



INTRODUCTION: A FEMINIST HISTORIAN'S INTENTIONS

This is a study of Hasidic women in the Lubavitcher sect. Specifically, it is an analysis of Lubavitcher women's contributions to their own American community since 1950, when outreach and education reforms supported by the late Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem M. Schneerson began to empower his female followers. I write this history as a feminist interested in what I will term *counterfeminist* women.

At first glance, Hasidic tradition and feminism appear to share little in common. Most Western-educated feminists, myself included, bring a certain set of political interests to our interrogation of women's status in religious communities. And so the question my colleagues ask most often is not "What have you learned from your research on Hasidic women?" but "Why on earth would you choose *them*?"

This attitude reflects an expectation that feminist historians will only study the lives and work of other feminists. Ergo, there is something unexpected and puzzling in my focus on traditionally religious women. I begin this work by responding that no group of immigrant women committed to reproducing a spiritual vision of womanhood should be marginalized by the feminist historian. Indeed, the feminist historian has an obligation to acknowledge diverse contexts of ethnic and gender identity.

Women's history as an academic field is a fairly recent phenomenon. Like other innovative disciplines, women's history has

been shaped by dissent among its own scholars, in addition to time-consuming attacks from external critics. A vocal contingent of academics continues to contest greater inclusion of studies on women and minorities in the once entirely white, male, and Western canon of historical literature. The more multicultural approach to the study of history threatens that established academic canon by revealing interconnecting storylines of achievement and oppression in history. Yet the women's history and women's studies fields can, themselves, foster exclusionary research if traditionally religious women in history are not incorporated as significant voices.

The challenge for women's history and women's studies programs, some still in beginning stages on college campuses, is to unveil rather than to obscure the reality of race, class, and ethnic differences between women. During the 1980s, when I took my doctorate at SUNY-Binghamton, feminist theorists and historians grew more alert to women's ethnic identification, to conflicts between ethnic group and gender loyalties, and to ways in which ethnic and racial stereotyping might be confronted within higher education. Multicultural curricula in women's studies courses and at feminist conferences speak to this commitment toward fuller representation of women in society and history.

But despite these steps toward more inclusive historical studies on women, many graduate students remain nervous about exploring the significant contributions of right-wing women in history, women whose lives and work remain rooted in a traditional ideology of divinely ordained, separate sex roles. Such women constitute no less of a dynamic group than any other community of women in history. But it is women's very involvement in the dissemination of conservative, antifeminist rhetoric that poses a unique set of questions for feminist historians.

We ask: What attracts women to movements or ideologies offering them restricted status? Why would women participate in the creation and popularization of propaganda advocating that woman's place is in the home, that her biological function naturally limits her capacity for public agency and intellectual achievement? Furthermore, what academic dialogue might ensue from the inclusion of research on antifeminist women in women's history curricula? These are the questions that sent me on my journey into the world of Hasidic womanhood.

Because my training is in history, rather than sociology or psychology of religion, I concentrate on *what* postwar Hasidic women did with their lives and their influence, rather than questioning

why Hasidic women hold views and values different from mine. It is both inaccurate and patronizing to assume that Hasidic women have merely been “brainwashed” by the males of their respective group. Such an assumption constructs women as passive recipients of ideology, and shifts all active and primary focus to male agency. While male authority and control certainly determine or circumscribe female choice, women do retain options as ideological consumers. Antifeminist ideologies may limit all women as a class, yet permit individual women to attain power and status through obedience to the prescribed female role.

In this study I place women in the primary focus as producers and agents of Hasidic ideology, and examine the possible social and self-image benefits that accrue to them through ultra-Orthodox activism. As more and more women worldwide have come to identify with conservative religious movements, it is no longer sufficient to dwell on what they are *not* allowed to do in such communities. The relevant question is, again, *what* traditionalist women *are doing* with their permitted influence as religious activists. Any separate, female sphere produces a certain and visible “women’s culture,” including hierarchies and (limited) authority. Because Hasidic women contend that they are “already liberated”—from Christian definitions of womanhood—and because there is good reason for them to distrust a Western feminism once based on Christian reforms, I choose to see Lubavitchers as counterfeminist, not antifeminist.

