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# Feminism and #MeToo in the Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women

Rebecca S. Battin  
*Portland State University*

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Feminism and #MeToo in the Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women

by

Rebecca S. Battin

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Dr. Kim Williams, PhD.

Portland State University

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***Abstract***

In recent years, the #MeToo movement in the US has normalized discussing sexual harassment and assault against women, as well as encouraged survivors to come forward with their experiences like never before. Though this movement has undoubtedly affected much of secular and even religious America, how much has the #MeToo movement affected the more extreme, conservative communities of Orthodox Judaism? Though some research has been conducted as to the effects of the patriarchy and sexual assault on women in some Jewish communities, there is little research regarding how the women in these communities may have been impacted by the recent #MeToo movement, whether regarding their potential abuse stories or how this movement may have influenced their opinion of feminism. Scholarship on Jewish feminism is varied because Jewish women each practice differently and adhere to traditional Jewish law differently. What is more, the majority of scholarship on Jewish feminism excludes Orthodox Jews whose extremely traditional values and obligations often include many patriarchal mindsets and practices. This paper addresses how traditional and Orthodox Jewish women are affected by #MeToo by studying Jewish feminism in these traditional communities, the existing patriarchal structures in Orthodox Judaism and how they work against #MeToo survivors, and the affect the #MeToo movement has had on the American Jewish and Orthodox Jewish communities. Interviews were conducted with Orthodox Jewish women in order to address these nuanced topics.

The feminist #MeToo movement that launched in the United States in 2017 has had a significant impact on organizations and individuals, whether public sector, nonprofit, in Hollywood, or on Wall Street.<sup>1</sup> This movement has definitively changed the landscape of sexual assault reporting and how women's testimony is received by the public. Additionally, the #MeToo movement has inspired many women to speak about their experiences, which has awakened the world to just how prevalent a problem sexual assault and harassment is in our society.<sup>2</sup> Though this movement has arguably had a strong effect on our public discourse from entertainment to politics to sports, some groups have largely been excluded from the discussion. One of the most prominent examples of this is the Orthodox Jews.

Orthodox Jews are members of a denomination of the Jewish religion that makes up about 10% of Jewish people across the globe.<sup>3</sup> Under the Orthodox Jewish umbrella, there are two main groups: Haredi (or ultra) Orthodox and Modern Orthodox Jews. For this paper, "Orthodox" refers to Modern Orthodox Jews. This is because the nature of Haredi Jews, as even more insular and strict in their observance of traditional Jewish law compared to Modern Orthodox Jews, makes conducting research with Haredim quite difficult.<sup>4</sup> Modern Orthodox Jews are, simply put, easier to get in contact with. However, research in the Modern Orthodox Jewish community is still quite difficult due to the very self-contained and exclusionary nature of the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Sommer, "Not Just Weinstein."

<sup>2</sup> McGinity, "Why It Was So Hard to Say #Metoo and What I Learned When I Finally Did."

<sup>3</sup> "A Portrait of American Orthodox Jews."

<sup>4</sup> Goldberg and Yassour-Borochowitz, "'Suddenly She Realizes That Her Husband Is Not Exactly Rabbi Akiba ...' – Perceptions of Masculinity of Ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jewish Battering Men."

Orthodox Jews have tried, and still work to remain as separated from secular society as possible.<sup>5</sup> This is largely because they base their lives on the traditional interpretation of the Torah and other Jewish texts, which tend to negate and even discourage various aspects of modern society. Additionally, Orthodox Jews are defined by their strict adherence to a list of mitzvot, or commandments and, since the 70's, by their increasingly conservative political views.<sup>6</sup> Since the second wave of the Women's Movement in the United States, Orthodox Jews have been hesitant or even hostile to the very concept of feminism, as many believe their religious observance must remain unchanging against secular whims. Over the past five decades, some changes have developed in Orthodox Judaism as a result of feminism. However, these changes are quite minor compared to secular society and Orthodox Jewish culture still adheres to very traditional gender roles and hierarchies.

Though Orthodox Jews intentionally attempt to seclude themselves from secular society, the #MeToo movement has had a significant impact on the broader American Jewish community, and this impact has spread to the Orthodox community, though not as substantially.<sup>7</sup> Though the Orthodox Jewish community has been faced with its share of #MeToo events, the effect of these events on the community has been limited and the response from the community has been relatively minor. It is important to work to better understand the reasons for this disparity. Understanding how Orthodox Jewish women's lives are shaped, both by existing religious and patriarchal structures in Orthodox Judaism as well as modern feminist movements like #MeToo is essential in better understanding this movement as well as this diverse, unique community.

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<sup>5</sup> Kress, "Judaism: Orthodox Judaism."

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition.*, Kress, "Judaism: Orthodox Judaism."

<sup>7</sup> Sommer, "Not Just Weinstein."

### ***Why This Topic is Important***

There are several reasons I chose to research American Jewish women's experiences. Though I identify as an American Sephardic Jewish woman, I have experienced a diversity of Jewish communities, all of which being unique and beautiful in their own ways. I have been in traditional/Halakhic Jewish communities and know them to be diverse, many encompassing different racial and ethnic distinctions, in addition to a variety of religious customs and beliefs. Though these communities are rich with different cultures and traditions, my experiences in many Jewish communities have been diminished by my gender. As a woman, I often felt constrained and limited when in traditional Jewish communities. Because of this, as a university student, I wanted to address the under-researched Orthodox Jewish community by exploring one of the things that impacted me most in these communities: my experience of gender inequality. Given the influence and impact of the #MeToo movement across the world, I chose to research how recent feminism has impacted the American Orthodox Jewish community. It was specifically important to include the women in these communities' thoughts and experiences, as they are extremely underrepresented in the already little research surrounding Orthodox Jews.

### ***Research statement***

Regarding the #MeToo movement specifically, what little response has developed in the Orthodox Jewish community has come almost exclusively from men or the media, mostly news sources. This disparity and lack of women's voices, especially on an issue that focuses women and their experiences so heavily, is striking. Given the predominance of women's testimony that was shared throughout the #MeToo movement in the secular and even modern-religious world, the lack of Orthodox Jewish women's voices on these issues is even more interesting. How has the #MeToo movement affected Orthodox Jewish women? What do they think? These questions

developed clearly from preliminary research on recent feminism’s effect on the Orthodox Jewish community, as #Metoo’s impact on women in these communities seems to have been given little, if any, interest.

### *Methods*

In investigating how modern feminism and the #MeToo movement have impacted Orthodox Jewish women, 5 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with women in the American Orthodox Jewish community. Additionally, published stories from Jewish women on #MeToo issues have been supplemented to provide more diverse opinions on how #MeToo has affected the Jewish, and Orthodox Jewish, community. A literature review of existing research on the #MeToo movement, the American Orthodox Jewish community, Orthodox Jewish feminism, and more was conducted to provide a detailed understanding of this interdisciplinary topic.

### *Interview Participants*

In order to participate in the research, interviewees were required to self-identify as women, and be 18 years or older. Participants were also required to be a part of the Orthodox Jewish community (meaning they regularly attend an Orthodox Jewish synagogue or self-identify as Orthodox Jewish). Below is a table of demographic information of the five participants included in this research.

Participant #	Location (City, State)	Age	Jewish Denomination	Mother (Y/N)	Level of Education
1	Mount. Kisco, NY	74	Orthodox	No	Postgraduate
2	Los Angeles, CA	24	Orthodox	Yes	Bachelor’s degree
3	Boca Raton, FL	35	Orthodox	Yes	Postgraduate
4	San Diego, CA	79	Orthodox	Yes	High school degree
5	Palm Beach, FL	37	“Conservadox”	No	Postgraduate

The participants' ages range from 24 to 79. All self-identified as being Orthodox Jewish except one who identified as "conservadox", which she defined as combining the tradition and Halakhic adherence of Orthodox Judaism with more egalitarian values. This individual still attended Orthodox Jewish services regularly, however. The participants had a range of education levels, the majority being highly educated, having earned at least a master's degree. This reflects existing research that demonstrates that American Jews tend to be more highly educated than the national average.<sup>8</sup>

### Interview Recruitment

Participants were all United States residents and were recruited based on their state of residence, in addition to the other factors listed above. The three states with the highest populations of Jewish people were selected for recruitment outreach. This method was chosen because Orthodox Jews tend to live in larger, more self-contained Jewish communities that are able to support their religious needs, such as following Kosher, going to the Mikveh, Minyan requirements, etc.<sup>9</sup> Using the three states with the highest Jewish populations, California, Florida, and New York, two online databases (UO.org and thejewishstar.com) were cross-referenced to compile a thorough list of Orthodox synagogues in each state. From this list of 105 Orthodox Jewish synagogues across three different states, each was contacted through both email and phone to find potential interviewees. Only five participants reached out in response to this recruitment process. The low response rate (5 individuals/105 synagogues) likely reflects the incredibly insular and closed-off nature of the American Orthodox Jewish community and a

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<sup>8</sup> "A Portrait of American Orthodox Jews."

<sup>9</sup> Blackman, "American Orthodox Jewish Women and Domestic Violence: An Intervention Design."



general wariness and distrust of outsiders, specifically researchers.<sup>10</sup> This is one of the reasons why the Orthodox Jewish community is largely under-researched and misunderstood in academia and broader American society. I chose to include my identity as a Jewish woman in the recruitment emails, and phone calls when applicable, to hopefully elicit a level of trust or respect, and to combat the exclusionary nature of these communities. Though my identity may have elicited some amount of increased access, the American Orthodox Jewish community still felt very much out-of-reach in my recruitment efforts.

