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View from an Exhibition

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MY MARILYN MONROE: YEHUDIT LEVY'S VISION OF SARAH SCHENIRER

On the cover of this issue of *Shofar* is a remarkable piece of art entitled *My Marilyn Monroe 1*, part of the series *Identity Cardiogram* (2016) by the Haredi artist Yehudit Levy (b. 1993, a pseudonym). In the series, Levy contests some conceptual and philosophical principles of her own community, Haredi society—and courageously and critically brings to the fore burning issues.

This image corresponds with and responds to Western celebrity culture. It uses as its model Marilyn Monroe, a sex symbol, brand name, and collective icon in Western culture. In this work, Levy replaces Monroe with an image of Sarah Schenirer, founder of the Bais Yaakov school movement, who has become a mother figure and role model in Haredi society.

This work of art demands that scholars address a topic rarely brought to the fore: women's identity among female ultra-Orthodox Jewish artists.[1] My analyses of *My Marilyn Monroe 1* and other works created over the first two decades of this millennium are drawn from anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which looks at cultural structures, practices, and codes.[2] This analysis also dismantles the stereotype of Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy as one hue of black—based on their mode of dressing in black clothing—when in actuality the society has "multicolored" nuances within and among its streams and sub-streams. As director and curator of the first gallery representing the ultra-Orthodox community, the ArtShelter Gallery, which has created opportunities to showcase to the public Haredi art and fostered dialogue between diverse communities, I have been in a unique position to gauge the state of the field of ultra-Orthodox women's

contemporary art. Following my discussion of Levy's work, I will offer my perspective on this exciting, emerging area of artistic production.

For years, artwork was underdeveloped—or not developed at all—among ultra-Orthodox Jews.[3] This dearth of artwork happened for two reasons: first, there is an injunction against creating idols or graven images, and, second, Torah study is paramount for men, leaving no time for "recreational" activities such as art. Conversely, women are not bound by the obligation for daily Torah study, and therefore they have been permitted the time it takes to be dedicated to creative arts. That said, women's involvement was generally craft based, and when they engaged in more traditional high-art forms, it was largely hobby based, with little to no disciplined study nor career development. This has changed in the past decade, in large part due to the influx of the newly religious, a number of whom brought professional and/or academic training in the arts.

Even though professional art training began to emerge within ultra-Orthodox circles, the specific topical focus on women or femininity was skirted by most female artists due to its political and social complexity within the culture. Yet the emergence of a few female ultra-Orthodox artists whose work homed in on the feminine—be it directly or indirectly—are the focus of this article.

Levy's work offers a creative evocation of an important figure in the lives of many Orthodox girls and women and highlights a significant history. In the nineteenth century, as part of quotas that required Jews to study in non-Jewish institutions of learning, girls were placed within the educational system in Eastern Europe and particularly the Pale of Settlement. By sending girls to school in order to fulfill the quota, the Jewish communities enabled boys to continue their religious learning. The impact of this secular education for girls was generations of Jewish women with a general and political education, who spoke foreign languages (not only Yiddish), and became cultural consumers of theater, music, and novels. These same Jewish women, however, were forbidden from widening their Jewish education. This prohibition was based on the Talmudic ruling, "whoever teaches his daughter Torah, teaches her obscenity" (BT, Sotah 20a). But there was a concern that secular

education opened the door to Jewish women's assimilation, that young Jewish women would no longer be observant and would abandon the traditional Jewish community and even marry into Christian society. Thus, Schenirer (1883–1935), a Polish seamstress born to a Belz Hasidic family, established a network of schools in Poland after World War I. Her mission was to have girls combine the study of both Jewish and secular studies in order to ensure continued Jewish engagement.

Schenirer arrived in Vienna as a refugee and, inspired by the neo-Orthodox attitude toward girls' education, modeled her own educational plan for Eastern European girls on it. In 1917, she established the first Bais Yaakov school in her small sewing studio in Krakow, where she initially provided twenty young girls with an education in both Jewish and general subjects. Schenirer ignored the strong and sometimes violent opposition to her program and rejected parents' fears that education would diminish their daughters' marriage prospects. Knowing that without official endorsement and approbation of prominent rabbinic figures her initiative was likely to fail, she convinced her brother to help her get the blessing of the Belzer Rebbe. Later, she also secured the support of the Chofetz Chaim (Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, 1839–1933), who wrote about the founding of schools for girls: "Theirs is a great and needed endeavor in these times, as the tide of heresy is rising vigorously [. . .] Those who fear or have doubts about the prohibition against teaching their daughters Torah need not concern themselves with it in our times. [. . .] [T]imes have changed."[4] Schenirer's situation was improved significantly once Agudath Israel decided to sponsor her schools.

