

The Role of Women in Contemporary Judaism. Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract: Within a framework marked by the tension between tradition and modernity, Jewish women position themselves on a broad spectrum of attitudes, from secularization and reform to orthodoxy and neo-orthodoxy. This research examines the rabbinic perspective on the role of women as reflected in the Talmud and post-Talmudic legislation, highlighting both constraints and opportunities for reconfiguring the status of women. At the same time, the transformations generated by reform and feminist movements within Judaism and their impact on traditional religious structures are analyzed. The study thus highlights the complexity and diversity of female experiences in Judaism, emphasizing the dynamics of its adaptation to the socio-cultural realities of the contemporary world.

Keywords: Women in Judaism, Talmud, Halakhah, Orthodoxy, Neo-Orthodoxy, Reform, Secularization

Introduction

Religion is traditionally perceived as being rooted in the past, associated with dogma and resistance to change, and is often seen as an area where innovation and progress have a limited role. From this perspective, one might assume that the status of women in Judaism has remained unchanged since biblical times, thus perpetuating a rigid and anachronistic legal system. However, careful analysis of Talmudic and post-Talmudic literature demonstrates the contrary: no other subject has been so frequently discussed and reinterpreted by the scholars of the Law as the status of women. Halakha, Judaism's normative framework, is by its very nature a system in constant transformation, as opposed to immobility. It is designed to evolve and adapt with the times and geography in which Jewish communities develop their existence. The rabbis, vested with the authority and responsibility to respond to contemporary needs, engage in a constant process of analyzing the sacred texts, exploring legal solutions that reflect the social requirements of the time. Thus, throughout history, the status of women has changed significantly, often anticipating social change and demonstrating a progressive character.

In the contemporary world, Jewish women find themselves in a wide spectrum of religious and social identities, oscillating between secularization, reform and various forms of orthodoxy. On the one hand, modernity has paved the way for reinterpretations of the feminine role in Judaism, offering women increased opportunities to participate in religious life and assume positions of authority. Orthodox and neo-orthodox movements, on the other hand, continue to uphold a traditional model based on clearly differentiated gender roles, but even within these frameworks debates have arisen about the place and contribution of women.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the diversity of women's status in Judaism, shedding light on both traditional perspectives and the influences of modernity on them. We will explore how Talmudic norms have influenced and continue to influence the reality of Jewish women, as well as how they have been able to claim new positions within their communities. The study also aims to examine the dynamics between Reform and Orthodoxy, highlighting the constant tensions and negotiations between tradition and change.

Through this analysis, we aim to contribute to our understanding of how Jewish women are navigating between their religious heritage and the challenges of the modern world, redefining their identity and their relationship to Judaism in a changing landscape.

The role of women in the books of the Old Testament

Before exploring these transformations, it is essential to analyze the role and representation of women in the Holy Scriptures. In Judaism, the Holy Scripture fulfills an essential educational function (Rotaru, 2020, pp.154-160), constituting not only a source of legal guidance for the sages of the Law, but also a guide for ethical and social behavior. Biblical characters provide models of conduct or ideals to aspire to and become fundamental benchmarks for rabbinic interpretation.

Within the Pentateuch, the portrayal of women is particularly positive. Although her presence may seem discreet, her influence on the unfolding of historical events is significant. These characters are portrayed as beautiful, intelligent and determined, capable of intervening decisively in the course of history. For example, Sarah, Abraham's wife, plays an active role in family and spiritual dynamics. When she asks her husband to send away Hagar, his servant who has become defiant after the birth of her son Ishmael, God urges Abraham to follow his wife's advice: "Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice" (Gen 21:12) (Greco, 2012, p. 154). This divine recommendation has been interpreted by the rabbis as an acknowledgment of Sarah's superior intuition, a fact later evidenced by the unfolding of events.

Rebekah, mother of twins Jacob and Esau, demonstrates a deep understanding of her sons' spiritual destiny. Convinced that only Jacob is worthy to receive her parental blessing, she acts with strategic intelligence to ensure that her husband Isaac, already weakened by blindness, blesses the one she considers the rightful heir of tradition (Gen 27:5-19). (Gen 27:5-19) Through this intervention, Rebekah shows discernment and a foresight that goes beyond mere maternal affection, thus influencing the spiritual future of the Jewish people (Greco, 2012, p. 154).