The interview method was chosen to explore the impact of feminism and #MeToo on Orthodox Jewish women because existing research into the Orthodox Jewish community has largely been performed with qualitative interviews.<sup>11</sup> This is likely because doing quantitative research with the community would result in a very low response rate, making the data largely inaccurate.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, due to the nature and complexity of the topics, interview-style data collection allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how many different aspects of Orthodox Judaism and feminism interact. The chosen method of interview recruitment was preferred over others due to the potential of reaching a more diverse segment of the Orthodox Jewish population. Reaching out through social media or through specific Jewish social or nonprofit organizations would likely result in a selection of more progressive, socially integrated, or niche Orthodox Jewish women than the community average. However, this issue is still present to an extent in this research, as it is likely that women who are more aware of feminism and #MeToo were more likely to volunteer for these interviews.

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<sup>10</sup> Altfeld, "Family Violence in the Jewish Community."

<sup>11</sup> Blackman, "American Orthodox Jewish Women and Domestic Violence: An Intervention Design.", Goldberg and Yassour-Borochowitz.

<sup>12</sup> Altfeld, "Family Violence in the Jewish Community."

### Interviews

Interviews took place in January and February of 2022. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Each participant signed an online consent document in accordance with IRB requirements. The interviews were semi-structured based on a set of 23 questions asked to all participants with potential follow up questions or tangential conversations occurring. The questions focused on women's thoughts around feminism and #MeToo and how they feel these movements have affected their religious communities, if at all. There were also questions to gauge the interviewees' level of satisfaction with the gender roles and existing female-oriented services in their communities, and whether they would support more egalitarian changes in their communities as a response to #MeToo.

### ***Theoretical statement***

This paper draws from interdisciplinary fields such as Jewish studies, Jewish feminism, mainstream feminism and #MeToo, domestic and sexual violence in the Jewish community, masculinity studies and more. Although there is relatively little research directly pertaining to Orthodox Jews, a few Orthodox Jewish-focused sources formed the foundation of this paper.

*On Women and Judaism*, by Blu Greenberg, largely introduced and succinctly described Orthodox Jewish feminism to people across the world.<sup>13</sup> The text articulates key battles between Orthodox Judaism and feminism and additionally urges for a variety of changes in the Orthodox Jewish world to hopefully bring more equality to women. Most of the issues noted in the text seem to still be relevant discussions in the community over 40 years later. Greenberg's book also provides a thorough historical account of women's treatment in Jewish communities and by

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<sup>13</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*.

Jewish law throughout history. This provides a helpful background on how and why more traditional gender roles still impact women in Orthodox Jewish communities so strongly.

The research paper, “‘Suddenly she realizes that her husband is not exactly Rabbi Akiba ...’ – perceptions of masculinity of ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jewish battering men”, by Goldberg and Yassour-Borochowitz, provides an important perspective on family structure, roles, and masculinity in Orthodox Jewish communities through interviews with Haredi Men.<sup>14</sup> Though this article deals specifically with an ultra-Orthodox, Israeli Jewish community, a lot of the findings and information on gender roles are applicable to Modern Orthodox communities. This article argues a connection between Orthodox Jewish culture, perceptions of masculinity, and violence against women in these communities. The authors describe the many ways Orthodox Jewish men’s masculinity is intensely valued in their communities while simultaneously questioned and degraded by various factors both inside the religion and out. This, the source argues, can contribute to increased violence against women in these communities. These ideas help provide foundational understanding for some of the religious and patriarchal structures that work against many Orthodox Jewish women with #MeToo experiences.

Finally, “American Orthodox Jewish Women and Domestic Violence: An Intervention Design” by Meredith Blackman provides additional background on women’s roles and treatment in Orthodox Judaism.<sup>15</sup> This source included interviews with Orthodox Jewish women, the only source of this nature found for this paper. Blackman’s research discusses some structural issues in American Orthodox Jewish communities that result in female survivors not being believed, not being able to find or access help, and more. The author’s findings on these issues are echoed

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<sup>14</sup> Goldberg and Yassour-Borochowitz, “‘Suddenly She Realizes That Her Husband Is Not Exactly Rabbi Akiba ...’ – Perceptions of Masculinity of Ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jewish Battering Men.”

<sup>15</sup> Blackman, “American Orthodox Jewish Women and Domestic Violence: An Intervention Design.”

in many other sources. Like Greenberg, Blackman also focuses a good portion of her work on suggesting actionable solutions and improvements the Orthodox Jewish community can undertake to create more gender equality, while still adhering to Jewish law.

This paper discusses the development of Jewish feminism and Orthodox Jewish feminists' ideas, echoing Greenberg's seminal work. Complicating Greenberg's generous support for Orthodox Judaism's inherent gender inequalities, ideas from Goldberg and Yassour-Borochowitz's article around how Orthodox Jewish family structure and gender roles often ultimately harm women are included. These ideas are specifically applied to #MeToo and how unique patriarchal structures in Orthodox Judaism work to silence these women more than in some other communities. These ideas align with Blackman's research which support many key points argued in this paper.

In the effort to explore how feminist ideology and movements, like #MeToo, has affected Orthodox Jewish women, many different topics need to be addressed. First, understanding the existing lifestyle of Orthodox Jewish women and how they view their roles in their communities is crucial. This includes engaging with how Orthodox communities are structured and the basis of their customs and practices, especially as they relate to women. Additionally, questions of how traditional, hyper-masculine behaviors affect women, specifically regarding violence against women are addressed. A background of Jewish feminism, and more importantly Orthodox Jewish feminism, and how these movements have engaged with the gender issues they have identified as most important was essential to fully understanding this topic. Other important questions presented themselves around how the #MeToo movement affected American Jewish communities, and what resulted from these clashes between tradition and modern feminism, which have been seen in other more conservative religions across the world. This

interdisciplinary research brought up numerous questions; given the lack of existing research into the Orthodox Jewish community, this paper has elicited more questions than it has answered.

### ***Violence Against Women in Jewish Communities***

In the past, and still today, there is a common myth that Jewish communities do not have domestic violence (DV) issues.<sup>16</sup> This may have been believed in larger society in part because Jewish men have been stereotyped as having a “pasty, book-ish, brainy, feminine persona”, which doesn’t fit the western stereotype of a violent man.<sup>17</sup> This idea could also have been further cultivated because Judaism, especially Orthodox Judaism, prioritizes different, less physical, traits as the masculine ideal compared to western cultures.<sup>18</sup> Examples of ideal masculine traits in Orthodox Judaism are focused and consistent study of the Torah and emotional and physical restraint. These masculine ideals being viewed as more feminine in western society can cause Orthodox men to feel emasculated which can have several harmful repercussions. Because of the patriarchal system that favors masculinity over femininity, Orthodox men that feel emasculated by larger society or even in their communities might choose to take on some more hypermasculine traits to assert their masculinity. The adoption of hypermasculinity can be potentially quite harmful to women in these men’s lives as this can lead to increased violence, both sexual and otherwise.<sup>19</sup> The attempted adoption of hypermasculinity also enforces traditional gender roles which have been shown to potentially increase the likelihood of violence in men. Murnen (2005) writes, “Traditional gender roles encourage men to

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<sup>16</sup> , Rosenbaum, “Archiving #MeToo.”

<sup>17</sup> Sommer, “Not Just Weinstein: The Year #MeToo Rocked and Shocked the Jewish World”.

<sup>18</sup> Goldberg and Yassour-Borochowitz, “‘Suddenly She Realizes That Her Husband Is Not Exactly Rabbi Akiba ...’ – Perceptions of Masculinity of Ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jewish Battering Men.”, Sztokman, *The Men’s Section: Orthodox Jewish Men in an Egalitarian World*.

<sup>19</sup> Goldberg and Yassour-Borochowitz, “‘Suddenly She Realizes That Her Husband Is Not Exactly Rabbi Akiba ...’ – Perceptions of Masculinity of Ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jewish Battering Men.”; Murnen, Wright, and Kaluzny, “If ‘Boys Will Be Boys,’ Then Girls Will Be Victims?”

be violent in the name of "masculinity" and women to be sexually passive in order to be "feminine."<sup>20</sup> Orthodox Judaism strongly encourages traditional gender roles in many ways, which sources, whether dealing directly with the Orthodox Jewish community or not, can largely agree is harmful to both women and men in these communities. The complex nature of how cultural gender roles and ideas of masculinity can potentially negatively affect women in different religiously conservative communities is a topic that deserves further attention and awareness, in both Jewish Orthodoxy and beyond.