My own work on Hasidic women began in the early 1980s, before there were any published monographs on ultra-Orthodox women in either women’s studies or Judaica. The enormous body of extant sources on Hasidism itself revealed almost no information on women’s lives, roles, or self-image. And when I turned to new feminist texts on women’s religious experience in history and community, I was again disappointed, for feminist scholarship on Jewish women’s identity had yet to address the viewpoint of the Hasidic woman. I am delighted to acknowledge that all of this has changed in the decade since I began my own research. The last years of the 1980s and first years of the 1990s saw an explosion of interest in the strictly Orthodox woman’s experience, culminating in the publications of books and articles by Lynn Davidman, Tamar Frankiel, Lis Harris, Debra Kaufman, Ellen Koskoff, Tamar El-Or, Jenna Weissman Joselit, and many others. There is now a plethora of research on Hasidic women’s spirituality available to the interested student.

In the early 1980s, however, I began my research on Hasidic women with little guidance from the either popular or academic sources. I faced the necessity of conducting my research, for a period of several years, within the Hasidic community itself.

Working in the archives of the Lubavitcher community in Brooklyn, I found evidence of a prolific and articulate female literature by women of the postwar American Hasidic community. It was precisely this literature that I hoped would place Hasidic women on the continuum of history relevant both to Judaica and multicultural women's studies. I realized the difficulty of match-making a marriage between Hasidic literature and women's studies, however, as I read page after page of Lubavitcher women's polemical essays denouncing the American women's movement, its proponents, and its achievements. Any accurate historical study of Lubavitcher women in American communities would have to include this flurry of hostility to organized feminism. I was unprepared for the magnitude of feeling. The women's literature I had rejoiced in finding yielded an almost endless attack on birth control, college education, the "idiot antics of Women's Lib," career-oriented women, and so on. More intriguing still were cogent essays by women who had left feminism for Hasidism; political petitions by Lubavitcher women seeking to overturn legislation on the separation of church and state; and, most fascinating of all, essays providing Hasidic responses to feminist criticism.

My initial encounters with Hasidic women's literature placed me in the company of other graduate students and historians who experience conflicts between their own values and those of their chosen subjects. In a forum on conservative women in history, held at Rutgers University in 1987, I heard testimony from emerging scholars whose work addressed slave-owning women, women empowered by the rise of European fascism, and female leadership in fundamentalist religious movements. All participants agreed that the classification of women as an oppressed group was complicated by substantial evidence of women empowered to restrict other women, men, or both. In my case, the study of Hasidic women would have to address not only the function of male authority in suppressing women, but the role of women in promoting obedience to sacrosanct male authority.

It is hardly news that racial, religious, or ethnic loyalties may outweigh the appeal of a "women's" movement for female members of persecuted minority groups. Distrust of and distaste for non-Jewish society is behind much of the counterfeminist sentiment

informing Lubavitcher women's writing. This defensive construction of the Gentile as Other is most significant, and illustrates the tension between ethnic and gender identity for many Jewish women, not only Hasidim. Because ethnic/religious identity, not gender, was the primary obstacle to Jewish freedom throughout history, it is not surprising to find that modern Hasidic women are more concerned with ethnic survival than in liberating themselves from Hasidic men. The preference is for loyalty to Jewish tradition rather than to a primarily white, Christian feminism: after all, did not Gentile women serve as agents of anti-Semitic provocation in Eastern Europe, and as Nazi officers in women's concentration camp barracks? In short, historical and contemporary anti-Semitism has so uprooted and affected the Hasidic community that Hasidic women cannot afford to consider themselves oppressed by their own people, their male relations and leaders. These reactions are not dissimilar from African-American women's disinterest in being "liberated" by a sometimes racist white feminism. Sadly, during my research years, the black and Hasidic communities of Crown Heights reached their most acrimonious standoff, impeding further the potential for dialogue between women.

Mindful of all these tensions, in the fall of 1986 I began my historical fieldwork in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, at the age of twenty-five.



Out of respect to my host community, I temporarily adopted a Lubavitcher's-eye view of the larger world, dressing and behaving in accordance with Hasidic stipulations while I worked in Crown Heights during the 1986–1988 period. My subsequent presentation on the values and activities of Lubavitcher women is the result of many months of experience as a visitor within the female culture I sought to write back into history. This unusual research experience simply must be described, in brief, for the reading audience unfamiliar with Hasidism.

