Orthodoxy, Feminism and Traditional Jewish Wedding Ritual –

What it takes to foster changes in a religious system

by Irit Koren

Short summary of the paper

Introduction

The paper I will be presenting is based on a sociological study of the ways in which women who identify as Orthodox and as feminists challenge, resist and adapt the traditional wedding ritual. In Jewish law, or Halakha, the wedding ritual marks the groom’s acquisition of ownership over the bride, and that legal significance underlies many of the customs associated with the ritual. The women I studied sought to modify the ritual, and their approach to it, in ways meant to put them on more of an equal footing with their husbands; doing this required them to negotiate extensively with their husbands, parents, future in-laws, and the officiating rabbis. I collected the data on which I based my work through in-depth narrative interviews with Jerusalemite women and a subset of their husbands, parents, and rabbis. Although the women in the study all lived in Jerusalem,¹ I believe the phenomenon they represent is mirrored elsewhere as well. While this topic might at first blush seem narrow, yet I follow the Geertzian course of seeking out in these grains of sand the heaven of a much broader phenomenon. These subjects illustrate the struggle faced by citizens of a modern, increasingly transnational world to remain at home with their religious traditions, to reconcile their modern identities with pre-modern ritual practice.

¹ Roughly half my subjects were born in the United States or were children of American immigrants.
This paper concerns the resources on which the brides drew in choosing to place themselves at the crossroads of modern feminism and Jewish religious tradition. In my analysis, these women expended considerable effort both in seeking to alter the ritual status quo, even at times pushing for radical change; as well as in remaining inside the Orthodox tradition, and continuing to identify as Orthodox even while being acutely aware of what they saw as serious problems with the tradition. The paper will explore the relative significance of these intellectual, emotional, social and personality-based resources and the ways in which the women draw on them to maintain their position at this difficult crossroads.

**Resources and Female Agency**

I see as the primary resource on which these women rely on as an ability to live with the existence of a conflict – that is, a remarkable capacity to be aware of this dialectical tension that characterizes the path they choose, and at the same time to resist the temptation to resolve the conflict decisively in favor of one side over the other. The first part of the my paper will deal with the resources which enable the women to challenge the traditional wedding ritual, including intellectual resources, social resources, and individual personality-based resources. Prominent among the resources upon which the women rely, particularly in the meeting the challenge of negotiations regarding the ritual with their husbands, parents, and rabbis, are extensive religious knowledge; a feminist consciousness and/or identity (intellectual resources); the ability to be confrontational; the ability to embrace and express negative feelings such as anger and frustration and use these to their advantage (emotional and personality-based
resources); and relationships with their husbands characterized by mutuality and equality (a social resource). Drawing on these resources in combination with one another helped these women to strive for change and take on the values of the religious establishment.

The second part of the paper will explore another set of resources: the resources on which my subjects drew in accepting existing religious traditions, to the extent that they did; or on which they relied in avoiding certain negotiations altogether, or in proceeding with the traditional ritual when their negotiations failed to achieve the extent of change the women had sought (owing to resistance from the husbands, parents, and rabbis). For the women in my study, making the decision *not* to break with the traditional system was no small matter, and required them to draw upon reserves of power both within them and without. Among the chief resources they utilized to accomplish this were an invocation of, and identification with, tradition; reliance on personal relationships (notably, in many instances, the relationship with a husband); and a bifurcation of the public/political sphere from the personal sphere. Using this third resource, a woman might see political and social value in the notion of creating public performances which undermine the patriarchal ritual, but nevertheless decide to forego this public challenge and instead emphasize the equality in her own personal relationship and marriage. For such women, the personal is *not* political.

**Summary:**

Through this paper I wish to discuss the model I have developed which serves to explain what are the social, personal, and intellectual resources which empower religious

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2 This reliance on relationships often includes what I call “positive emotional management,” i.e., the active management of emotions to enable the accommodation of tension between the woman’s identity as a feminist and the patriarchal reality. For instance, a woman might choose to focus on her love for her fiance and her excited anticipation of their upcoming wedding to quiet the negative emotions of anger, resentment and frustration that might have arisen in the course of negotiations regarding the ritual.
women and enable them to try and make a change in the religious ritual and gender relations on the one hand; and enable them to stay within the traditional power relation on the other hand. The important component in this process is not the existence of an individual resource but rather the combination of the different resources. This combination can explain why it is exactly this group, which has a unique profile, who is leading the phenomenon of changing the religious wedding ritual.