EMPOWERMENT AND INTERNAL STRUGGLE:

AN EXPLORATION OF THE WOMEN'S TEFILLAH GROUP IN LOS ANGELES

By

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Abstract

On the heels of religious feminism of the 1970's, women's tefillah groups have been creating safe and empowering spaces for Orthodox women to take on more participatory roles within Jewish ritual practice. Employing a format similar to that of a traditional Orthodox service, women have the opportunity to *layn* Torah and lead the *davening*, which are not commonly available for Orthodox women. This movement has grown within several Modern Orthodox communities, the majority of which are on the east coast and only one group in California, located in Los Angeles. Using ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews, this thesis explores a new area of research within this topic, focusing on the presence of women's tefillah groups on the west coast. While many Orthodox leaders in the Los Angeles community were openly opposed to the group's forming about fourteen years ago, the group has become more commonly accepted today. However, this has led the group to a crossroads for defining itself, understanding its role and the future of the group within the community. Through my research there is clear evidence that the group's active participants are committed to the continued success of the group, especially for the education and religious opportunities of future generations of Orthodox girls, though many find it personally uninspiring. Additionally, the women who were interviewed all possessed a level of self-awareness in their choice to embrace an Orthodox lifestyle and the feminist ideological complexities that often accompany it. Recommendations are made for participants of this women's tefillah group to strengthen their identity through this transitional period and to participants of other social movements who can learn from the example this group has shown as a social movement within the course of Jewish history.

Acknowledgements

This thesis project and the last eighteen months of research would not have been possible without the support of so many incredible people. First I would like to acknowledge Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the School of Jewish Nonprofit Management for allowing me the opportunity to explore this subject which has received such little academic attention. My thesis advisor Dr. Sarah Benor also deserves significant thanks for the countless hours she spent helping me process my decision to engage in this research topic, my approach and vision, as well future ways in which I continue this research. Her continuous encouragement and guidance has helped me to not only find more successful study techniques, but to also realize a deeper appreciation for the area of social research.

A considerable statement of thanks and acknowledgement is also owed to the women and men of this community who welcomed me into their homes and tefillah services. Yet even beyond that they shared the complexities and internal struggles they frequently face as Orthodox Jewish Orthodox women. As an unexpected result they also gave me the opportunity to process and reflect on some of my own feelings and personal challenges in relation to my passions for traditional Judaism and feminist thought. I am not only forever grateful, but forever changed as well.

Introduction

One Shabbat morning almost like any other, I sat in the women's section of an Orthodox service as we acknowledged and celebrated the coming of age for one young synagogue member. The regular congregants openly welcomed family members who had traveled from neighboring and distant cities as we marked this special occasion. The morning *Shacharit* prayers were recited as more and more community members filled the room, and the by the time the Torah was removed from the ark, the room was full with a feeling of warmth and community who came to share in the family's special day.

As the newest member of the adult community approached the Torah in front of everyone present, I glanced around the room. The recitation began and I noticed something occurring in the back of the room. On the raised platform at the top of the staircase leading into the room stood five men, *tallitot* (prayer shawls) resting on their shoulders and their eyes resting on this Torah reader, the bat mitzvah girl. Her notes of learned *trope*, ritual chanting, filled the ears of over fifty women and what grew to be about twelve men standing in the back of the room, behind the women's section which made up the entire congregation aside from the small group of male family members. Both groups of men and women consisted of multiple generations spanning from groups of younger children to grandparents; everyone present and attentive to celebrate this one girl.

As I tried to return to reading the *chumash* in my hands and follow along with the bat mitzvah girl's chanting, I felt too distracted by the dynamics happening around me. Here we were a group of women in an Orthodox setting, serving as the majority of the people in the room, and sitting in the front while the men stood in back. This juxtaposition – sitting on the opposite of the *mechitza* of where women traditionally sit in an Orthodox service – was something I had

read about as a tradition some uphold in a women's tefillah group setting, but never something I had personally experienced. Though I had sat parallel to or behind the men, never in front so they would look over onto us. In what seemed like an hour, yet in reality was only approximately a period of ten minutes, I was filled with mixed feelings of unease, empowerment and a sense of true community.