The Lubavitchers aggressively solicit guests. Outreach tactics espoused by their leader, the late Rebbe, demand that all assimilated Jews (such as myself) be treated as potential adherents to traditional Orthodox practice. A variety of schools and services, specifically aimed at *baalot teshuvah* or newly observant women, exist in the contemporary Crown Heights community. Any sincerely interested Jewish visitor may take the subway to Kingston Avenue and Eastern Parkway and walk into the Lubavitcher world.

The sight of older, female students of Judaism, awkwardly but earnestly adjusting to Hasidic norms in their pilgrimages as *baalot teshuvah*, is a source of pride rather than embarrassment for Lubavitcher activists. Moreover, the highly international character of the Brooklyn Hasidic community provides a background scenery incorporating visitors, displaced students, and (until his death in 1994) clients of the Rebbe. As opposed to the more restricted Satmar and Tasher sects of Hasidism, where standards of attire, speech patterns, employment, and daily conduct are meticulously uniform, the Lubavitcher community hosts guests from myriad cultures and walks of life. French, Israeli, Iranian, Canadian, and South American Jews, as well as recent Soviet Jewish émigrés, are frequent visitors to Crown Heights on Jewish holidays (many came in pursuit of private audience with the Rebbe). In addition to this cross-cultural milieu, the spectrum of American Jewry within Crown Heights far exceeds one's immediate stereotype of Hasidic homogeneity. New, beaming, previously college-educated Hasidic adherents, elderly first-generation American Jews, and families from every state chose to settle close to the Rebbe, bringing a range of styles, accents, and dress. Against this background, I was never the most conspicuous visitor, but one of a multitude of Jews interested in learning more about Lubavitch Hasidism.

My previous experiences among the Hasidim of Jerusalem, during a year of college study in Israel, prepared me for the basic codes of conduct I was to adopt in Brooklyn. In Crown Heights, where the language spoken in the streets was more often English than Yiddish, I pursued my research with relative ease and receptivity. In order to avoid offending the community that was handsomely permitting me free rein in its libraries, I studiously observed Lubavitcher etiquette. Acceptable standards of *tznius*, or modesty, required that I wear a long skirt, white opaque stockings, feminine-styled shoes of good quality, and a blouse or sweater with a high neck and long sleeves. As an unmarried Jewish woman, I was not required to cover my head; however, in a community where most young women are married at nineteen or twenty, my uncovered head with its twenty-five-year-old face signified to all passersby that I was either new to Hasidism . . . or a pitiable out-of-towner with an unsuccessful matchmaking record.

While I was familiar with the dictum that male and female avoid one another on the street and never initiate contact or unnecessary conversation, I was apt to forget in a shop that I must not take change directly from a man's hand. I also learned that book-

sellers' brusqueness or inattention to me was merely another manifestation of avoiding excessive contact with an unknown woman. Furthermore, a woman's book order was less pressing than a man's, for the male is obligated to study, while an adult woman's learning is optional, beyond her grasp of those prayers and commandments directed at her.

However, no one thought it odd that an apparently unmarried and childless woman such as myself should browse in the famous children's toy store, Tzivos Hashem. As I stood making surreptitious notes on Lubavitcher educational toys, I was constantly approached by other women shoppers, who asked my opinion on purchases for their babies—did I think this size *yarmulke* would fit a three-year-old? As almost all Hasidic women grow up in large families, it is assumed that an unmarried or childless woman nevertheless has child-rearing expertise and interests gleaned from a lifetime of caring for siblings.

During conversations, particularly when I was excitedly interviewing new contacts and lapsed into secular glibness, I had to monitor myself carefully to avoid using crude slang expressions. One was expected to speak of the Rebbe as "the Rebbe, *shlita*" ("may he live and be well"). To omit this Yiddish acronym was a mark of ignorance and disrespect. Similarly, one rarely hears the word "God" spoken in Crown Heights; "Hashem," The Name, is the universally employed euphemism, and oaths that take the name of God in vain are unthinkable. Colorful Yiddish epithets more than suffice, but one must learn which, and when they are permissible. There are many taboos for normal conversation; it is unlucky to mention ages or numbers of children, or to overtly praise one's recent good fortune. Should such references be absolutely necessary, Hasidim (and less Orthodox Jews as well) say "*Kin ayn ahora*" against the Evil Eye. It is also customary to answer "How are you?" with "*Baruch Hashem!*" ("Blessed is the Name"), as a way of thanking the Almighty. One may say "*Baruch Hashem*" after the completion of work, the success of an event, or on any other occasion when it is appropriate to express gratitude. I heard fourth-grade girls say it after completing a difficult page of schoolwork.