Due in part to the myths mentioned earlier, there has been little research into domestic violence conducted in the Jewish community, and this is especially true regarding the Orthodox Jewish community.<sup>21</sup> However, according to Jewish Women International (JWI) and other sources, rates of domestic violence in the American Jewish community are roughly the same as that in the broader United States.<sup>22</sup> Specific statistics around domestic violence in the Orthodox Jewish community have not been produced yet, so it would be misleading to suggest a percentage of women who are affected by this issue. Of the few recent studies conducted, findings have demonstrated that violence in Orthodox Jewish communities is a particularly difficult issue to address. One reason for this is Orthodox Jews have specific ideals of what makes a masculine man, as mentioned earlier.<sup>23</sup> These ideals of intense Torah study, physical and emotional restraint, and providing for the family conflict with each other, increasingly so in modern times. For example, Orthodox Jewish men who study Torah as dedicatedly as they are encouraged to don't have time to also be the family breadwinner. This results in some men being

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<sup>20</sup> Murnen, Wright, and Kaluzny, "If 'Boys Will Be Boys,' Then Girls Will Be Victims?", 2.

<sup>21</sup> Altfeld, "Family Violence in the Jewish Community."

<sup>22</sup> Senser, "Shalom Bayit."

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emasculated, as their wife may be the sole or main provider. On the other hand, if these men chose to provide for their families, they are also choosing to sacrifice a very valued aspect of their religious practice, which is also emasculating, especially if, for instance, they are not well enough versed in the nuance of different theological debates and ideas or do not educate their families enough on the Jewish religion. This provides a very difficult situation which, as Goldberg and Yassour-Borochowitz (2009) found, results in many Orthodox men feeling their masculinity threatened. In their study, including interviews conducted with 11 Orthodox Jewish battering men, many if not all the men interviewed directly or indirectly cited their feelings of masculine inferiority as a main reason they were violent with their wives. This feeling of masculine inferiority, caused in part by unattainable masculine ideals, that predominates in some Orthodox Jewish communities evidently impacts and directly harms many women in these communities as well.

A core issue in both understanding and addressing domestic violence in Orthodox Jewish communities is the different ways survivors are silenced and issues are kept private. There are several different areas of Jewish law that have been employed to silence women who are experiencing or have experienced abuse.<sup>24</sup> This is particularly important because a primary goal of Orthodox Judaism is to adhere to the traditional interpretation of Jewish religious law, Halakha, as strictly as they can.<sup>25</sup> One example of the way Halakha can work against women is that they are prohibited from refusing sex with their husbands.<sup>26</sup> Another example, from Blackman (2010), is “men are warned not to listen to women, for fear that they will be greatly

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<sup>24</sup> Blackman, “American Orthodox Jewish Women and Domestic Violence: An Intervention Design”.

<sup>25</sup> Kress, “Judaism: Orthodox Judaism.”

<sup>26</sup> Blackman, “American Orthodox Jewish Women and Domestic Violence: An Intervention Design”.

moved or swayed from their course of action.”<sup>27</sup> Though this doesn’t directly relate to domestic or sexual violence, this idea can be employed to argue that people shouldn’t trust women reporting their experiences.

A result of the silencing of Orthodox Jewish women’s voices around these topics and their experiences is that the community is largely unaware of if these issues are happening or not. Of the five women interviewed, each had a somewhat different opinion on whether or not sexual assault and other similar issues were prevalent in their communities. One older woman asserted, “we don’t have any of those problems here... We don't have issues of harassment, we don't.”<sup>28</sup> This is contrasted with a younger interviewee, perhaps more in touch with secular western ideas, reflecting, “I don't see them [sexual assault and harassment] being very big issues, although that's something that's always part of any community.”<sup>29</sup> The majority of the women had opinions more similar to the latter, with different interviews touching on how even though there may be, and even likely is, domestic violence in Orthodox Jewish communities, these women and communities do not hear about it or see it addressed so there is no way to know what is actually happening behind closed doors. Survivors not sharing their experiences is due to different mechanisms and behaviors in the Orthodox Jewish community that, whether intentional or not, work to keep these domestic and sexual violence problems under wraps and unaddressed.

Another problem related to the common silencing of survivor’s testimony is the often-great difficulty of finding resources or support for women who are experiencing domestic and sexual violence. When asked in interviews, none of the women could come up with a single program, resource center, room, or even person designated to help women with potential

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<sup>27</sup> Blackman, “American Orthodox Jewish Women and Domestic Violence: An Intervention Design.”

<sup>28</sup> Interview 1, Interviewed by author, January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Interview 2, Interviewed by author, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022.



domestic violence, sexism, or assault issues in their community.<sup>30</sup> Two interviewees mentioned seeing stickers or posters in women's bathrooms with phone hotlines for those experiencing domestic violence, but beyond this, there was nothing else these women were aware of. Most of the women felt if a woman in their synagogue was experiencing DV she would likely and hopefully be comfortable finding support from the rabbi. One potential issue with this idea is that the rabbi may align with the husband if the issue was brought to his attention, as he would likely see and pray with the husband on a daily basis and potentially have little to no relationship with the wife. Though rabbinical support may be an adequate solution for some women, resource centers, trained professionals, informational meetings, and other supportive and informational services would likely be more beneficial to women in these communities who have or are experiencing violence and would additionally educate others on these unfortunately common problems. It is important to have more resources for domestic violence directly accessible in Orthodox Jewish communities to emphasize the validity and severity of survivor's experiences. Additionally, having services in these communities and religious organizations would likely make them more trusted and potentially more utilized by Orthodox Jewish women than the same services are in secular America. The lack of domestic violence resources in Orthodox Jewish communities also demonstrates a lack of resources, education, and support in these communities for women experiencing #MeToo issues more generally, which can include stalking, workplace harassment, and more beyond DV. This severe lacking in support services and resources for #MeToo survivors in US Orthodox Jewish communities is important to consider when addressing how #MeToo is responded to in these communities in general.

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<sup>30</sup> Interviews conducted by author, 2022.

Domestic violence is a prevalent issue in Jewish and Orthodox Jewish communities, as in all communities across the world. Some specific masculine ideals and gender hierarchies may make domestic violence situations more complicated to address for Orthodox Jewish women. More research into this and other domestic violence-related topics in Orthodox Jewish communities is crucial. Furthermore, there is still great work to be done in providing Orthodox Jewish women with services and support, whether they are survivors of domestic violence or not. Additionally, the lack of community resources and discourse around domestic violence and other gendered issues reinforces the isolation of survivors experiencing these problems and misinformation about the frequency and severity of these issues in the community. The incredible lack of DV-related services in Orthodox Jewish communities, as well as the specific mechanisms in place that work to silence survivors, are substantial hurdles in Orthodox Judaism and other traditional communities and must be addressed more thoroughly. These and many more mechanisms discussed later demonstrate the many hurdles Orthodox Jewish women may face when sharing a #MeToo story or seeking help. Although these specific issues are not well understood in secular America, Jewish people, and specifically Jewish feminists, have been working for generations to address these very issues and their root causes in their religious communities. Understanding these efforts will better demonstrate which structural elements in Orthodox Judaism work against women facing a variety of #MeToo issues.

### ***Jewish Feminism***

Jewish Feminism developed during the second wave feminist movement in the United States due in part to antisemitism in the larger women's movement.<sup>31</sup> Even though many Jewish women readily participated in the revitalized women's movement in 1960s and 70s America,

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<sup>31</sup> Umansky, "Females, Feminists, and Feminism."

they were marginalized, and their issues were largely ignored. Jewish women were not alone in the treatment they received from the women's movement of this period, as many women of color and queer people were also marginalized from the women's movement, especially in leadership. However, the Jewish women joining the women's movement at the time were socioeconomically and, to an extent culturally, comparable to the white women who led the movement. Instead, according to Umansky (1988), the reason Jewish women were largely ignored in second wave feminism was due to their religion (even if the women didn't identify as religious) and antisemitism in the movement.

Because of this anti-Semitism, Jewish women began developing their own sect of feminism that could better meet their needs. Umansky (1988) writes, "Jewish Feminism emerged as a means of asserting both *Jewish* visibility within the feminist movement and *feminist* self-consciousness within the U.S. Jewish community."<sup>32</sup> Soon after its beginnings, Jewish feminism began moving from analysis of the broader US system through a Jewish feminist lens, to looking inward and working with the patriarchy in the Jewish faith and community structure. There were several key issues that Jewish feminists fought for that are still relevant today, especially in more traditional sects of Judaism. One key issue was the struggle for women's ordination as rabbis in synagogues.<sup>33</sup> Today, most synagogues allow for women to be rabbis, however, this is still prohibited in Orthodox Judaism, as it is against the Halakha.<sup>34</sup>

Another core issue in Jewish Feminism is expanding and providing space for Jewish women's voices and experiences. This issue is mirrored in the #MeToo movement, which also fights for more space for, and value of, women's voices and experiences. More recently, Jewish

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<sup>32</sup> Umansky. 352.

<sup>33</sup> Briggs, "Women and Religion."

<sup>34</sup> Kress, "Judaism: Orthodox Judaism."