Another example of female self-sacrifice is found in the story of Rachel, Jacob's beloved betrothed. In an act of ultimate self-sacrifice, she gives her place to her older sister Leah on the wedding night to avoid humiliation. Since Jacob and Rachel had established secret signs to recognize each other, Rachel reveals them to her sister to protect her from shame. (Acts 29:23) In doing so, Rachel demonstrates not only loyalty and compassion, but also remarkable emotional and ethical maturity.

Thus, the analysis of female figures in the Bible reveals a portrait of women as an active and influential element in the social and religious structure of Judaism. The rabbinic world, far from perpetuating an immobile system, continued to reassess and adapt the status of women in a dynamic process that reflects the evolving essence of the Halakhah.

Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, son of the patriarch Jacob, is a remarkable example of determination in applying the law of levirate, a legal rule designed to ensure the continuity of a deceased man's lineage without heirs. To achieve this goal, Tamar adopts an ingenious strategy, assuming the identity of a prostitute and thus succeeding in obtaining from her father-in-law the heir necessary to perpetuate her husband's name. When the truth comes to light, Judah, confronted with his own deeds, publicly recognizes the justice of her action, declaring: "She is more righteous than I" (Gen 38:26), thus underlining the moral legitimacy of her action in the context of the ethical and legal norms of the time.

Miriam, Moses' sister, occupies a distinct place in biblical tradition as the first woman designated as a prophetess (Ex 15:20). One of the key moments that testify to her status is her courageous intervention with her parents, advising them to resume their married life (*Talmud, Sotah 12b*) at a time when Pharaoh had issued an edict that all newborn male Hebrew babies should be drowned in the waters of the Nile (Ex 1:22). This decision, motivated by the conviction that the future savior of the Jewish people was about to be born, contributes directly to Moses' coming into the world. It is also worth mentioning the Jewish midwives who, in defiance of Pharaoh's commandment, refused to kill Jewish babies, showing exceptional compassion and courageous defiance of authority (Ex 1:17) (Diamant & Kushner, 2008, p. 121).

Ruth is one of the most symbolic figures of the biblical tradition, personifying genuine conversion and devotion to Judaism. Her story illustrates a profound transition from an idolatrous belief system to an unconditional acceptance of the Jewish faith. His decision to abandon his family, homeland and culture of origin to accompany his widowed and materially destitute mother-in-law (Ruth 1:16) is a rare act of loyalty and selflessness. Thanks to this choice, Ruth becomes the grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:17), a central figure in Jewish history and the messianic ancestor according to the prophetic tradition (Barber, 2003, p. 22).

Esther, another iconic figure in biblical history, stands out for her decisive role in protecting the Jewish people in ancient Persia. As the favorite of King Ahasuerus, Esther finds herself in a privileged position, but instead of ensuring her own safety and comfort, she chooses to take on a historical responsibility. Aware of the risks involved, she intervenes to thwart the plans of a tyrannical and manipulative minister at the risk of her own life. Her decision demonstrates exemplary courage and remarkable self-sacrifice and is a symbol of female leadership in the biblical context.

Anne, although marked by the suffering of sterility, remains one of the most important female figures in the sacred texts. The depth and sincerity of her prayer to God is so intense that it elicits a divine response, resulting in the birth of the prophet Samuel (I Samuel 1:20). This biblical moment, in which his prayer is answered, underlines the essential role of authentic communication with the divinity and is recognized as such in the liturgical framework of the Jewish New Year. In this context, Anna's prayer is considered as the ultimate expression of sincere and profound supplication, reflecting the solemnity and significance of this feast in the Jewish tradition.

Of all the biblical texts, the Book of Proverbs is the one that offers the most expansive and laudatory view of women, as a fundamental pillar in the structure of the family and society. In its pages, the courageous and virtuous woman is celebrated, and this homage is traditionally reiterated during the opening ceremony of the Shabbat, either in the synagogue or within the family (Rotaru, 2014, II, pp.54-55), in recognition of the essential contribution of women in maintaining balance and harmony in the home. In Jewish understanding, Shabbat is often personified in the form of a spiritual betrothed, a metaphor reflecting deep respect for the life partner, seen as the nucleus of family and religious existence.

This view is also supported by modern thinkers, including the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, who emphasizes the importance of the female role in shaping Israel's spiritual and historical destiny. He notes that throughout messianic history, crucial moments were overseen and decisively influenced by women. He argues that without the foresight, determination, ingenuity and spirit of sacrifice of women, the unfolding of biblical events could have taken a very different turn (Levinas, 1963, p. 53).