I emphasize these details because my use of Lubavitcher facilities such as libraries, records offices, and book dealers depended in large part on my willingness to comply with Orthodox Jewish law. I learned that one does not bring holy books into a lavatory, even when they are inside a satchel with one's other possessions; xerox-

ing materials containing sacred literature requires that flawed reprints be left with a rabbi for appropriate religious disposal; food may not be consumed in public without the correct prayer; women may not hum, let alone sing, in public areas, lest their voices prove a temptation to men.

I dressed as a Lubavitcher not to deceive, but to observe the appropriate decorum. I explained my research interests honestly to anyone who inquired, although I seldom introduced myself up front as the radical feminist daughter of a Jewish-Gentile intermarriage. But the apparent Hasidic allegiance suggested by my dress had other repercussions. I have mentioned that my research coincided with the onset of a devastating period of racial and political tension between Hasidim and black residents of Crown Heights. In my Hasidic dress, I was an easy target for those who expressed their animus for Hasidim through verbal and physical abuse.

The primary collection from which I drew my sources is the Levi Yitzchok Library of the Lubavitcher Youth Organization, on Kingston Avenue in Crown Heights. Housing over 25,000 volumes in several languages, including a large children's selection, this library has been open since 1975 and contains bound collections of nearly every Lubavitcher periodical ever produced. While the shelves are arranged according to Hebrew or English titles, I found that the section of books pertaining to women in Judaism was labeled "Miscellaneous." Texts in this women's section include publications by the Lubavitcher Women's Organization, volumes of their Convention programs, pamphlets by rabbis on the role of women, cookbooks, marriage manuals and wedding sermons, teachers' guidelines for establishing Jewish day schools, and numerous books on the laws of *niddah* and *mikveh* (menstrual taboos and purification).

The women's section dealt almost exclusively with Jewish law and female obligations toward the preservation of *sholom bayis*, or household harmony; little could be found on the role of Jewish women in history, although the library had recently acquired *The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln*. Due to the library's excellent collection of periodicals such as *Di Yiddishe Heim* and other women's publications, as well as community histories and papers by the Rebbe, I spent most of my research time in the Levi Yitzchok archives.

In deference to the laws of modesty, the Library holds separate hours for men and women, and as a woman I was only permitted in the facility from noon to 4 on Sundays and from 4 to 9 P.M. on Mon-

days and Wednesdays. As I was already adjunct faculty at SUNY-Binghamton in upstate New York by then, and could only come to Brooklyn for a few days of research at a time, I found the Library's schedule quite a challenge. Xeroxing all the materials I needed was prohibitively expensive, as the ancient machine in the Library charged twenty-five cents per page and could be run only by the attending, overworked librarian. Finally I petitioned for and received a library card—no easy task for an “outsider” lacking references from community authorities, but fortunately I had a letter of introduction from a friendly Chabad rabbi. I was then permitted to check out exactly two items at a time for exactly two weeks. My own difficulty in obtaining access to materials should shed some light on the barriers to independent female learning in the community.

While “men’s hours” at the library were observed somberly, for the scholarly study of community rabbis, “women’s hours” were consistently loud, chaotic, and unreliable. The bulk of the visitors were children between the ages of newborn to sixteen. The noise was sometimes incredible, but efforts by hapless librarians to restore order were met with hostile responses from the children’s accompanying mothers/older siblings/babysitters. The problem of discipline in the Library was compounded by the fact that the librarians were primarily young (but aging) *baalot teshuvah*, unmarried, with no social standing whatsoever, whereas the smug young patrons were the descendents of the very authors of more revered texts in the Levi Yitzchok Library itself. It was apparent that serving as a librarian to the indulged, critical brood of Lubavitcher children was a standard job assigned to *baalot teshuvah* who had left families and careers to start life anew in Crown Heights. These lonely and overworked women also supported themselves through babysitting. In both jobs they were surrounded by children not their own, surely a frustrating reminder of their own single status; often, the librarians would gossip with one another and express unhappiness that their mentors in the community had judged them unready for Lubavitcher matchmaking. Resigned to their own status on sufferance, the librarians accepted curt freshness from the children they served.