Feminism has focused on #MeToo issues, similar to the larger women's movement in the US. Rachel Adler, who some consider to be the doyenne of Jewish feminism, has discussed the issue of #MeToo and how the Jewish community should move forward to be more egalitarian.<sup>35</sup> She believes there is "long-standing male supremacy embedded in Jewish texts" and that the Torah and other religious texts should be reinterpreted to allow for them to be applied to modern issues and better promote equality. This idea is echoed in many recent Jewish Feminist texts, as well as some Jewish scholarship and media. The idea of reinterpreting Jewish texts to make room for more gender equality is also a commonly discussed aspect of Orthodox Jewish Feminism. An interesting example of reinterpreting religious texts to be more inclusive is demonstrated in the work of Lynn Dufour (2002), who studied how Jewish women "sifted" their desired aspects of both their feminism and their Jewishness into a unique identity where they can identify as both.<sup>36</sup> Especially in conservative Jewish practices, the patriarchal aspects of Judaism can directly clash with feminist ideas. However, some conservative Jewish women have found a way to identify as both, by reinterpreting some sexist practices in their faith through a lens of egalitarianism. A similar idea was mirrored in some interviews. One interviewee stressed her identity as "conservadox", even though she still largely attended a traditionally Orthodox synagogue.<sup>37</sup> She defined "conservadox" as combining traditional adherence to Jewish Orthodox law and practice with more egalitarian values. This is a great example of Dufour's idea of Jewish women "sifting" certain aspects of different, often conflicting, identities into a unique practice that works best for them.

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<sup>35</sup> Pine, "Feminist Icon Rachel Adler on #MeToo and Jewish Law."

<sup>36</sup> Dufour, "Sifting Through Tradition."

<sup>37</sup> Interview 5, interviewed by author, February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

Jewish feminism has developed from a small off shoot of mainstream feminism into its own movement which has addressed various gender imbalances in the Jewish community. Jewish feminists still work to bring more equality and freedom to Jewish women across the world, and in the past several years have focused much more on #MeToo related issues and both the common and unique ways the Jewish community may perpetuate these issues.

### ***#MeToo in the Jewish community***

The discussion of the many mechanisms that work against survivors in the Jewish community has been widespread in recent years, following the #MeToo movement. Although it had a rough start, with the Jewish community largely not acknowledging allegations for some time after the #MeToo movement first began, the Jewish community has begun addressing gender equity issues and making some changes.<sup>38</sup> Recently, there have been a variety of reform efforts and increased inclusion of women's voices in community dialogues.

### ***Published accounts of Jewish Women's #MeToo Experiences***

Some Jewish women of different denominations have chosen to publish their #MeToo experiences in the Jewish community. These first-hand accounts propelled the #MeToo movement in Jewish communities and made people examine women's experiences with sexism as potentially community issues, as with the broader #MeToo movement. One woman who published her experiences with misogyny in the Jewish community chose to outline her many first-hand accounts throughout her Jewish upbringing in powerful vignettes.<sup>39</sup> This format was very impactful as it demonstrated over and over the many pervasive and unique ways that the misogyny in Judaism can affect a woman's life and the sexist messaging Jewish women can face

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<sup>38</sup> Medoff, "When Will US Jews Confront Sexual Harassment and Other Abuses of Power?"

<sup>39</sup> Ahuvia, "A Patriarchal Miseducation."

in their religion, whether from individuals, cultural practices, and Jewish scripture itself. This author chose to specifically focus on how the patriarchal ideology in the Torah works to oppress women and even condone sexual assault and rape.

Another woman who published her first-hand experiences in relation to the sexism she faced in Judaism did so by sharing her story of saying “me too” against a well-known Jewish professor.<sup>40</sup> The author echoed common sentiments of feeling that her community would view her speaking out against a Jewish figure as an attack against the Jewish community. She confessed, “ideas that the Jewish people are one big family, that we are responsible for one another, and that we should not speak ill of each other kept a muzzle on me.”<sup>41</sup> This is a commonly cited issue that many feel is an important aspect of survivors not being believed in the American Jewish community. Due in part to a history of targeted attacks and anti-Semitism, Jews are a very tightknit community that often hesitate to speak negatively of each other, lest it spur on more anti-Semitic violence. Another source echoed both these ideas, citing that Jewish people prefer to keep their issues private and sort them out within the community because Jews tend to be tight knit and loyal, as well as afraid of giving anti-Semites reasons to aggress against them.<sup>42</sup>

#### *#MeToo Concerns in the Jewish Community*

Besides first-hand accounts from Jewish women, Jewish media sources both in the US and in other countries have discussed #MeToo, its impact on the community, and the remaining work to be done. Some of these sources have discussed the many things working against women who are trying to come forward in the Jewish community. One source argues that the

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<sup>40</sup> McGinity, “Why It Was So Hard to Say #Metoo and What I Learned When I Finally Did.”

<sup>41</sup> McGinity, 21

<sup>42</sup> Seltzer, “The Hazards of Working in the Jewish Community”.

interconnectedness of the Jewish community can mean that often the abuser is a widely beloved figure, which makes coming out against them much more difficult for survivors.<sup>43</sup> In fact, the Jewish Women’s Archive found that 12% of the Jewish women in their #MeToo research reported abuse by male rabbis.<sup>44</sup> In general, the familial nature of the Jewish community can work against survivors in many ways. Rosenbaum (2020) writes, “the defense that the Jewish community is a family—an argument that is used both to deny and to silence any wrongdoing—is a familiar one.”<sup>45</sup> This idea of the familial aspect of Jewish communities is mentioned in many #MeToo related articles, narratives, and research and is a pervasive issue when it comes to sexual assault and believing survivors.

Another commonly cited #MeToo concern in the Jewish community is the culture around donors and board members of Jewish organizations.<sup>46</sup> Donors, board members, and other leaders often have a strong sense of entitlement and act poorly, whether financially, misogynistically, or otherwise. This coupled with a lack of accountability, transparency, or a democratic mechanism to vote out leaders in many of these organizations can further systemic oppression experienced by survivors and diminished accountability.<sup>47</sup> Relating to #MeToo, this can be especially problematic because often the lack of accountability, coupled with the sense of entitlement, the large amounts of power that come with these positions, and the fact that these donors and organization leaders are often well beloved and respected in the community, can make coming forward with #MeToo allegations tremendously difficult for women. This situation demonstrates how different issues, sometimes heightened in the Jewish community, work against assault

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<sup>43</sup> Sztokman, “#metoo in the Jewish Community.”

<sup>44</sup> Rosenbaum, “Archiving #MeToo.”

<sup>45</sup> Rosenbaum.

<sup>46</sup> Cohen, “What’s Changed in the Jewish World After #MeToo?”

<sup>47</sup> Medoff, “When Will US Jews Confront Sexual Harassment and Other Abuses of Power?”

survivors and can pile on to create an even more upsetting situation for some Jewish women. Some Jewish institutions have been addressing these issues and specific perpetrators. This, coupled with media coverage of these issues demonstrates slow progress towards equality in these communities, progress that is not nearly as evident in American Orthodox Jewish communities.

Finally, several sources also discussed a pernicious bystander issue in the Jewish community, meaning that many people will be aware of abuse happening but not do anything to try and stop it.<sup>48</sup> Sztokman writes in a 2018 news article, “Several informants discussed this bystander silence as a quality of Jewish organizational life. This is likely connected to the issue of donor-supremacy, and the fearfulness with which many professional women are trained to behave in Jewish organizations when donors are involved”.<sup>49</sup> The author goes on to say many survivors she spoke to felt that the systems within the Jewish community that made reporting and being believed so difficult were more upsetting than the actual abuses in many cases. These mechanisms, part of the larger patriarchal system working against women in the Jewish community, are evidently a serious issue that must be more substantially addressed, an idea which is echoed in many of the above sources.

#### *#MeToo-Related Research in the Jewish Community*

Research into #MeToo issues is beginning to be conducted in the more secular Jewish community. One important example of new research is from the majority women-run Jewish non-profit, the Safety Respect Equity (SRE) Network. In 2019, this organization conducted a study to better understand the state of Jewish workplaces and communal spaces, through the lens

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<sup>48</sup> Sztokman, “#metoo in the Jewish Community.”; Benchimol and Huber, “We Need to Talk: A Review of Public Discourse and Survivor Experiences of Safety, Respect, and Equity in Jewish Workplaces and Communal Spaces, Executive Summary.”

<sup>49</sup> Sztokman, “#metoo in the Jewish Community.”



of domestic violence survivors' experiences.<sup>50</sup> This report found a general lack of safety and respect for survivors in the Jewish community, as well as many other issues, and gathered more detailed data about these issues throughout the Jewish community, information which has been largely lacking before now. Reports like these demonstrate progress in the Jewish community, which will help first better understand the extent and root of the problem and then begin to address these issues with the proper scope.

Another research project conducted involving #MeToo in the Jewish community archived anonymous Jewish women's thoughts and experiences around #MeToo.<sup>51</sup> This project was conducted by The Jewish Women's Archive starting in 2018 and they collected over one hundred responses. The 2020 report on their research echoed much of the information from previous sources. Issues identified in the report cited the negative aspect of familial messaging and pressure in the Jewish community, the commonly held belief that Jewish communities don't have domestic violence issues, and women often feeling responsible for their harassment or for the consequences their perpetrator may have faced. Although these issues are not uncommon across the world, they collectively work to silence Jewish women survivors and are still largely unaddressed in specifically the Orthodox Jewish community. On the whole, the #MeToo movement in the less traditional American Jewish community followed a similar trajectory to that in secular America. However, the same cannot be said for the Orthodox Jewish communities in the US, which have seen very little if any changes as a response to #MeToo.

### *American Modern Orthodox Jews*

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<sup>50</sup> Benchimol and Huber, "We Need to Talk: A Review of Public Discourse and Survivor Experiences of Safety, Respect, and Equity in Jewish Workplaces and Communal Spaces, Executive Summary."