The Midrash, one of the sources of rabbinic exegesis, continues to accord women an honored status, recognizing their central role in the great liberation moments of the Jewish people. The tradition states that "the Jews were saved from Egypt because of the righteous women" (*Sotah* 11b), a statement that emphasizes their courage and essential actions in the liberation process. In support of this idea, another rabbinic text recalls that women actively participated in the exit from Egypt and, in order to keep this memory alive, they are required, like men, to drink the four cups of wine during the Seder ceremony, which marks the celebration of the Jewish Passover (*Arukh Ha-Shulhan, Orah Hayim* 472, 15).

The Role and Status of Women in the Talmud: Perspectives and Interpretations

The Talmud also provides detailed insights into the relationship between man and woman, emphasizing the respect and sensitivity that should be shown to the woman. One of the Talmudic masters warns of the importance of protecting the wife's feelings, emphasizing that women, being more emotionally sensitive, can be easily hurt (*Baba Metsia* 58b). From this perspective, any act of violence or disrespect towards the wife is considered unacceptable and the legal consequences

are severe. If a man treats his wife with brutality, she has the right to seek a divorce with the support of the rabbinical court, and the man risks being excluded from the community (Finkelstein, 1924, pp. 69-71). This provision demonstrates the existence of a legal protection mechanism for women within Jewish law, which contradicts the idea of a social structure that unilaterally favors male authority.

The teachings of the Talmud, considered as an extension of the principles of the Torah (written law), are in full continuity with it, reflecting a normative framework that developed organically from the sacred texts. Over the ages, rabbinic literature has portrayed women primarily as wives and mothers, recognizing their merits and giving them protection and respect. However, this approach must be understood in the context of an ancient patriarchal society in which women's duties were structured differently from those of men. In a broader context, it should be noted that other legal codes of antiquity, such as the Code of Hammurabi in the 18th century BC (Rotaru, 2023, pp. 825-874), also included measures to protect the status of women.

However, rabbinic tradition does not limit women exclusively to the roles of wife and mother. Numerous texts mention the existence of women in influential positions in society, whether in business or in the intellectual and spiritual spheres. Although such examples are not particularly numerous, the fact that these women were able to exercise their activities in predominantly male environments demonstrates that they were not subject to absolute exclusion from public life and that, to a certain extent, they were allowed to claim a status of their own (Valler, 1999, p. 11).

In contrast to the widespread perception that women were subordinate and without influence, the Jewish tradition recognizes women as having an essential role in spiritual and family life, implicitly influencing the moral direction of society. Unlike other religions, where the place of worship occupies a central position, in Judaism, the real nucleus of religious life is not the synagogue but the family. The Talmud reinforces this idea with the expression: "A man's house is his wife" (*Schottenstein Ed Talmud. Yoma*, 1998, vol. 1, 2a), thus emphasizing that it is the woman who gives identity and stability to the home. From this perspective, whether wife, mother, widow or divorced woman, she has always been a central concern of rabbinic law. This will be a central theme in the remainder of our analysis.

Before analyzing in detail the development of marriage law in Judaism, it is essential to recall that the oral law, handed down from generation to generation through a structured pedagogical process, was codified in writing for historical reasons between the 1st and 6th centuries of the common era (Rotaru, 2015, pp.318-322). This compilation, known as the Talmud, constitutes the main legal corpus of Jewish law, playing a fundamental role in the interpretation and application of religious and social norms. Developed by rabbis in historical contexts marked by patriarchal structures, the Talmud inevitably reflects the social realities of the times in which it was written. In this sense, it is unproductive to look for an explicit concern for gender equality in these texts, since this issue was not articulated as such in the societies in which Jews lived - whether in the Babylonian, Greek or Roman world, which exerted a considerable influence on the life of Jewish communities.

Moreover, after the canonization of the Talmud was completed, the great rabbis of the Jewish tradition worked predominantly in Muslim societies, whether in Babylonia, Spain or North Africa. This historical reality needs to be taken into account when evaluating certain remarks in rabbinic literature concerning women. Although some statements can be identified which, taken out of context, appear to be derogatory to women, these passages are often amplified by critics in order to challenge the rabbis' position. However, to characterize the sages of antiquity and the Middle Ages as misogynistic or sexist would be a profoundly erroneous anachronism, since such notions must be analyzed in relation to the specific norms and mentalities of the respective eras. For this reason, isolated observations that might suggest a discriminatory view of women will not be the subject of our study, as they do not reflect the

majority direction of rabbinic legislation, which actively contributed to the improvement of the status of women in Jewish society.