Working with the religious system, Schenirer was able to push historical boundaries. She glorified women from Jewish history in order to create role models for her students, and she created an ideal of Jewish womanhood that combined both modernity and traditionalism. Her ideas and their implementation may be described as *conservative* or *tacit feminism* (a characterization the Haredi sector would reject).

Due to the Haredi predilection for idealistic historiography, even at the expense of facts, Schenirer's life story has remained vague.[5] A censored and

reedited Hebrew translation of her diaries was published in Israel. The mystery surrounding her person was augmented by her request to her students not to hang her picture on the walls of the schools she had founded. "Carry it in your heart," she told them. Schenirer was rarely photographed during her lifetime, and so for Levy's art, she used Schenirer's only two extant photographs. In one of them, a highly retouched, "representative" image, probably from her youth (which appears on Bais Yaakov publications), she is seen with her hair completely covered by a coif. In the other one, taken toward the end of her life, her hair peeks out from under her headwear.

In *My Marilyn Monroe 1* (fig. 1), Levy replaces Andy Warhol's flattened image of the titular starlet with Schenirer's retouched photograph. In *My Marilyn Monroe 2* (fig. 2), the artist juxtaposes the idealized portrait of Schenirer with one from late in her life. Another coupling appearing in the series is that of the images of Schenirer and the Belzer Rebbetzin, the founder of the Bais Malka network of girls' schools. Although both women belonged to the same Hasidic dynasty, the latter sought to preserve the idiosyncrasy of her Hasidut by establishing exclusively Belzer institutions. In her work, Levy attempts to trace major female role models of different sectors by comparing them, examining the impact they have had on her own life, and playing with their visual representation, especially in analogy to enigmatic details from Schenirer's life. Levy raises ambivalent questions that, on the one hand, enhance and serve the "Haredi propaganda," and, on the other hand, contain an undercurrent of self-criticism.

Another problem thematized by Levy is the issue of matchmaking. In her series *A Good Guy* (2016, fig. 3), Levy mocks this institution and cynically wonders what has become of the vision of the Chazon Ish (Avrohom Yeshaya Karelitz, 1878–1953), who sanctioned women's work in order to enable their husbands to dedicate themselves completely to Torah study. She protests against the absurd status scale according to which a *Talmid chacham* [Torah scholar] is measured during the matchmaking process, when instead of examining his character, one concentrates on his maintenance expenses.

Questioning this status scale, Levy uses an anachronistic Pop Art style, which is considered modern in conservative Haredi society, in

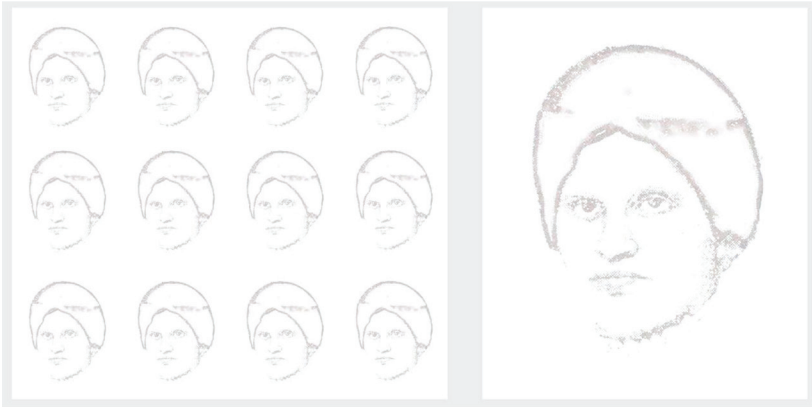

Figure 1. Yehudit Levi, *My Marilyn Monroe 1*, 2016.

Figure 2. Yehudit Levi, *My Marilyn Monroe 2*, 2016.

Figure 3. Yehudit Levi, *A Good Guy*, 2016.

order to humorously highlight problematic attitudes within the community about the value of men, ethnicity, and marriage.[6] In fading through the images, she raises questions about the problematics of racism and discrimination that elevate Jews from Ashkenazi backgrounds and denigrate Sephardi Jews who are considered lower caste (and may be disparaged as "black").