<sup>51</sup> Rosenbaum, "Archiving #MeToo."

In order to understand the complexity of how #MeToo and other feminism has affected Orthodox Jews, and how these communities have responded to the movement and its survivors, it is essential to more deeply understand Modern Orthodox Judaism and what being an Orthodox Jew really means. The lives of Orthodox Jews are dictated by the many religious texts these communities strictly adhere to.<sup>52</sup> Everything in the Torah, Talmud, and more, has been studied, memorized, and interpreted by rabbis for thousands of years.<sup>53</sup> These interpretations, and conclusions on how these interpretations should be adhered to, form the basis of Orthodox Jewish life through a detailed collection of religious laws. The Halakha is the complete collection of these laws which defines how Orthodox Jews are to ideally live, a sort of ordained lifestyle.<sup>54</sup> Greenberg (1981), writes about following the Halakha, “For a Jew, a life directed by Halakha is as near perfect a way of life as possible.”<sup>55</sup> This law structure guides both large and seemingly insignificant aspects of life, from marriage to cutting toenails, and Orthodox Jews appreciate this structure and tradition for many reasons. Greenberg goes on to write that Halakha is an ever-changing system, as it can be reinterpreted to match with changing mindsets and modernization. Kress describes the process by writing, “As practical questions arise, Orthodox authorities apply the Halachic process (the system of legal reasoning and interpretation described in the Oral Torah) using the Torah (both Oral and Written) to determine how best to live in accordance with G-d's will.”<sup>56</sup> Whether this feature of Halakha is achieved, especially more recently, is debatable. However, Greenberg uses this idea to demonstrate specific points throughout time where rabbis chose to reinterpret Jewish law to slowly bring women more

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<sup>52</sup> Kress, “Judaism: Orthodox Judaism.”

<sup>53</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*.

<sup>54</sup> Greenberg.

<sup>55</sup> Greenberg. 43.

<sup>56</sup> Kress, “Judaism: Orthodox Judaism.”

equality. Regardless of these changes over time, Blackman argues, “Orthodox traditions retain the notions of male superiority and female deference.”<sup>57</sup> These notions can be seen in many aspects of Orthodox Judaism.

In addressing Orthodox Jewish women’s roles and treatment in their communities, there are two areas of importance for the scope of this paper: their religious and spiritual roles, and Jewish women’s marital, divorce, and by extension legal, treatment.

Regarding liturgical responsibilities, women have very few.<sup>58</sup> There are many examples of the different religious roles assigned to men and women, such as women not constituting a minyan (the quorum of ten or more men required to conduct certain religious practices), the lack of obligation for women to perform formal fixed-time prayer, women not being permitted to study the Talmud, gendered sections for men and women at synagogues, and women not being allowed to serve as religious leaders (or even touch the Torah). Greenberg, though appearing personally unbothered by them, believes these differences hinder the religious experience for many other Orthodox women, describing these inequalities as “prayer by proxy and spiritual community at arm’s length.”<sup>59</sup> An additional aspect of this gendered religious experience is that women are exempted from prayer and other religious commandments, unlike men, which Greenberg argues disincentivizes women from being engaged in their religious practice and communities. The focus on religious life and responsibility for men and not women centers women’s role in Orthodox Judaism to the home and the private sphere, which further encourages traditional gender roles for these women.

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<sup>57</sup> Blackman, “American Orthodox Jewish Women and Domestic Violence: An Intervention Design.”

<sup>58</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*.

<sup>59</sup> Greenberg. 89.

For most of history, divorce has been unequal for women, and this is true of Jewish communities as well. Greenberg eloquently describes the issue by saying “divorce was the absolute right of the husband.”<sup>60</sup> This has been true for virtually all of Jewish history, and although women’s rights in divorce have grown over time, there is still clear inequality in Orthodox Judaism on this matter. There are three main things working against Jewish women in divorce: “the theory on man’s absolute right, the biblical precedents that qualified these rights, and the earliest layer of rabbinic sources that interpreted biblical laws broadly or narrowly.”<sup>61</sup> Tangentially, this idea of a base concept in a Jewish text, layered with centuries of often conservative and misogynistic rabbinical decree can be applied to many different current laws and practices throughout Orthodox Judaism. Because of the religious, legal, and patriarchal systems working against Orthodox Jewish women in divorce, little has changed since Medieval times. The system of getting a divorce in Orthodox Judaism is incredibly complicated and there are many ways women are at a disadvantage in the process. There is also “potential for real abuse in Jewish divorce law” due to the ability of an abusive, violent husband to exert a vast amount of control over the process.<sup>62</sup> According to Jewish Women International, 81% of Jewish domestic violence support providers cite “withholding of a get”, or a husband refusing the legal divorce process, as a form of abuse.<sup>63</sup> Even though there is this substantial issue facing women in the Jewish community on this matter, it is often women who feel humiliated and ostracized from their communities if they are abused or mistreated by the divorce process, not the perpetrators. Overall, Jewish women face many disadvantages in the Orthodox legal process as it is entirely

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<sup>60</sup> Greenberg. 125.

<sup>61</sup> Greenberg. 128.

<sup>62</sup> Greenberg. 135.

<sup>63</sup> Rep. *Domestic Violence in the Jewish Community*.

controlled by men who cannot fully understand women's issues or needs, even when they work to. Orthodox Jewish women's lack of legal control or representation, especially around divorce, as well as the encouraged traditional gender roles and domestic work over community and religious connection illustrates that many Orthodox Jewish women are living in very traditional communities that result in inherently, and substantially, unequal, gendered treatment.

The daily life of Orthodox Jewish women is, in some ways, very similar to that of other traditional female roles. Orthodox Jewish women's lives are oriented around caring for the family, through traditional homemaking avenues, such as child raising, cleaning, cooking, planning social engagements, etc.<sup>64</sup> However, additionally, there are several specific expectations that are placed on these women via Halakhic law. For one, women are expected to prepare for shabbat, which can require a great amount of cooking, hosting, cleaning, religious responsibilities, and more, even though it is considered the weekly day of rest. An important part of this is the mitzvot that women light shabbat candles. This weekly role of lighting of candles, as well as lighting candles for holidays like Hanukkah, is significant because it is one of very few Halachically specified expectations for Orthodox Jewish women. Some people take women's responsibility of lighting candles to signify their value or importance in the home. One interviewee believes that women lighting candles represents them "bringing light, enlightenment" to a home.<sup>65</sup> This idea is echoed in other sources as well.

Another unique aspect of Orthodox Jewish women's lives is their monthly trip to the Mikveh. The Mikveh is a ceremonial bath that every married Orthodox Jewish woman is Halachically commanded to perform.<sup>66</sup> This bath is supposed to happen on the 7<sup>th</sup> "clean" day

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<sup>64</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*.

<sup>65</sup> Interview 4, conducted by author, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022

<sup>66</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*.

after the last day of a woman's period. It is a complex cleaning ritual where a woman goes to a community Mikveh, undresses and is inspected by a Mikveh lady, then completely dunks her body under water. This practice symbolizes women becoming "clean" after their menstruation and marks their ability to have sex with their husbands again, until the start of their next cycle. The idea of the Mikveh symbolizing cleanliness, implying women are inherently unclean in their periods, has been largely critiqued and reinterpreted by Jewish feminists.

There are certain ways that Orthodox Jewish women's lives are culturally unique to other women across the world, although many of the community's traditional gender roles reflect the experiences of women in different traditional religious communities across the world. Some of these Jewish women's cultural practices can often look misogynistic to outsiders, however many women find value and fulfillment in these practices that hundreds of generations of women have performed before them, as expressed by Greenberg (1981) and in some interviews. Additionally, an important theme brought up in four of the five interviews is a feeling that the outside world views these women's roles and treatment in their communities as much more oppressive than it actually is. One interviewee noted, "I think that people are misinformed and continue to think that we are being held down or being held back. And that's not the case."<sup>67</sup> This adds further nuance to many outsiders' more black-and-white mindset of traditional gender roles determinedly meaning that women are unhappy or oppressed in their communities. Finally, as mentioned by several interviewees, it is important to not assume American Orthodox Jewish communities are all similar. Though they are a relatively small niche in the US, these communities run the gamut from far-right conservative, ultra-conservative Haredi Orthodox, and more liberal and progressive. These differences were somewhat represented in the interview

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<sup>67</sup> Interview 4.

participant's communities, but of course this research offers a very limited perspective of the diversity in this community.

### ***Orthodox Jewish Feminism***

Given the evident inequalities in gender roles, divorce, synagogue leadership, and more that are founded on Halakhic law, many may be surprised that Orthodox Jewish feminism even exists. Scholars have questioned the compatibility of the two, given that Orthodox Judaism and feminism often seem in direct opposition. Umansky (1988) questions, "can Orthodox women be Jewish feminists or does adherence to traditional Jewish law *by definition* exclude them?"<sup>68</sup> Other Jewish female authors engage this question in a variety of ways, some suggesting that Orthodox Jewish women's subordination is written into Halakhic law, which cannot be changed. Greenberg (1981) several times notes the intense dichotomies between feminism and Orthodox Judaism.<sup>69</sup> From this dichotomy, Greenberg personally chooses to largely reject feminism in the sake of her traditional Jewish values and practice. This idea of rejecting feminism for Orthodox Judaism was echoed in four out of five of the women interviewed.<sup>70</sup> These interviewees expressed hesitancy, distrust, and dislike of feminism, at varying degrees. One woman said, "I think a lot of it [feminism] is misguided. I think that we're trying to make women like men, and that's negating what a woman is."<sup>71</sup> This idea of women and men being fundamentally different as a way to negate the idea that they should have equal roles was presented by a few of the women interviewed. A different interviewee shared a similarly conflicted opinion of feminism saying, "I agree with a lot of feminist ideas. But I also disagree with a lot of them, and I wouldn't

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<sup>68</sup> Umansky, "Females, Feminists, and Feminism." p. 364

<sup>69</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*.