Among the many reforms introduced by the Doctors of the Law in Talmudic and post-Talmudic legal literature, several fundamental issues stand out that profoundly shaped the status of women in Judaism. Our analysis will include five key themes: the institutionalization of the act of marriage, the prohibition of polygamy, the right of women to consent to divorce, the relaxation of restrictions on female testimony in legal proceedings, and the explicit prohibition of marital relationships imposed against a woman's will.

As far as the marriage union is concerned, it is noteworthy that there is no explicit mention of a marriage ceremony or formalized document in the biblical text. Instead, the expression "taking a wife" appears frequently to denote the formation of a marital union, without any codified ritual or written contract. Polygamy and divorce are also recognized practices in biblical law, and Deuteronomy mentions only a unilateral form of separation known as repudiation.

As the legal tradition developed, the rabbis intervened in this rudimentary legal framework, using their prerogatives to shape and improve the marriage structure summarized in the Bible. Thus, key regulations were introduced, such as the establishment of a formal act of marriage to provide legal protection for women, the prohibition of polygamy in certain communities, and the implementation of the principle of mutual consent in the divorce process. These measures reflect the adaptive dynamics of Jewish law, which, over the centuries, has constantly evolved to respond to social realities and to improve the status of women within the Jewish community.

The diversity of women's status in contemporary Judaism: secularization, reform and orthodoxy

In the context of a lack of fully satisfying religious responses, and especially in the face of increasing secularization, Jewish women have had to re-evaluate how they define their identity and their relationship to Jewish tradition. The heritage handed down from previous generations has provided them with a set of benchmarks that has enabled them to carefully and judiciously manage the complexities of previous loyalties, cultural influences and socialization, alongside their own integration mechanisms, individual sensitivities and personal expectations. This process was also shaped by an accumulation of external influences, which contributed to the diversification of identity approaches. Although this diversity has inevitably led to a fragmentation of the frame of reference, so far, four main directions of positioning have emerged: the secular perspective, the reformist orientation, the feminist approach and, finally, the adherence to the orthodox and neo-orthodox currents.

Secularized women

This orientation constitutes the most widespread position among Jewish women who have renounced religious practices and traditional frameworks in favor of full integration into a secularized lifestyle. It is important to emphasize that although they adopt this pattern - either through a conscious choice or through the influence of their mothers or other women in their entourage who have made this transition previously - these women do not necessarily lose their connection to Judaism. Instead, they are building a Jewish identity based on non-religious references, such as history, culture, collective memory, their relationship to Israel and the trauma of the Holocaust. Many of them are vehemently critical of Jewish legal norms, which they perceive as discriminatory against women, denouncing their patriarchal character. These women advocate a secular Judaism, freed from the constraints of a religious legislation considered outdated and incompatible with the principles of gender equality and the democratic values of modernity.

Reformers

The second line of identity positioning is represented by the followers of Reform Judaism, who believe that this movement achieves a harmonious synthesis between tradition and modernity, between divine revelation and human reason. For advocates of this perspective, the adaptation of religious norms to the ethical and humanist principles promoted by the Enlightenment is an authentic expression of the spirit of the Jewish tradition, keeping it in active dialog with historical and social realities (Rotaru, 2005, p. 350). Reform (or liberal) Judaism argues that Jewish law is not static, but evolves according to historical and social context. Criticizing the sexist perspectives inherited from the rabbinic tradition, this movement believes that the restrictions imposed on women in the past do not reflect an immutable divine command, but rather the mentalities of the times in which these rules were codified. Consequently, Reformers argue that such norms can be re-evaluated and modified without altering the spiritual essence of Jewish law.

This perspective argues that a careful analysis of the Talmud and rabbinic exegeses reveals the absence of authoritative justifications for discriminatory prohibitions against women. In many cases, these rules are the result of historical social prejudices and practices rather than immutable religious principles. Reformists believe that most of the conditions necessary for the recognition of women's equality have already been met, but have been ignored or minimized because of conformity to the customs of the time. This approach, therefore, does not entail a radical hermeneutical revolution, but rather a more careful and nuanced reading of the sacred texts, one that highlights rabbinic views favorable to women and eliminates any interpretation influenced by gender bias.