Levy belongs to a recently growing, intricate, and reflective trend of Haredi creative women who discuss critically, albeit constructively, issues that hitherto were rarely aired in public. This movement started some twenty years ago with Haredi women novelists, who were then followed by women filmmakers.[7] Its impact is only marginally felt in the Haredi visual arts, which as a rule tend to be idealistic, nostalgic, naïve, and "enlisted."

NOTES FROM THE FIELD: EMERGING ARTISTS AND THEIR WORK

Elinora Schwartz

Levy draws attention to a turning point, which also relates to artists who are *ba'alot teshuvah*—secular Jews who return to religious Judaism—such as Elinora Schwartz (b. 1960), a multidisciplinary artist in Jerusalem. Schwartz works in video and other media, with a focus on autobiographical experiences that critically address issues such as gender, power relationships, the body, identity, and archives. As someone who crossed the barricades and "migrated" into the ultra-Orthodox world, Schwartz says that as a religious woman, she stopped dancing. She had danced before becoming religious and describes it as part of her fiber. It was only half a century later that she returned to working creatively, this time engaging in photography and art video series, which led her to "dance" herself through these media. In her photo and art video series, Schwartz tries to connect the different identities she holds in ultra-Orthodox habitus, drawing on her experiences both before and after becoming a part of this community.

For example, in *Black Coffee* (2019, fig. 4), Schwartz (whose name means *black* in Yiddish) plays on the daily ritual of drinking coffee; however, instead of drinking politely, its pours out of her mouth and down her face. The black mess symbolizes the disorder she is forced to drink but cannot contain: racism in ultra-Orthodoxy. Although Schwartz belongs to the "right side," in that she has an Ashkenazi surname (Jews of Eastern European descent), she hails from a Sephardic background (Spanish or Middle Eastern descent). She proudly defies her origins associated with the black coffee, which pours out of her mouth and looks like a black beard.

Figure 4. Elinora Schwartz, *Black Coffee*, 2019.

After years of integration in ultra-Orthodox society, Schwartz dared to embark on a hidden journey as a *Marranos* [someone who professes conversion to avoid persection] to allow for the personal scream of *gevald* [woe in Yiddish], a blatant bursting out, albeit via the "controlled" and "aesthetically astute," in the conservative terms of the society in which she lives. Schwartz sees herself as a gate-keeping prophetess, allowing herself to be criticized outside the community and acknowledging that inside the house its position is still impossible.

In *Captive* (fig. 5), a woman's head bust is wrapped in pantyhose, signifying possible discomfort with or the trappings of blind faith. Pantyhose are a cornerstone of the required dress code for ultra-Orthodox women, and the thickness of the pantyhose has become a metric for piety: the thicker the pantyhose, the more modest, and therefore the more pious. Schwartz radicalizes the Jewish notion of piousness: she uses twisted pantyhose on the head and neck as an effect to signify strangulation.[8] Schwartz's artistic questioning of societal norms is a self-portrait; it depicts a creative woman living the double life her community cannot fully embody.

Figure 5. Elinora Schwartz, *Captive*, 2017. Still photograph.

This next piece serves as a self-portrait as well. In *The Walk-In Closet* (2019, fig. 6), Schwartz reveals herself on the home front. Her ultra-Orthodox habitus is characterized by the cheap brand of Tempo seltzer water boxes, stored on a floor built with simplistic tiling common in Israel, all indicative of the lower socioeconomic status associated with the Israeli ultra-Orthodox sector. She dons a house robe, worn by many Haredi women because it adheres to all modesty rules. Schwartz lies on the floor in the closet walkway, taking up space as if she were just another food package, joining the products at the lowest level—the floor. This is her domain as homemaker. To drive home the point, the woman in the photograph is faceless, which forces the viewer—seeking to empathize with her—to become part of the "cover-up" game of a dynamic woman who has been reduced to homemaking, highlighting the status of her and all women in her society. Schwartz's work is an experimental confessional, combined with protest elements, that suggests that what is behind ultra-Orthodox consumption is unacceptable.

Figure 6. Elinora Swchartz, *The Walk-In Closet*, 2019.

