

# The hidden, holy lives of Orthodox Jewish women

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Much has been written and explored about the lives of Haredi Jewish women, from Netflix shows to academic theses. But what about women who aren't Haredi yet still Orthodox? What do we know about their Jewish lives, and how they balance their spiritual and secular obligations?

These are some of the questions that form the basis of a new, ground breaking book titled *Challenge and Conformity – The Religious Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women* by Dr Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz.

Speaking to the *SA Jewish Report* from her home in London, Taylor-Guthartz explains that the book is based on her doctorate, which she received from University College London. She has lectured at the universities of Cambridge, Oxford, and Middlesex, and at Vassar College, New York, and has taught at the London School of Jewish Studies. She has presented at many international conferences including Limmud South Africa, and says the South African Jewish community's warmth and unity had a profound impact on her when she visited the country.

"You can't do a PhD unless you're in love with the subject," Taylor-Guthartz says. Originally, she wanted to explore the customs of Orthodox Jewish women in the British Jewish community. "They were things I had never heard of after returning to England from many years in Israel."

As she tells it in the introduction to the book, "In 2002, an informal talk on 'Jewish superstitions' alerted me to a variety of

individual, generally family or home-based practices that were very much part of women's religious lives even though they were often described by both women and men as 'superstitions'. Most of these were unfamiliar to me, though many were recognised and also practised, by members of the all-female audience.

"They included practices related to marriage, childbirth, and death, as well as protective rituals in everyday life," she writes. "When I came to conduct formal interviews for this study, many more activities were mentioned. The women I interviewed told me about the Rosh Hodesh movement and women's *tefilah* groups, and their part in these groups. They explained about *berakhah* parties and partnership *minyanim*, which have sprung up in the past two decades and are still not widely known, raising the question of how change and innovation takes place in a conservative community and what factors determine the acceptance or rejection of a new practice.

"I participated in all these activities and more as I explored how they form part of women's religious identity and constitute an area in which Jewish women can exercise agency, acting independently and making their own choices."

Taylor-Guthartz realised that she had to explore these rituals in the wider context of women's lives. She did, indeed, fall in love with the subject, and



Dr Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz

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eventually turned her thesis into the book.

The book comes at an exciting time in the Jewish world, when there has been "accelerated change. There's been an explosion of women's Torah learning," she says. "There are even women training for Orthodox rabbinic ordination, something that was unthinkable a few years ago." Taylor-Guthartz is, in fact, one of the women who did just that, at Yeshivat Maharat in New York.

"I wanted to learn more," she says. While she has no desire to become a community rabbi, she hopes that the qualification will enrich her life, learning, and teaching. "I want to help others with questions of Jewish law, and give more people access. Halachic texts are very difficult to access."

Turning to her book, she says it explores the "double invisibility" of Orthodox Jewish women. "To the outside world, they are often completely invisible. And in the Jewish world, men don't know what women are doing. They're totally unaware."

While her book focuses on the British Jewish community, there are many themes that are relevant worldwide. Discussing the return to religiosity that has swept the South African Jewish community over the past 25 years, she says it's "a global phenomenon seen in America, Israel, and the United Kingdom. There has been a huge amount written about it." But she notes "people don't stay in one place with their religion all their lives". Her interviews for the book encompass many women and their families drifting closer to or further from

Judaism at different ages and stages.

Looking to the future, Taylor-Guthartz says that shuls moving online as a result of COVID-19 led to people exploring other synagogues or denominations. "It's created a huge question about going back [to shul]. It might be a game changer, allowing people to be more flexible."

This has been particularly beneficial for women, who have been able to hold online services and events that may have been frowned upon in person. She believes that such openness is key to Jewish communities surviving and thriving, and that forums like Limmud are a "lifeline".

For her, the most inspiring part of writing her book was finding out "how resilient women are, and how they cope, get round obstacles, and manage. For example, they have *tefilah* groups that have survived in spite of opposition from the London Beth Din. They have created their own space for their voice to be heard. I have enormous respect for how Orthodox women have created their own religious life."

Who should read this book? "Everyone!" she says. But in particular, she hopes that rabbis and men read it. She emphasises that she doesn't make "policy recommendations", but simply documents what's happening on the ground. "I hope it will help rabbis realise how female congregants feel. I hope the fact that it's about women doesn't make men feel it's not for them." She says that of those Orthodox women who have read it, many say it corresponds with their experience.

As she writes in her conclusion, most Orthodox Jewish women in the diaspora "inhabit a set of overlapping worlds. In their conformity and allegiance to the Jewish community, in their creativity in Jewish ritual and its interpretation, and in challenging or working around male-dominated structures to make spaces where their voices can be heard, these women demonstrate remarkable agency and adaptability."

The book can be bought from the Liverpool University Press website.



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