Bèbe (1993) argues the need for a clear distinction between a descriptive and a prescriptive reading of the tradition. In her view, when rabbis of the Talmudic period exempted women from certain religious obligations, this should not be interpreted as a prohibition, but as a dispensation from fulfilling those duties. She argues that this nuance has often been misunderstood, leading to the entrenchment of restrictive rules that were not originally intended to prohibit, but merely to exclude women from certain obligations without actively preventing them from participating. This hermeneutical approach allows her to formulate a rigorous and well-grounded critique of the Orthodox position and to demonstrate, through the analysis of rabbinic texts, that some of the traditional prohibitions against women do not have a solid legal basis but are rather the product of later interpretations.

What is remarkable in this context is that, at the time of Pauline Bèbe's ordination as rabbi, most of the Orthodox authorities consulted could not offer a firm legal justification for their opposition to women's access to this religious office. During the discussions, some of the rabbis interviewed were forced to admit that their opposition was based not so much on religious law codified in the halakhah, but rather on respect for a tradition handed down by custom (*minhag*). This recognition suggests that the exclusion of women from the rabbinate is not the result of a formal prohibition enshrined in Jewish law, but rather a consequence of the perpetuation of traditional norms that have not been subject to critical reassessment in light of contemporary social and cultural developments.

Feminists

This third line of positioning reflects the hermeneutical approach developed by Jewish women who claim their feminist identity from within Orthodoxy. Although this movement fits within the conceptual frameworks of the Orthodox world, its paradox is that it is as radical, if not more radical than Reform Judaism, in that it does not directly challenge the theological foundations of the tradition, but seeks a profound transformation of the interpretation of sacred texts and their associated socio-cultural structures. Significantly influenced by the wave of American feminism in the 1970s, this movement expresses a dual claim: a search for identity and a struggle for recognition, together with a desire to accede to positions of authority in the religious sphere (Storper-Perez, 1984, pp. 155-167).

Orthodox feminists articulate their approach from a fundamental correlation between knowledge and power. They argue that women's access to religious study and practice on the same terms as men is an essential element for their intellectual and spiritual fulfillment. This is the basis of the hermeneutical revolution they advocate, one that seeks a reconfiguration of gender relations within Orthodox Judaism without departing from its doctrinal principles.

In fact, even before this movement crystallized, women had already penetrated various Jewish institutional structures, especially in the field of education. Since the early decades of the twentieth century, young women from Orthodox backgrounds have benefited from high quality religious education (Davidman & Tenenbaum, 1994), which enabled them, once they reached adulthood, to claim the right to teach religious subjects previously reserved exclusively for men. This change occurred not only in response to the growing need for teachers in Jewish educational networks, in the context of a shortage of male teachers, but also as a result of a gradual change in mentalities, marking a first victory for women in the religious sphere. However, a crucial question remains: did this professional emancipation lead to real equality of status in religious life?

To achieve this goal, which many of them consider essential, Orthodox feminists aim to re-evaluate the interpretation of sacred texts, considering that the traditional way of reading them is responsible for their exclusion from religious life. The exegesis they promote responds to a double necessity. First, it reflects the aspiration of women to have unrestricted access to the study of religious texts, a prerogative which until recently was monopolized by rabbis. Significant progress has been made in this respect: although access to traditional Talmudic academies remains forbidden, notably because of gender-segregated rules, women can now study in parallel institutions created especially for them. What's more, they are present in most of the study programs - whether coeducational or all-female, more or less integrated into the Orthodox mainstream - that have multiplied in recent years. In other words, the right of women to have access to the knowledge and study of sacred texts is no longer absolutely contested, thus marking a fundamental change in the dynamics of religious education within Orthodox Judaism.

The second claim, of a more radical nature, is not only about access to sacred texts, which women have already succeeded in gaining to a certain extent, but questions the very relationship to the text and the interpretative principles underlying traditional exegesis. Orthodox feminists aim not only to study the Bible and the oral tradition from a feminist perspective, but to challenge the very logic of their exclusion, a logic that has historically prevented them not only from participating in the learning process, but especially from being involved in decision-making on religious law. Thus, they claim not only the right of access to knowledge, but also the right to be co-authors of the interpretation of religious norms, i.e. to directly influence the decision-making process in the halakhic field. This fundamental paradigm shift, which entails gaining full power over the interpretation of texts, is, in their view, the only way for women to be recognized as religious equals (Prell, 1989).