Additionally, the use of the word *closet* in the title alludes to the idea of "coming out of the closet." Schwartz courageously invokes a grotesque yet sophisticated black humor in her imagery of a woman lying down in a kitchen cabinet (closet), and in doing so makes an analogy to the LGBT community by calling for the liberation of women in the male-dominated religious establishment of which she is a part. Through grotesque and sophisticated art and humor, Schwartz is bravely challenging the masculine religious foundation.

Dvorah Cohen

Dvorah Cohen found an indirect method of dealing with femininity by covering her face with her own hair (fig. 7). The covering of the face is not a new artistic motif, as, for example, Rene Magritte uses it in the context of childhood trauma. However, the choice of hair as a face cover has ultra-Orthodox connotations. For the ultra-Orthodox, displaying one's own hair distinguishes single women from married women, who do cover their hair. (Only if the hair is cut off from its source and used as a wig can it appear in public.) Hair, therefore, is key to a woman's identity. Cohen shows her liminal place in a patriarchal society that sanctifies marriage and positions the bachelorette as perpetually unfulfilled in her role as a woman.

Figure 7. Dvorah Cohen, *Luderit*, 2017. Cohen, a graduate of the ultra-Orthodox branch of the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, hides her face to signify her unresolved issues with rules about public exposure for ultra-Orthodox women.

Sigal Adelman

Headgear is also widely used in the works of Sigal Adelman (b. 1961, a graduate of Nativ Bina Seminary),[9] who, among other things, investigated the

role and meaning of hair coverings in the construct of different sectoral identities. In the flagship series *Black and White Women* (fig. 8), displayed at the Jewish Museum in Berlin, Adelman photographed secular women in generic Western attire. The same women were then photographed with a headdress customary in Orthodox Jewish societies. The contrast stuns the viewer, showcasing the loaded message being referenced: a headdress is visibly dominant in identity construction and functions as an element of the regime of power. Adelman writes of the series:

> Photography calls for mutual listening, tolerance not only in the desire to understand the Other—but in the quest to expand the self, and work to contain other conflicting voices. At times, in the secretness of the subjects, I live within opposing worlds and the tension between them. The search for dialogue between the different voices also serves as a source for creativity. I am a daughter of the People of Israel, the Hebrew nation who always moves from one place to another—but also maintains their past. We live a constant tension between the desire, to grow and change, and the need to be authentic and faithful to our source.[10]

Figure 8. Sigal Adelman, *Black and White Women,* 2005.

In *Tête-à-Tête* (2000, fig. 9), two female busts, which are actually Styrofoam wig heads, face each other. In the Lithuanian community, two Styrofoam wig heads are to be found in most houses: one for an everyday

wig, the other for Shabbat wig. Ironically, these sculpture-like heads are kept in the Jewish home's "holy of holies"—the master bedroom.

In Adelman's installation, the heads seem to reference the temple cherubs—who were "to face each other" (Exodus 25:20) and, as Midrash Genesis Rabbah (21:13) indicates, had human faces. To complete the allusion, the artist projected a slide of Michael Avi-Yonah's Second Temple model on these heads. One way of interpreting the work is a direct, ingenuous sectorial reading that conceives the woman and her righteousness, of which the head covering is a part, as an important component of the process of redemption and the rebuilding of the Temple. This ideological message glorifies the woman, or rather a faceless woman, bereft of her individuality as she complies with the precept of chastity and covering. The photo's symmetrical composition leaves little doubt about this ethos. Another, less overt reading might include questions concerning the role ascribed to the woman in the process of redemption, which is usually portrayed from a patriarchal point of view; indeed, the very projection of an image of the Temple on female busts merits an investigation.

Figure 9. Sigal Adelman, *Tête-à-Tête*, 2000.

Sigal Maor

Sigal Maor (b. 1966) became newly religious and lives in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Ashdod, Israel. Her work deals with Kabbalistic references, using discarded materials as media, in and among which she sometimes weaves aspects on feminine identity. Her *Self-Portrait with Sunglasses* (fig. 10) is a paper mosaic that portrays an elegant dissonance between cool and *frum* [pious], and fantasy and reality, by featuring sunglasses as the "crown" on an ultra-Orthodox woman's headdress, instead of using the glasses to hide her face.

Figure 10. Sigal Maor, *Self-Portrait with Sunglasses*, 2012.