Women's tefillah groups have been quietly creating similar feelings for many Orthodox community members for roughly the last fifty years. Numerous men and women have been unsure of its intentions, permissibility, and overall impact on community traditions In contrast, others have viewed this practice as a means of bringing them closer to their Jewish faith, spirituality and community either through new personal roles or by ensuring greater inclusion and gender equality within religious practice. Women's tefillah groups differ from traditional Orthodox prayer settings mainly in the roles and physical access to the Torah they provide to women. In these groups, which consist only of women aside from an occasional bat mitzvah as described above, women not only lead the service but read directly from the Torah as well, practices otherwise not commonly available for Orthodox Jewish women. Its development stems from the east coast, home of the majority of today's women's tefillah groups. The movement expanded to the west coast in relative whispers, as my research found only three women's tefillah groups on the west coast: two in Portland, Oregon, and one in Los Angeles, California. Though it may seem small, its established presence in the Los Angeles community has brought forth successes as well as challenges, and demonstrates the influence and impact of social movements.

The goal of my research is to explore the unique qualities and presence of the women's tefillah group in Los Angeles, as well as the personal motivations and challenges its participants

have experienced. The developments of the women's tefillah group movement are similar to other changes found within Judaism and the frequent communal struggles that often accompany them. As the rest of the world continues to shift and adapt to increasing changes of the modern world, so does the Jewish community, as seen through numerous examples, including religious feminism, which will be explored further in this paper. Even though the Orthodox community tends to give the impression that it is the most static and resistant of these changes, the women's tefillah group movement is a clear example of a modern transformation taking place within the Orthodox movement. Though little research (or writing) has been done on the subject, the women's tefillah group movement is a noteworthy example of determination and ways in which Orthodox men and women have been working to adapt Jewish tradition to create more equal opportunities for women in religious life that still fall within traditional Jewish law.

It is therefore important not only that leaders of the Orthodox movement better understand the needs of its community and the directions in which change may be occurring, but also that others from outside the Orthodox community take note of this phenomenon as well. In doing so, both entities can hopefully gain a deeper understanding of the large challenges that often oppose changes in religious practice. Additionally, for those unfamiliar with the traditions of the Orthodox community, this thesis will hopefully paint a different picture from the common misbelief that Jewish law and Orthodox practice ignore the rights of women. While there is still great debate over women's rights and the roles they can take in religious practice, the fact is that this conversation is happening, with women's voices more at the forefront than previously found in American Orthodox communities.

Methodology

After my initial inquiries and exploration of the literature on women's tefillah groups I decided to conduct my own research to better understand the nature of the women's tefillah group movement. For the purpose of this thesis, four specific questions guided my research on the women's tefillah group movement in Los Angeles: (1) *What are the motivations behind a separate women's tefillah group?* (2) *What are the perceptions of the women's tefillah movement within the Modern Orthodox community in Los Angeles?* (3) *What is the need for women's tefillah groups in Los Angeles?* (4) *What feelings or associations arise from the use of the word "feminist" in relation to the women's tefillah group movement?*

In an effort to answer parts of each of these research questions, I engaged in conversation with several participants of women's tefillah in Los Angeles. I conducted in-depth interviews with ten of these women who had various levels of experiences and involvement with the women's tefillah group movement. Their observance backgrounds also varied with some who grew up in the Reform, Conservative, as well as different communities within the Orthodox movement. The interviewees range in age from mid-twenties to early eighties, and their backgrounds both in terms of spirituality and their feminist ideologies which led them to women's tefillah widely ranged as well. They had all participated in the group by *layning* Torah, and many of them had led other components of the service including the *davening* or Torah learning. The majority, though not all of them, continue to attend the women's tefillah services today.