<sup>70</sup> Interviews conducted by author, 2022.

<sup>71</sup> Interview 3, conducted by author, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

lump myself in with a movement that I have serious issues with.”<sup>72</sup> These more negative opinions of feminism demonstrate a distrust between western feminism and Orthodox Judaism, perhaps due to a lack of communication between the two groups, as well as feminism’s view of traditional women that can often be uninformed and apathetic. Though feminism in general is not thought of in high regard among most of the women interviewed, Orthodox Jewish feminism, surprisingly, did not fair significantly better. Interviewees cited largely the same complaints of western feminism in Orthodox Jewish feminism, though to a lesser degree. Some women specifically noted some key issues Jewish feminists were fighting for as too much and unnecessary, demonstrating that the applicability of feminist efforts is not what is turning these women away from the movement. Further study into the division between Orthodox Jewish women and feminism, even in their own communities, is necessary to better understand this situation.

For women who resonate with certain feminist ideas, yet find their Orthodox Jewish and modern ideologies conflicting, some chose to reinterpret certain aspects of Orthodox Jewish tradition to make sense for themselves and their desired gender roles and treatment.<sup>73</sup> An example of this is demonstrated by one interviewee who said, “there's traditional gender roles [in my Orthodox Jewish community], which a lot of people would see as sexist, but I personally don't experience the community as sexist.”<sup>74</sup> Other women view their gendered treatment in their conservative communities as favoring them.<sup>75</sup> One interviewee argued this point by saying, “Jewish women are really on a pedestal”, evidencing this opinion by referencing a commonly

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<sup>72</sup> Interview 2, conducted by author, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>73</sup> Dufour, “Sifting Through Tradition.”

<sup>74</sup> Interview 2, conducted by author, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>75</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*.



cited bit of Jewish law that says a husband should pleasure his wife sexually, and not doing so is grounds for divorce.<sup>76</sup> This section of Jewish law was mentioned in two interviews and is frequently employed to argue that women have power in Orthodox Judaism. However, these arguments fall short because, one, this is just one example that is impossible to enforce or quantify, and two, women filing for divorce in Orthodox Judaism is so often ineffective and can lead to abuse against them that the threat of divorce from a woman if she isn't sexually satisfied seems moot.

Another woman interviewed views the different roles of men and women, namely men being encouraged to be religious scholars while women aren't expected or able to, as an example of women being viewed as better than men. The interviewee argued, "women are more spiritual than men. So, because of that we're required to do less: less mitzvahs, less observance, you know, [we have] less stringent laws because we already have that connection to God, more so than a man can have."<sup>77</sup> Basically, women are not expected to do as many religious acts and their work is focused in the home because women are naturally connected to god and therefore don't need to build and sustain this connection like men do. This idea, as the one above, is also found in different areas of Orthodox Jewish feminism and works to justify, or excuse, different inequalities between men and women's roles. This may demonstrate that even though some interviewees were not very supportive of Orthodox Jewish feminism, the ideas and issues raised by the movement are still widely discussed and supported by some women in the community.

In looking at Orthodox Jewish feminism and its impact on women in these communities, the continued points of debate and contention in this more conservative feminist movement can

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<sup>76</sup> Interview 4, conducted by author, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022.

<sup>77</sup> Interview 3, conducted by author, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

help better illustrate some clear inequalities. One of the most common debates in Orthodox Jewish feminism is over whether women should be allowed in a liturgy. There are many examples of the differences assigned to men and women in the realm of liturgical practices, such as women not constituting a minyan, the obligation for men to perform formal fixed-time prayer but not women, and women not being allowed to serve as a religious leader or rabbi in a synagogue.<sup>78</sup> However, these inequalities are written into Jewish law and are incredibly difficult to alter.<sup>79</sup> In fact, changing Jewish law goes against Orthodox Judaism, and so many Orthodox feminists just write off women's equal roles in the clergy as impossible or unwanted, an idea which was represented in interviews as well.<sup>80</sup> In spite of this, recently a new type of Orthodox synagogue has been formed, commonly referred to as a partnership synagogue. Elana Maryles Sztokman, in her book *The Men's Section*, focuses on partnership synagogues, their attendees, and how they impact individuals and a community.<sup>81</sup> Sztokman defines partnership synagogues as synagogues that have "tweaked and tinkered with the service to maximize women's equal participation, while keeping strictly to the letter of Halakha."<sup>82</sup> In partnership synagogues, unlike in many regular Orthodox ones, you will find women leading parts of the service, singing, and leading prayer, no seating separation between women and men, and more involvement of children in the service. Partnership synagogues are working to find a middle ground between the traditional gender roles of Jewish law and the desire among some for more egalitarianism in Orthodox Judaism, by reinterpreting Halakha rather than changing it. Though these synagogues have been growing in number for the past few decades and can be found across the world, a vast

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<sup>78</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*.

<sup>79</sup> Greenberg.

<sup>80</sup> Interviews conducted by author, 2022.

<sup>81</sup> Sztokman, *The Men's Section: Orthodox Jewish Men in an Egalitarian World*.

<sup>82</sup> Sztokman. p 20.

majority of Orthodox Jews, including women, still frequent traditional Orthodox synagogues. This points to the complexity and true dichotomy between Orthodox Judaism and feminism, which often seem to be pulling in opposite directions, leaving Orthodox Jewish women at the center of this tension.

Beyond women in the liturgy, there are many other issues Orthodox Jewish feminists engage with. Divorce is another important issue to Orthodox Jewish feminists, as the current system leaves women at a serious disadvantage, as mentioned earlier. Unlike divorce in other sects of Judaism, which goes through the regular civil court system, divorce in Orthodox Judaism requires approval from a panel of three rabbis and a signed document, or get, from the husband okaying the process.<sup>83</sup> These requirements are also incredibly hard to change and make divorce potentially dangerous and humiliating for many Orthodox Jewish women. There is no clear avenue as to how this would be improved upon, as it is integrated into Orthodox Jewish law.

The meaning of the Mikveh bath mentioned earlier, as symbolically cleansing women after their periods, implying menstruation to be inherently dirty, is a common debate among Orthodox Jewish feminists. Many women rely on reinterpreting these practices to align with both their religion and feminism. For example, Greenberg views the Mikveh as “a regeneration of the life forces” rather than a legally required purification ritual.<sup>84</sup> One Orthodox Jewish woman interviewed was a Mikveh lady for some time and found the experience a gratifying one, especially because the monthly Mikveh bath is a mitzvot, or commandment, for women. She reflected on her experience saying, “working at the Mikveh was rewarding, because, you know, you're helping somebody do a mitzvah.”<sup>85</sup> This demonstrates that some women in the Orthodox

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<sup>83</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*.

<sup>84</sup> Greenberg, p 121.

<sup>85</sup> Interview 4.

Jewish community find a different type of fulfillment with the Mikveh ritual by appreciating its role in connecting them to their religion.

Finally, Orthodox Jewish feminism also engages abortion and family planning issues. Orthodox Jewish feminists strongly believe in the importance and value of Jewish motherhood. This is largely because Jewish people have been persecuted throughout history, which has resulted in a strong pressure and value placed, especially on women, to have children and pass down the religion and culture, which is passed matrilineally.<sup>86</sup> This is especially important because Judaism does not proselytize, and in fact often discourages conversion, especially in more traditional sects. This pressure on Jewish women to become mothers means that there is often hesitancy around abortion and even the career-first mindset pushed by many mainstream feminists. This conflicting pressure for young Orthodox Jewish women between career-first and family-first mindsets was demonstrated in interviews. One woman shared, “I think being a mother, in my Orthodox Jewish community, is very celebrated. And, maybe in other spaces, being a mother at 24 and still in school, people feel bad for me.”<sup>87</sup> The assumptions and expectations for women in Orthodox Judaism are different than in the secular west and the broader feminist movement. This adds more division between feminists and Orthodox Jews and therefore makes Orthodox Jewish feminist’s efforts bridging this gap all the more difficult.

Additionally, though Judaism is largely neutral to or even pro-abortion (in cases of risk to mother’s health, physical or psychological) as evidenced in the three most important Jewish texts (the Torah, Mishnah, and Talmud), there is still conflict between Orthodox Jewish feminism and mainstream feminism on these issues. This could be due to the lack of understanding from

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<sup>86</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*.

<sup>87</sup> Interview 2, conducted by author, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

mainstream feminism of the history and complexity of Jewish women's concerns around family planning.