However, this second claim has so far failed to bring about significant transformations. The dominant masculine structures within Orthodox Judaism remain inflexible in the face of such a change and refuse any actualization of tradition that could lead to a redefinition of power dynamics in religious communities. Opposition to this reform is based not only on theological considerations, but also on the fear that such a reconfiguration could generate consequences that Orthodox institutions would not be able to fully control. In a context in which Orthodoxy has become a point of attraction for young people in search of a clear identity and stable points of reference, religious leaders feel no real pressure to respond to these demands. In these circumstances, the question is why would they accept such a far-reaching change at a time when Orthodoxy continues to strengthen its position as a bastion of stability in the face of the uncertainties of the contemporary world?

Orthodox and neo-orthodox women

This last category reflects a profound rejection of modernity and the values and social mechanisms it imposes. In the case of the Orthodox, this attitude is based on the continuity of an unbroken tradition, maintained in the most closed and impervious to external influences. Orthodoxy assumes the role of a bulwark against social change, believing that religious truths must be kept intact, without being subject to reinterpretations imposed by new cultural and ideological realities (Kaufman, 1991).

In contrast, the rejection of modernity by neo-orthodox does not derive from a historical continuity, but from a profound critical reaction to their previous experiences in a secularized environment (Rotaru, 2006, pp. 251-266). In contrast to traditional Orthodox, neo-Orthodox are individuals who were born and formed in modernity, but who, having been exposed to and experienced its effects, come to radically contest it. They thus represent a paradoxical phenomenon: they are the "rebellious children" of modernity, knowing it in detail from the inside and critically re-evaluating it on the basis of their own life experiences.

The discourse of neo-orthodox women highlights a perception of modernity that questions the concept of "women's liberation" promoted by secularized society. Some of them, often after experiences marked by disappointment, frustration or even trauma, come to believe that what modernity defines as emancipation is nothing but a new form of alienation. In this context, a return to tradition represents for them a search for more coherent structures of life that offer them moral stability, clear points of identity and a religious authority to which they can delegate responsibility for their existential decisions. For the most radical among them, this choice is not just a return to tradition, but involves a total rejection of the principle of personal autonomy and an unconditional acceptance of absolute religious authority, administered exclusively by men (Davidman, 1991).

Unlike Orthodox feminists, who seek to alter tradition in order to gain a more equitable place in religious structures, neo-Orthodox women do not demand a change of tradition, but instead adopt it in its integral form, without the desire to adapt it to their personal needs. These women wholeheartedly accept the roles and responsibilities assigned to them by religious norms, and the restrictions imposed by this way of life are not perceived as a constraint but as a form of protection and balance. Having satisfied their curiosity about the outside world and having experienced their freedom in secular society, they see retreat into a well-defined setting with clear rules and fixed structures as liberating rather than limiting. This lifestyle allows them to escape outside pressures and, above all, to free themselves from what they perceive as the constant objectification of women in the eyes of modern men, a gaze often seen as intrusive, alienating and degrading.

On the other hand, this re-evaluation of the status of women within the tradition is not limited to passive acceptance of imposed roles. In an attempt to reconstruct a positive feminine identity, these women not only reproduce traditional models, but also valorize them, making them the pillars of their existence. The home and the family thus become essential spaces of affirmation, where they exercise their roles as wives, mothers and educators, strictly following the rules of marital purity, ensuring that ritual dietary rules are observed and assuming the role of transmitting the values of Orthodox Judaism to the next generations. The birth and upbringing of large numbers of children are seen not only as religious obligations, but as a means by which they consolidate their status and fulfill their spiritual mission.

However, this pattern of life does not entirely exclude engagement outside the domestic sphere. On the contrary, many of these women manage to combine tradition with skills acquired before their return to religion. They are identifying and creating new spaces for affirmation in the community by engaging in charitable, educational and social activities. Although they follow the tradition's recommendations that the main purpose of their lives is dedication to their husbands and children, they do not give up personal development,

participating in study programs and courses structured to be compatible with their values and lifestyle (El-Or, 1993, pp. 61-81).

This seemingly paradoxical combination of modern and anti-modern elements defines the profile of neo-orthodox women: they embrace modern ways of managing their own existence, but reject the egalitarian values promoted by modernity. For them, equality is not an ideal but an illusion with no intrinsic value. What motivates them is not the aspiration for equality with men, but the rediscovery of an authentic identity, cultural roots and a way of life which, although rediscovered in a contemporary context, gives them a sense of belonging and deep stability. In doing so, they not only return to tradition, but reinvent it in a way that allows them to reaffirm their place within it, without questioning the established hierarchy.