To establish a stronger understanding of questions number three and four, I sought out the input of several local Modern Orthodox Rabbis. I was fortunate to interview two of them,

and they each had very different experiences and impressions of the women's tefillah group movement (see interview guides in Appendices).

For my original research I also conducted ethnographic observations of six Shabbat Shacharit and Mincha services conducted by the local women's tefillah group, including the bat mitzvah described earlier. Additionally I observed holiday services for Simchat Torah and Purim. To discover similarities and contrasts between the services and attendees, I observed traditional Shabbat Shacharit services in different Modern Orthodox settings in the area. I was also fortunate to attend a planning meeting for the women's tefillah group. In all of these settings the participants were extremely warm, inviting and encouraging of my research interests.

The community's welcoming attitude was actually meaningful on a deeper level than simply making an easy process to complete this project. This topic is very personal to me, and in fact so personal that I was not even fully aware of the extent until I began the original research. Growing up in a suburb of Los Angeles, my Orthodox day school and synagogue had both explicitly and implicitly perpetuated several traditional misperceptions and misunderstandings of women's roles and prohibitions in ritual areas that the interviewees discussed. For instance I grew up with the deep-seated belief that I cannot touch a Torah beyond a light touch with my fingers as it is carried around the community before and after a Torah service. I still remember my first Simchat Torah celebration while away in college when a community member of a Conservative synagogue approached me to take a turn carrying the Torah. I simply looked at him, almost paralyzed by the thought. I was not *allowed* to do such a thing, or so I had been taught. Not only has this experience been helpful in breaking down those types of misperceptions from my past, but it has also allowed me to explore ways in which my passions for Judaism and feminist thinking can at least begin an internal dialogue even if they cannot

always create a metaphorical truce. This research focuses on the internal conflict of *halacha* (Jewish law) and feminist ideologies and how these feelings play out into the arena of prayer, which is something I have personally struggled with for some time. As an appreciated and unexpected result, this project and its research have created a path of self-exploration for me in a way I could not have imagined.

This research projects sheds light on the current state of the women's tefillah group movement in Los Angeles, though there are some limitations to its results. First, not all active participants were interviewed, though a diverse sampling of women was selected. Similarly Los Angeles is a very large and diverse city, even solely looking at the Orthodox community, so it is difficult to come to sound conclusions of the community's perceptions as a whole based on these initial interviews. Second, it would have been helpful to compare some of the feelings of Los Angeles participants with those of New York participants, for example, to establish a stronger sense of the movement as a whole today. However, there is potential for this initial research to serve as a starting point for future investigation, as there is still much to be explored of this developing movement, and even much to learn just from this particular group. Hopefully this thesis will bring more attention to the practice of women's tefillah as a whole, its diversity and its significance in the Jewish community.

Modern Orthodoxy

Before beginning an analysis of the women's tefillah group movement, it is important to understand a little more of the context in which this movement has developed. The Jewish Orthodox movement has multiple divisions within it. Two common divisions are the ultra-Orthodox or "Haredi" and the more liberal or "Modern" Orthodox. While both groups believe in certain principles such as that the Oral Torah was given by God with the Written Torah, there are

some differing beliefs on how one can act in accordance with *halacha* and the modern world. As Samuel C. Heilman (2006) describes, Modern Orthodox Jews (or as he refers to them, "contrapuntalists") "believe that those boundaries [between Orthodoxy and the modern world] can be crossed and that Orthodox Jews can become part of the world around them without losing their Jewish commitments and loyalties" (296). In contrast, Heilman says that "the Haredi group is certain that to be Orthodox means recognizing that one remains always the stranger, always holding onto a sense of being in exile, and that lines remain that can never be crossed" (296). It is this ability to "cross boundaries" and to instill communal change that has allowed Modern Orthodoxy to adapt to practices and realities in the world around them while still working within the framework of *halacha.*