My regular appearance as a patron who genuinely wished to study caused some talk. Librarians flew to assist me and roundly scolded the many chattering schoolchildren, leading to great antipathy toward me on the behalf of the upbraided. When told by one librarian that I needed quiet for research, three nine-year-olds simply walked over to my table and announced, “We’re doing

important work. Work for the *Rebbe*. Not our own research." On other occasions, older girls asked me to diaper infants, watch toddlers, or tutor a group of sixth-graders for a "little while." These were entirely natural requests in the Lubavitcher community, where sibling parenting and group learning (as opposed to individual scholarship for women) prevailed. The conditions of women's hours at the Library were such that soothing a squalling baby on top of a table was the rule rather than the exception. One memorable afternoon I used the library restroom only to return and find two toddlers eating and crayoning on my research notes. When, the next time, I tactfully scooped up all my work and brought it with me into the restroom, I was stopped by the librarian, who reminded me that Jewish law prohibits bringing any religious works into a bathroom. As an unclean place, a bathroom is the one site where one is not supposed to study Torah.

These incidents may seem entirely anecdotal to my larger research aims, but I include them here because of their significance in the question of female culture. Women's hours at the library demonstrated a living, working sphere of women and children only, that in many ways was the essence of female Lubavitcher culture. Furthermore, in spite of the chaotic background of noise and childcare, real work did take place, even at the grammar-school level—as evidenced by the fourth-grade girls' smug confrontation with me. Their work, work for the *Rebbe*, was of paramount importance and status. They approached it with the same dedication their fathers brought to higher Talmud study. Theirs was a nearly divinely ordained homework assignment, next to which my attempts at secular analysis of the Lubavitchers appeared crudely irrelevant. This involvement of even very young girls in community and history says a good deal about the potential for female status and satisfaction within Lubavitch priorities. There is no "self-esteem" problem among girls here.

My insistence on working in this unusual library atmosphere led to my being mentioned in one of the very journals whose history I was researching. The January 1987 issue of *Neshei Chabad Newsletter* included an article called "Something for Everyone: Levi Yitzchok Library," and the third paragraph began:

Do you see that woman over there? She's doing research for a college term paper, writing about Orthodox Jewry in America right after WWII. I heard her talking to the librarian, very quietly, of course, who helped her to locate the table-full of books she's using right now.

While the concept of a secular doctoral dissertation was contemptible to some Lubavitchers, I represented my research intentions clearly, explaining that there were few studies on Lubavitcher women and that I was collecting historical materials to bring Neshei Chabad philosophy to interested students in the secular world. But inevitably, the first thing I was told by women of the community was that I must change my name: Bonnie did not sound Jewish. Did I have a Hebrew name? I must write to the Rebbe about it. The centrality of the Rebbe to his followers was once again demonstrated.

After I established my desire to give an honest portrait of the community, I was showered with references and assistance. I was also noticed by men in the community, for social custom still mates the male *baal teshuvah* with his female counterpart. As an obvious newcomer to Lubavitch, I was awkwardly invited to dine by several newly devout young men.

During my two years of research in Crown Heights, I attended classes at Machon Chana, group encounters with the Rebbe, holiday street festivals, women's conventions, celebration meals, synagogue services, Neshei Chabad business brunches, and other events. While my study focused on the past literature and history of the community, I was unable to detach myself from the current lively Lubavitcher scene, particularly as most of the women whose early contributions I studied were still active. It is this personal glimpse of a continuum of female activity that made my work so rewarding.

Incorporating feminist analysis was my most difficult task; not because such analysis is unnecessary, but because it placed me in the ungracious position of scrutinizing my hosts and noting their anachronisms. Their responsibility to me was more than carried out; they endeavored to bring me to full Hasidic observance and, failing to win my adherence, loaded me with texts and sources contributing to my academic, and (they hoped) spiritual, advancement. And my responsibility to them? Their astonishing generosity in the face of my uncompromising analysis cannot be fully repaid in kind, for there is nothing they seek or admire in my world. Yet I hope my efforts to note the history and activism of Lubavitcher women will be accepted by them as a gesture of cross-cultural awareness. I count myself lucky to have experienced the warmth of a world my ancestors called their own.