Though Orthodox Jewish feminism is not as egalitarian as some other sects of feminism, the movement is still addressing important topics and concerns for many Orthodox Jewish women, such as community role and access inequalities, both in education and religious services and leadership, and misogynistic ideas around women's bodies. There is evidently a substantial hurdle to face in responding to these concerns, given the limitations in changing Halakha. In spite of these limitations, Orthodox Jewish feminism has been addressing specific issues, raising community awareness, and even suggesting and implementing more equitable solutions within Halakhic limitations, as exemplified in partnership synagogues. Orthodox Jewish feminists each strike their own balance between traditionalism and feminism, sometimes through reinterpreting more unequal aspects of their religion in a way that makes sense to their specific ideological balance. This results in a feminist movement which, though not the most progressive, is a unique, thought-provoking ideology that addresses prevalent issues in the community.

Although Orthodox Jewish feminism is working to address different important gender inequalities in the community, this work has not translated to systemic or cultural impact around #MeToo in the American Orthodox Jewish community. Though there have been different activist efforts around #MeToo in some Orthodox Jewish communities, many of them are focused in Israel, are smaller scale, and have not resulted in many of the more substantial changes awarded to the mainstream #MeToo movement in the United States. There are many reasons for the unyielding nature of the Orthodox Jewish community, specifically around #MeToo and other feminist movements, that speak both to the community's nature and ideals, as well as to the added difficulties of being a survivor in these communities.

## *American Orthodox Judaism in the face of #MeToo*

### *#MeToo Community Discourse*

The Orthodox Jewish community has stayed relatively silent on #MeToo issues, preferring to handle things privately whenever possible.<sup>88</sup> To the extent that #MeToo has been publicly addressed, it has been predominantly from men and religious news sources; women have been largely excluded, or willingly silent, on #MeToo issues in the Orthodox Jewish community. Different sources agree that the Orthodox community is lagging significantly behind the rest of the Jewish world regarding #MeToo, whether in addressing it, listening to and learning from women's experiences, or trying to make changes within the community.<sup>89</sup>

The lack of widespread public discussion on #MeToo in Orthodox Jewish media may be resulting in a generational divide between Orthodox Jewish women. In interviews, the two older women were unaware of what the #MeToo movement was or its goals, while all three younger interviewees were very familiar with the movement.<sup>90</sup> This may demonstrate that older Orthodox Jewish women are more likely to follow Orthodox Jewish news sites, while younger women in these communities may be more connected with the secular world, whether for work, school, etc. However, this #MeToo knowledge disparity may also be explained by the younger women self-selecting for interviews due to their comfort with or understanding of #MeToo.

Though the Orthodox Jewish community has had relatively little discourse around #MeToo and even less attempted change in response, there has still been some coverage of #MeToo by Orthodox Jewish news sources, both conservative and liberal, which has been slowly growing over time. Regardless of this news presence, interviews demonstrated little to no

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<sup>88</sup> Blackman, "American Orthodox Jewish Women and Domestic Violence: An Intervention Design".

<sup>89</sup> Sommer, "Not Just Weinstein."

<sup>90</sup> Interviews conducted by author, 2022.

awareness of this from women in the American Orthodox Jewish community. Every woman interviewed, when asked their thoughts on how the American Orthodox Jewish community has responded to #MeToo, said they were unaware if the community had responded or how specifically. Given that Haaretz, the longest running newspaper in Israel, referred to #MeToo as a movement that had “rocked and shocked the Jewish world”, this lack of awareness from conservative Jewish women on how their communities have responded to #MeToo is surprising.<sup>91</sup> This limited understanding of the Orthodox Jewish community’s (albeit small) response to #MeToo may demonstrate that some Orthodox Jewish women are not encouraged to keep up with news, even if it’s community specific. More broadly, this information likely reflects the minimal public discourse around #MeToo and other movements in individual Orthodox Jewish communities across the country.

The lack of discussion around #MeToo issues in the American Orthodox Jewish community is equally, if not more, present at the individual and synagogue level compared to the national level. Four out of five women interviewed reflected that they didn’t believe they had ever discussed the #MeToo movement in their Orthodox Jewish community.<sup>92</sup> This further demonstrates the insular nature of many Orthodox Jewish communities, which work to protect themselves from modern movements and change. This also demonstrates how private Orthodox Jewish communities can be, with individuals not discussing personal matters or thoughts on controversial topics with others, even in their own community. One woman expressed disappointment at this behavior in her Orthodox Jewish community saying, “therein lies one of the problems. There is still like this element of secrecy. Unless you're very close with somebody,

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<sup>91</sup> Sommer, “Not Just Weinstein.”

<sup>92</sup> Interviews conducted by author, 2022.

people don't share personal things, especially about their marriage.”<sup>93</sup> This concept makes understanding and quantifying #MeToo issues in Orthodox Jewish communities very difficult because people are incredibly private, even to those in their congregation they may trust. The lack of dialogue around #MeToo at the small community level is another barrier to female survivors being able to say “me too” and additionally works to perpetuate these issues at every level in American Orthodox Judaism.

### *Barriers in the Community for #MeToo Survivors*

In the broader American Jewish community, efforts have been made to promote women’s voices, and many women are feeling more comfortable sharing their #MeToo experiences, similar to women in the secular western world. However, this is not the case for some Orthodox Jewish women who may “live in a world where they are educated to submit to men and blame themselves for male transgression, [and] experience deep shame, guilt and fear when they are assaulted”.<sup>94</sup> This results in a large pressure for women to not come forward with their experiences and allegations, lest they be subject to judgment and shame from their community. Additionally, when people do come forward with assault allegations in the Orthodox Jewish community, their experiences are often seen as isolated events, not part of a larger systemic issue which threatens the safety of numerous community members.<sup>95</sup>

Another prolific issue in Orthodox Jewish communities that works against the #MeToo movement and survivors is the idea of lashon hara. Lashon hara is a Halakhic term that urges against “sinful gossiping.”<sup>96</sup> This idea has been largely used by people in more traditional Jewish

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<sup>93</sup> Interview 3, conducted by author, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>94</sup> Sommer, “Not Just Weinstein.”

<sup>95</sup> Benchimol and Huber, “We Need to Talk: A Review of Public Discourse and Survivor Experiences of Safety, Respect, and Equity in Jewish Workplaces and Communal Spaces, Executive Summary.”

<sup>96</sup> Sztokman, “#metoo in the Jewish Community.”



communities to silence survivors of assault by arguing that spreading harmful “gossip”, whether true or not, is against Jewish law.<sup>97</sup> Lashon hara only further limits #MeToo dialogue in Orthodox Jewish communities, which, as mentioned earlier, works to further silence survivors and preserve the existing gender imbalances. The various tactics of silencing survivors, such as lashon hara and the mentality of Jews as one big happy family, combined with the prevalence of passive-bystanders and one-bad-apple mentalities, makes for a powerful force against Jewish women who may want to share their #MeToo stories or allegations.

*A Case Study: Chaim Walder*

These many issues working against Orthodox Jewish women survivors were recently brought to light again when an influential, widely beloved Orthodox Jewish man, Chaim Walder, was accused of dozens of accounts of sexual assault of women, as well as underage girls and boys.<sup>98</sup> Chaim Walder was a Haredi, or ultra-Orthodox, children’s book author and child psychologist in Israel. His books were so widely read and enjoyed by children that he was named a “protector of children” by the Israeli Government and awarded the Magen LeYeled (Defender of the Child) award from the Israel National Council for the Child in 2003.<sup>99</sup> One source reflected on his influence saying, “Chaim Walder was a Haredi rock star, a feature in every ultra-Orthodox home, an individual who had enormous power and influence in shaping how parents raised their children.”<sup>100</sup> When the first accusations of assault and rape were released, Walder was a regular columnist for a newspaper writing about social issues, a host of a popular talk show, the head of The Center for the Child and Family in Israel, and was an educational

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<sup>97</sup> Blackman, “American Orthodox Jewish Women and Domestic Violence: An Intervention Design.”

<sup>98</sup> Nehorai, “Grassroots Movement Exposed Abusive Children’s Author Chaim Walder.”

<sup>99</sup> Tobin, “How the Haredi Power Elite Avoid Responsibility for Chaim Walder Affair.”

<sup>100</sup> Tobin.

counselor regularly working with Haredi children who experienced trauma and abuse. Chaim Walder's immense influence in Orthodox Jewish culture, both in Israel and the US, allowed him to have a terrible combination of access to victims, and enough power and esteem to be beyond accountability or even questioning. This resulted in dozens of individuals, and perhaps many more, being brutally and repeatedly assaulted at the hands of someone the rest of their community revered.

In November of 2021, the first accounts against Chaim Walder were released, followed not long after by dozens more. These accounts demonstrated the repeated assault and rape of children as young as 9 and 12 for decades of Walder's career. After the accounts of abuse were published, the Orthodox Jewish community (organizations, leadership, and the media) was silent for some time, echoing previous notes of the strong passive-bystander issue around sexual assault and #MeToo in many Orthodox Jewish communities.<sup>101</sup> However, due in great part to pressure from grassroots anti-abuse organizing that had been building in Israel for years, Orthodox Jewish press became compelled to respond to the allegations. Soon after, 22 accusations of assault were heard in an Ultra-Orthodox court in Israel in which survivors, as well as therapists, rabbis, and other professionals testified against Walder.<sup>102</sup> Two days later, Chaim Walder committed suicide.<sup>103</sup> This marked a turn in the growing upset against the abuser, as a strong backlash from many conservative Orthodox Jews erupted after Walder's death.<sup>104</sup> Many rabbis and other influential people blamed victims and activists for Walder's death, calling the accusations a "secular conspiracy against the religious community."<sup>105</sup> Others wrote glowing

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<sup>101</sup> Nehorai, "Grassroots Movement Exposed Abusive Children's Author Chaim Walder."