In *Striving Upward* (2020, fig. 11) the artist's photograph portrait is overlaid twice onto a weaving of plastic bags, tea bags, and newspaper clippings. Her two figures are placed with one positioning her arms horizontally outward, and another with arms diagonally pointing upward, an image that evokes Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. Maor sees her art as a spiritual correction to da Vinci's piece:

> This work hints at the soul in the person, commanding creativity in Creation ("What is merciful—you are merciful"), and thus this figure has two physical hands pointed out of the sides of her body, and two hands raised up, implying the bondage of the will of man who believes in God, for the will of God. (Hands imply human activity, lifted hands imply sublimation to God's will). This image is also inspired by the story of Moses during the Amalek war: when his hands are raised, the people are waging the war, and when they are lowered, they lose.
>
> Although Leonardo's intention was a scientific reference in investigating the dimensions of human anatomy and physical proportions, I was focused specifically on the aspect of "measuring," which is also implied in the [Hebrew] word [for] "man" [ADAM]—by reversing the letters [in Hebrew, AMAD], it thereby means to measure, to test, and to be constantly self-aware of the work of measurement.[11]

Maor is aware that da Vinci chose a naked male figure, while she subversively places herself—a traditional Jewish woman fully covered in garb from head to toe—at the center of the piece. She claims this is a complement to da Vinci's piece, because the word for *human* in Hebrew contains both the word for *man* and *woman*. Maor thereby creates her feminine version of the *Vitruvian Man* and argues that the spiritual dimension requires being clothed—the first act that Adam and Eve took after the original sin in the Garden of Eden.

Maor describes her experience with creating art as revelation for her own private, personal Torah renewal, providing her a wealth of "justifications": "I invest a huge amount of time in these works of art, which involve a very Sisyphean process, but there is also the cost/benefit

in that I learn spiritually which for me is personally very important. Artistic creation is not an end in and of itself, rather something that serves to deliver supreme spiritual value." Here, Maor brings to light a dilemma for artists in the ultra-Orthodox habitus: how to create legitimate art. For Maor, the justification is that art serves spiritual means, even Torah-inspired "spiritual renewals," which inject art into the holy. This spiritual justification also allows Maor to use her own female body as imagery, despite the possible repercussions of her society's fear of the body as a negative focus on the physical and egocentric self. Unintentionally, Maor finds herself entering the conundrum of the exclusion of ultra-Orthodox women from the still largely patriarchal territory, namely the study of classical sacred texts.[12] Maor, however, ignores the possible feminist-subversive readings of her work and seeks to see it as her own pursuit to learn more about integral traditions in Judaism.

Figure 11. Sigal Maor, *Striving Upward*, 2020.

Sara Cutler

Sara Cutler was born in London in 1992, to an ultra-Orthodox family of the Chabad Hasidic sect. As she was born outside of Israel, she enjoyed the privilege of studying at the Academy of Art in London. After moving to Israel, she began to encounter the ideological conflict between art and Judaism, and is now building a career in its midst. In her work *Havdalah* (fig. 12),[13] it seems the scene relates how single women incur a need to perform commandments that are conventionally performed by men, such as the Havdalah (Sabbath commencement) ritual. The subject's pose and the humility on her face showcase the ultra-Orthodox aggravation with the dissonance, and its effect on the woman's self-esteem. Cutler seeks not to protest on behalf of the woman's role nor religious practice; rather, she aims to bring light (the candle in the darkness) to a sensitive and current phenomenon happening among Orthodox Jewish women as part of expanding religious experience.

Lea Laukstein

Lea Laukstein (b. 1986) is a convert who immigrated to Israel at age nineteen after falling in love with Judaism and going through a conversion process along with her husband. She manages an Orthodox lifestyle as an artist, expressing her life visually.

In the art video *My Shadow and I* (2011, fig. 13), presented at the 2017 "Ima Iyla'a: The Art of Motherhood" exhibit in Jerusalem, Laukstein presents a day in the life of a religious mother, with imagery of the mother's shadow as separate, operating a life of its own. In a moment frozen in time, the colored imagery is one of a mother sitting and praying, while by contrast and simultaneously her shadow puts a baby to sleep in a crib. The use of the doubling technique seeks to empower the artist's fulfillment of her traditional Jewish role of being a "woman of valor," as a closed circuit. The style corresponds to the Domestic Dutch Golden Age paintings in a local-contemporary twist and perhaps speaks of barrenness and the longing for (and praying for) a child.

Figure 12. Sara Cutler, *Havdalah*, 2018.

Figure 13. Lea Laukstein, *My Shadow and I* , 2011. Video art.

