

Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, *Challenge and Conformity: The Religious Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women*, London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization 2021, 324 pp., ISBN: 978-1-786941-71-8

Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz's *Challenge and Conformity: The Religious Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women* offers its readers insights into the lived experiences of Orthodox Jewish women in England. Taylor-Guthartz situates her work, which is based on her PhD research, against a desire to understand Orthodox Jewish women's lived experiences in England. Anglo-Jewry has received little scholarly attention despite being the fifth biggest Jewish community in the world. Taylor-Guthartz ambitiously uses five data collection methods (participant observation in synagogues, at Jewish festivals and holidays, and in women's groups; thirty-seven semi-structured interviews; a survey; and analysis of the local Jewish press and community email lists) to understand orthodox women's lived experiences, practices, and stories. Through thoughtful and in-depth analysis of their words, life-stories, practices, and involvements at events, she skilfully brings her participants to life, demonstrating her sensitive approach to researching contemporary religiosity.

Chapters 1 (Studying Jewish Women) and 2 (Setting the Scene: the Jewish Landscape) function as background chapters to the study. First, Taylor-Guthartz situates Orthodox women's lived experiences in relation to those of men. She also considers the relationship between the English Orthodox world and the wider English society. She questions the hegemonic Western secular notion of agency by arguing that while women cannot read the Torah aloud, give sermons and make halakhic decisions, many Orthodox women view raising a family as their primary Jewish involvement and many engage with various women's rituals and groups. These are often undocumented or considered superstitions, but they are fundamental to our understanding of Orthodox women's self-understanding, agency, and identity negotiation in a patriarchal society. She guides the reader through recent Jewish history in England and contemporary Jewish landscape, while being attentive to the role of Orthodox women in relation to historical and socio-cultural developments that have affected their lived experiences.

Chapter 3 (The View from the Ladies Gallery: Women's 'Official' Life in the Community) documents and analyses women's involvement, activities, and experiences of synagogue worship – with particular attention to life-cycle events and Simchat Torah. She focuses on women's involvement in birth, coming-of-age, and marriage rituals and practices. The chapter also examines women's changing roles in synagogues and women's Jewish education. This involves debates about gender separation in synagogues, whether women should learn Talmud, and women leading services. Chapter 4 (Contested Prayers and Powerful Blessings: Women's 'Unofficial' Life in the Community) examines women's other practices by exploring other spaces, such as gatherings in homes and other community spaces. There, women exercise their religiosity by having study groups and talks. They engage with activities, such as include berakhah parties, challah parties, tehilim groups, Rosh Hodesh groups, ahavat yisrael groups, and gemahs to support and protect people in the community. In these chapters, that focus on women's public lives, Taylor-Guthartz shows her commitment to shedding light on these women's diverse experiences. Indeed, she pays attention to women's agency sense of belonging (and unbelonging), their tones, and how they negotiate spiritual and physical spaces. Taylor-Guthartz successfully manages to balance experiences across a variety of Orthodox synagogues and denominations to give authentic and nuanced insights into women's lived experiences and practices, and obstacles to performing them.

In the next two chapters, Taylor-Guthartz turns to the domestic and family sphere. In chapter 5 (The View from the Kitchen: Women's 'Official' Life in the Family) Taylor-Guthartz explores a variety of rituals and customs that Jewish women engage with. She concentrates on food (especially women's role in keeping a kosher kitchen), Passover rituals in the home (where she highlights women's role in Passover cleaning), and the participants personal relationship to God. She also skilfully addresses aspects to do with modesty and purity rituals such as going to mikveh. In doing so, she again succeeds in giving the reader a nuanced perspective into what a Jewish woman's life outside formal Jewish institutions looks like. By applying a gendered lens, she contributes to an important scholarly conversation on lived religion. She continues to do this in chapter 6 (Red Threads and Amulets: Women's 'Unofficial' Life in the Family), where she turns to non-official Jewish rituals and practices. These rituals and customs are performed in everyday and domestic life. Here, Taylor-Guthartz sheds light on the Jewish customs and practices that are the least visible and discussed. These rituals are integral to

many women's lives but have often been ignored, undermined or merely referred to as 'superstitions'. Often passed on from their mothers and grandmothers, women engage with several customs to, among other things, find a husband, get pregnant, give birth, for good luck, and to avoid the evil eye. In this chapter, she underlines that these integral aspects of women's lives ought to receive more scholarly attention and they must be taken more seriously. Finally, chapter 7 (Conclusion) summarises the key arguments and findings. Additionally, it comes with recommendations for future research and scholarly directions for conceptualising Orthodox Judaism.

The ambitious nature of the book is notable. Utilising multiple data collection methods can either be highly successful or chaotic. I was highly impressed by Taylor-Guthartz's ability to integrate the methods and create a coherent narrative that makes the book strong and easily readable. She describes multiple events to situate the topics, refers to her survey to demonstrate the scale of some phenomena (such as how widespread some practices and customs are), and integrates quotes from her interviews to develop her argument and narrative. The interview quotes allow the reader to gain a glimpse into the lives of the women in their own words. She translates Hebrew and Yiddish words into English in brackets, and often also explains the word in more detail in a footnote, which is helpful to readers who are outsiders to the community.

She demonstrates the complexities of Orthodox Jewish in a thought-provoking manner. An excellent example of this can be found in chapter 5 when some participants note, about periods where they pray less frequently, that they 'had no doubts about their basic faith and acknowledged that prayer is not always easy' (p. 203). In other words, this moves beyond a simplistic understanding of how ritual engagement, such as prayer, is fundamental to Jewishness since the participants argue that periods where they do not pray or pray less frequently do not change their Jewish identity. I welcome this contribution to the scholarly conversation on what Jewishness means.

This in-depth analysis of Orthodox women's lived experiences in England undoubtedly adds to scholarly conversations on women's lived experiences, lived religion, and Jewish studies. As she concludes 'while earlier studies have often humped all denominationally defined

Orthodox Jewish women together, my observations suggest that three subgroups – Haredi, Modern Orthodox, and traditionalist – exist, and that different patterns of belief, practice, and world-view characterize each group’ (p. 256). This makes the book an excellent read for anthropologists and sociologists of religion too. In brief, Taylor-Guthartz’s book provides excellent, and much needed, insights into Orthodox women’s lived experiences and practices in England by revealing complexities of religious subjectivities and agency in public and domestic Jewish life.

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