<sup>102</sup> Rabinowitz, "Court Hears 22 Accusations of Sexual Assault by Haredi Author Chaim Walder."

<sup>103</sup> Bayar, "Too Many Chose to Look Away from Chaim Walder's Crimes. We Can Make Other Choices Now."

<sup>104</sup> Tobin, "How the Haredi Power Elite Avoid Responsibility for Chaim Walder Affair."

<sup>105</sup> Tobin.

obituaries in response to the suicide, completely omitting survivors' stories and suffering.<sup>106</sup>

People deflected and denied the accusations and many rabbis and Orthodox Jewish community members employed the same lashon hara argument mentioned earlier, saying that speaking negatively of Walder was sinful "gossip" as a means to dismiss and silence survivors and advocates.

Although these demonstrated tactics of silencing survivors' experiences and protecting the perpetrator were seen in many responses from the traditional Orthodox community, other community members and leaders, both in Israel and the US, understood the weight of these accusations and the systemic issues facing the Orthodox Jewish community. One rabbi discussed the issues the Orthodox Jewish community faces around #MeToo and women coming forward. He specifically noted, "This problem is compounded multiple times over when the perpetrator is a powerful and respected public figure. No one believes the victims, and the best advice given to their family is 'to hush it up.'"<sup>107</sup> These comments further argue the same issues and their severity in the Orthodox Jewish community: the difficulty and lack of accountability or responsibility for perpetrators, especially if they are powerful in the community, as well as the silencing of women and the insistence on keeping things private. These are both common issues that can be seen in many communities regardless of religion across the world, but they are prevalent hurdles for women in the Orthodox Jewish community as well.

As months passed and the Orthodox Jewish community continued to recover from this shocking #MeToo event, many community leaders who had once blamed advocates and survivors for the situation began to have a more sympathetic approach and some moved to

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<sup>106</sup> Nehorai, "Grassroots Movement Exposed Abusive Children's Author Chaim Walder."

<sup>107</sup> Lopiansky, "For This We Weep – Mishpacha Magazine."

openly condemn Walder's actions.<sup>108</sup> Regardless of some slow acceptance of the serious abuses Walder committed, the Orthodox Jewish community seems to be, once again, treating this as an isolated issue, rather than one that demonstrates a systemic problem. One source argued, "There's nothing systemic about the approach that's being taken by the community leadership, and it's a systemic problem. You have to have a systemic solution. And they're avoiding that at all costs."<sup>109</sup> This is a core dilemma in Orthodox Judaism; addressing #MeToo issues in the community, the same issues that are exemplified in the Chaim Walder case (such as the passive bystander pervasiveness, community leaders not being held accountable, lashon hara used to silence survivors, and more) will require large-scale change, which much of Orthodox Judaism seems unwilling to even consider. Although many issues the Orthodox Jewish community faces can be found everywhere, this community still has great work to do in properly addressing these issues, moving beyond the reductive "one bad apple" mentality, and analyzing the unique ways their community may perpetuate assault issues and #MeToo denial.

In conservative and traditional Jewish communities, feminist movements like #MeToo, as well as gendered violence in general, are severely understudied, even though these women can potentially face substantial barriers in trying to address their abuse, more than many women in secular America. Due to the doctrinaire nature of Orthodox Judaism, the unique laws and structure of the religion can create diverse added difficulties for women who may be facing different #MeToo issues. Some of the most pervasive barriers in these communities are the dismissal and silencing of women's experiences with lashon hara, the idea of all Jews as one big happy family, the difficulty of bystanders to take action when they know something is going on,

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<sup>108</sup> Nehorai, "Grassroots Movement Exposed Abusive Children's Author Chaim Walder."

<sup>109</sup> Nehorai.

and the lack of community discourse or even acknowledgement around #MeToo and other gendered issues. Although the large-scale community discussion brought about by Chaim Walder in late 2021 and early 2022 may show the Orthodox Jewish community is becoming more amenable to #MeToo discussion, where it has silenced it in the past, this is not enough. There need to be efforts to address the different systemic issues that perpetuate the behaviors of predators like Chaim Walder while silencing and isolating the victims. The Orthodox Jewish community must look inward, address the gendered issues that many in the community have been concerned about for decades, and accept that change in the community (and perhaps religion) is necessary for Orthodox Jewish women to be granted the respect, safety, and access they deserve.

### ***Conclusion***

This paper is a preliminary study into American Modern Orthodox Jewish communities and their response to feminist movements like #MeToo. Specifically, this study focuses on Orthodox Jewish *women's* roles in their communities and their perspectives on the #MeToo movement's potential impact in these communities. This is one of the few scholarly sources to focus on US Orthodox Jewish Women's experiences, especially through interviews.

This paper addresses how Orthodox Jewish women are affected by #MeToo by studying domestic and sexual violence in Orthodox Jewish communities, Jewish feminism in these traditional communities, the existing patriarchal structures in Orthodox Judaism and how they work against #MeToo survivors, and the affect the #MeToo movement has had on American Jews and Orthodox Jews. In this research, it was found that there are many systemic mechanisms at work in the Orthodox Jewish community that negatively impact women and survivors. Examples of some of the most pervasive, widespread issues in the Orthodox Jewish community

around #MeToo are the passive-bystander issue, little to no accountability for leadership in many Jewish organizations, familial messaging and pressure in the Jewish community, the sin of lashon hara as a silencing tactic, and the lack of community knowledge or discussion around #MeToo. These many barriers to women being heard and believed make the Orthodox Jewish community a likely stressful, isolating, and threatening environment for survivors. Although Orthodox Jewish feminists are fighting to address some of these issues, they face an uphill battle due to the nature of Orthodox Judaism and the general refusal from its members to reform the religion to accommodate more gender equality. Recent more widespread uproar around Chaim Walder and other abusers, due to feminist efforts in the wake of #MeToo, may demonstrate a slowly changing tide in this community. However, there is a much bigger battle in bringing about lasting change from this uproar, as activists all across the world may well know.

### ***Suggestions of Further Research***

Given these preliminary findings, there is evidently much more work to be done in understanding the nuance of the roles and agency of Orthodox Jewish women in their community. This research was not able to properly address what women in these communities feel, and are told, about their perceived level of gender equality, which is important to understanding how best to address gender inequality in these communities. Further research is also needed to understand (and even discover) what methods would be best in expanding #MeToo-related services, discussion, and community reform. This paper was not able to address how Orthodox Jewish male allies fit into the dynamic of the religion and community's treatment of women and the #MeToo movement, though this would be an interesting avenue in researching the contours of women's vs men's roles in the slow changes forming in some of these communities. Finally, comparing different conservative religions and their responses to #MeToo,

in order to better understand these conservative religions, their female followers, and the #MeToo movement's effect, would undoubtedly provide further nuance and context to the current academic understanding of Orthodox Jewish practices as they relate to feminism.

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Human Research Protection Program  
 1600 SW 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Suite 620  
 Portland, OR 97201  
 (503) 725-5484 psuirb@pdx.edu

**Human Research Protection Program  
 Notice of Exempt Certification**

December 20, 2021

Dear Investigator,

The PSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed the following submission:

<b>Investigator(s)</b>	Kim Williams / Rebecca Battin
<b>HRPP #</b>	217550-18
<b>Title</b>	Interview-based study of orthodox Jewish women's felt effects of the #MeToo movement in the United States
<b>Funding Agency / Kuali #</b>	N/A
<b>Determination Date</b>	December 20, 2021
<b>Expiration Date</b>	N/A
<b>Review Category(ies)</b>	Exempt: # 2

The IRB determined this study qualifies as exempt and is satisfied the provisions for protecting the rights and welfare of all subjects participating in research are adequate. The study may proceed in accordance with the HRPP materials submitted.

Approval by the PSU HRPP to conduct human subjects research does not constitute permission to access and use protected data (such as FERPA-protected student records) for research purposes. Other institutional approvals must be sought and obtained prior to accessing protected data for research purposes.

Please note the following ongoing Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) requirements:

**IMPORTANT: Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, all researchers and research personnel conducting human subjects research are required to comply with state and local health authority mandates, as well as PSU policy, on social distancing and other protective measures to reduce COVID-19 transmission.**

**Changes to Study Activities:** Any changes to the study must be submitted to the HRPP for review and determination prior to implementation.

**Unanticipated Problems or Adverse Events:** Notify the HRPP within 5 days of any unanticipated problems or adverse events that occur as a result of the study.

**Study Completion:** Notify the HRPP when the study is complete; the HRPP will request annual updates on the study status. Study materials must be kept for at least three years following completion.

**Compliance:** The PSU IRB (FWA00000091; IRB00000903) and HRPP comply with 45 CFR Part 46, 21 CFR Parts 50 and 56, and other federal and Oregon laws and regulations, as applicable.

If there are any questions, please contact the HRPP at [psuirb@pdx.edu](mailto:psuirb@pdx.edu) or call 503-725-5484.

Sincerely,

HRPP Administrator  
 Human Research Protection Program