CONCLUSION

Bella Layosh analyzes the place of ultra-Orthodox women, socially and personally. She questions whether they are gatekeepers who want to preserve the existing paradigm or serve as agents of change that affect ultra-Orthodox society and expand its habitus. She looks at the woman in the ultra-Orthodox community who, on the one hand, views her community as worthwhile, secure, and stable, but, on the other hand, as personally limiting, with an overbearing authority who does not properly address women's issues within the society. She writes:

> The complex world of these women—which includes difficulties, doubts, and a sense of dual loyalties in relation to their position—was exposed. Others cultivate paradoxes including a sense of dual identity, which creates a violation within their inner-self, necessitating redefining their identities as ultra-Orthodox women, including their exposure to modernity and the adoption of its characteristics which leads them to take measures aimed at pleasing the society in which they live. This facilitates them to capture the dichotomy therein, and to continue to live in both worlds.[14]

Although Layosh is not specifically researching artists in her work on ultra-Orthodox women, her understanding of ultra-Orthodox women's experiences may also be directed at understanding these women artists. Art allows the women to reflect and examine their personal and feminine place within ultra-Orthodox society at a variety of levels. In doing so, they foster revolution, even if unconsciously, ultimately paving the way for legitimizing their artistically expressed messages.

Despite the generation gap and background differences among these artists, their adoption of the ultra-Orthodox habitus allows them to be discussed as a unit. Even though each woman works individually, and the field of art in ultra-Orthodoxy is expanding in stages and burgeoning in various directions, common denominators can be identified among the artists. The artists are on the line between an often-piercing criticism and a sense of a need to balance a newfound approach to their integration within and their internalization of Orthodoxy and its community values.

Their work addresses the feminine, which is born of seeing themselves as educators, as responsible for the impact of their work, and creates an implicit feminine discourse (dealing with marriage, motherhood, domestication, and dress codes, among other things). Sometimes as a result of this awareness, and sometimes because of it, they prefer to hide their identities.

Nevertheless, the term *feminism* is still a taboo, absent from the discussion and from the art scene,[15] even though it is undoubtedly present beneath the surface.[16] We can thus apply the term *conservative religious feminism* or *quiet feminism* and see them as cultural agents.[17] For these women, the challenges they encounter and present engage with their place within religious society, and they use art as a platform for sectorial self-reflection. As with Sarah Schenirer, their quiet revolution aims to stay inside the religious systems.

NOTES

1. Part of this article was contributed to a catalog, *Israeli Women Artists Reflect on their Religious and Gender Identity*, edited by Maor Haim and Tseno Ureno, and I would like to express gratitude for permission to reprint it here. See Cohn, "Sarah Schenirer and Marilyn Monroe."
2. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.
3. Cohn, "Art in the Orthodox Discourse."
4. Quoted in Benisch, *Carry Me in Your Heart*, 117–18.
5. Shaul, "Orphaned Generation Looks for a Mother." From the few biographical facts known about her, we learn that having divorced her first husband, she remarried. For the prevalent historiographical approach in the Haredi public, see Caplan, "Trends and Characteristics."
6. On Haredi conservatism in general, see Sivan and Caplan, *Israeli Haredim*.
7. See Vinig, *Haredi Cinema*.
8. In recent years, especially since the early 2000s, and especially in Jerusalem, we have been seeing more and more devout religious Jewish women who cover themselves. These women, for the most part, repent or become more religious. See Baram Ben Yosef, *A Scruffy Look*.

9. This Lithuanian seminary for girls is known for the many prominent *baalot teshuva* who graduated from it. Later on, Adelman joined the Zionist Haredi sector.
10. Cohn, "From Dizingoff to Matersdorff."
11. Interview, May 2020.
12. El Or, *Educated and Ignorant*.
13. Havdalah is a Jewish ritual done at the end of Shabbat and distinguishes it from the rest of the week (Rambam: Shabbat, Chapter 29).
14. *Layosh*, *Women on the Verge*.
15. On orthodox women creating new places vis-à-vis feminism at large and religious feminism in particular, see Kehat, *Judaism and Feminism*.
16. This phenomenon exists in orthodox communities in general confronting modern feminism in various ways. A comparative study deserves its own paper. See Davidson and Stock, "Varieties of Fundamentalist Experience," 120–22.
17. Regarding this term, see Brenner, "Religious Feminism."

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