Conclusions

The value of equality between men and women does not occupy a central place in Judaism as long as it continues to be shaped by a social and cultural context in which the principle of equality is not a fundamental priority. In a society organized on rigid hierarchical structures determined by a cosmic order to which both men and women are equally subject, the concept of gender equality becomes problematic both theoretically and in terms of its practical applicability. In this framework, the lack of equality between women and men is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a wider system of inequalities, which affects the very social structure of Jewish communities. Men, for their part, are not equal among themselves, being differentiated by factors such as origin, genealogy, religious affiliation, ideological beliefs, traditional influences and the political or religious organization of the group to which they belong.

However, beyond the constraints imposed by religious and legal norms, each individual, regardless of his or her status within this social hierarchy, can try to develop his or her own potential, while remaining within the limits of the place assigned to him or her. In the Jewish tradition, men have the opportunity to transcend their social status and assert their identity through the study and deepening of the Torah, which offers them a form of intellectual and spiritual escape. Women, on the other hand, do not enjoy the same kind of access to religious knowledge and wisdom, and are encouraged to find fulfillment in the domestic sphere, where their responsibilities are seen as complementary and essential to maintaining community balance.

It is only when society as a whole begins to open up to the idea of equality and it becomes a positive, desirable value that is considered accessible to all that Jewish communities begin to take this principle into account. The evolution of Jewish attitudes towards equality has followed a progressive path, initially oriented towards achieving equal status with other social groups. Thus, the first stage was the political and legal emancipation of Jews as a minority in the states in which they lived, which enabled them to obtain equal rights as citizens. It was only later, with the advance of secularization in society, that the issue of gender equality became a distinct concern and Jewish women were urged to claim equality, this time not only as members of the Jewish community, but also as women.

However, although the social and cultural emancipation of Jewish women has been influenced by the transformations of modern society, this progress has not been followed by a corresponding emancipation in the religious sphere. Although they gained access to education, public life and various spheres of activity previously reserved for men, religious norms and hierarchies remained largely unchanged, preserving traditional restrictions on women's participation in religious authority and decision-making. Thus, gender equality in Judaism remains a relative concept, whose implementation is conditioned by cultural, theological and historical factors that go beyond the mere adoption of modern principles.

The inability to be recognized as religious equals led Jewish women to channel their aspirations and construct their identity outside the sphere of tradition and religious norms. Lack of access to religious status equivalent to men pushed them to explore and assert

themselves in secular fields, where they not only found their place, but were able to compete successfully, often from an early age, alongside their male peers. Thus, Jewish mothers and wives, the symbolic figures of the "brave woman" evoked in the Book of Proverbs, became active players in economic, social and cultural life: they became workers, activists, trade unionists, professionals, intellectuals and artists.

Buoyed by the significant progress they have made towards social, political and cultural equality, but at the same time aware of the obstacles still to be overcome, most of these women have abandoned the idea of demanding equality within religious Judaism. Rather than channeling their energies into a confrontation with traditional religious institutions, they have chosen to direct their efforts towards the secular spaces in which they live, believing that this is where the real stakes of their emancipation lie. As a result of this reconfiguration of priorities, women who continue to accept the traditional status of Jewish women have become a minority. And within this minority there is an even smaller group of women who, despite the challenges, remain determined to reclaim religious equality, choosing to fight the struggle from within tradition in the hope of reforming it from within.

From a sociological perspective, however, it is not necessarily the fact that women have finally succeeded in gaining access to the office of rabbi that is most significant. In the United States, the number of women rabbis has increased considerably, and this phenomenon can be seen as the result of a negotiated compromise between religious Judaism and the pressures of a secularized society. What is truly remarkable is the emergence of a new generation of women who, although born and educated in the heart of advanced liberal societies, choose to adhere to neo-orthodoxy. These women do not reject modernity per se, but refuse to embrace the struggle for equality as a personal cause. Rather than aligning themselves with the prevailing feminist discourse, they assert their right to be different through a life choice that involves a radically distinct relationship to the world and to the values promoted by modern society. Thus, their choice is not just a form of conformity to tradition, but a reaffirmation of their freedom to define their own identity beyond contemporary ideological constraints.

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