A quote from one of the rabbis I interviewed clearly demonstrates some of the internal dialogue that takes places and allows this cross over to sometimes take place. When asked about the criticism of women's tefillah groups that it would destroy *minhag*, Jewish tradition, he replied:

> In general terms we are a community very respectful of *minhag* because it binds us to generations past and because there's wisdom in *minhag.* The time when you have to think carefully is when *minhag* is driving you off a cliff. And the part of the community in which I sit, the stubborn refusal to be more inclusive of women in ways that are halakhicly viable is driving the community off a cliff. You're just pushing people away, out of the organized Orthodox community. And not only that, you're depriving them of spiritual experiences that women a number of generations ago may not have desired or craved. But there are spiritual experiences that women today for all kinds of reasons, that are easy to figure out. To deny them those spiritual experiences in the name of *minhag* seems to me to be wrong. Just as it is wrong to insist that all women must go to women's tefillah.

It is feelings such as these that have allowed women to take even small steps of increased participation in traditional services. An example of a relatively large step is the practice of giving women in the synagogue the opportunity to carry the Torah through the women's section both prior to and after the Torah service. Although this practice may not be common in Orthodox synagogues, I observed it regularly in the synagogue associated with the Los Angeles women's tefillah group. In this synagogue women also serve on the board and in various committees, including the rituals committee. It was also this synagogue that included as one of its four *Megillah* readings for *erev Purim* a reading lead solely by a woman, though it was open and considered halakhicly acceptable for men and women to attend. These are just some examples of the developments to which a Modern Orthodox framework has lead, in contrast to other sects of Orthodox Judaism.

Distinction of a Women's Tefillah Group Service

A women's tefillah group service in many ways resembles that of a traditional Orthodox service, yet it is evident that there are several aspects that set it apart. As referenced above, the clearest distinction is that only women are permitted to lead and participate in services held in a women's tefillah group setting. In the instance of a bat mitzvah as I had attended, the family has the option to create a *mechitza* (physical separation between men and women during traditional religious ceremonies) behind which the girl's male family members can join the service, but only for the time she will be reading from the Torah or possibly giving a reflection on the Torah portion (*dvar torah*) and not in any participatory way such as leading a prayer or having an *aliyah* (Goodstein, 2000). A prayer group of only women allows participants to take on more leadership roles as it does not break the Orthodox tradition known as *kol isha,* which forbids men

from hearing the singing of women in both ritual and public settings due to an infringement of modesty (Ostfeld, 2009). Therefore in this setting, women can participate throughout the service including the leading of *davening* (praying), *aliyot*, Torah readings, as well as any learning or *dvar torah* that is shared. This means then that aside from an occasion of a bat mitzvah, there is no need for a *mechitza*.

Another distinction is the general layout and rhythm of the service. In a typical Orthodox synagogue, there is a goal to have at least ten men present in order to make what is referred to as a *minyan*. In Jewish tradition there are major blessings and prayers that cannot be said without a *minyan* or quota of Jewish males. Participants of women's tefillah groups do not consider themselves to be a *minyan* since they are lacking the male presence required by Jewish law, *halacha*; so as a result, they do not recite certain major components of a service such as the *barechu* or the repetition of the *amidah* after it has been read silently (Marcus, 1997). Due to the fact that they are not considered a *minyan*, as well as that Jewish women are traditionally not viewed as having the same time-bound prayer obligations as Jewish men, women's tefillah groups tend to have a much wider range of creative liberties, which will be discussed further on in this paper. Due to this sense of freedom and authority, the changes women make in the service differs among the various women's tefillah groups around the world. In order to more effectively understand the development of the women's tefillah group movement as a whole and how each group has defined its own characteristics, it is essential to first understand the historical contexts within which it has grown and developed.

History of Religious Feminism

Women have been developing religious advocacy groups and movements for several generations as well as among a wide variety of religions. Shared feelings of spiritual disconnect

from religious rituals, and of injustice within traditional biblical texts, have remained a longstanding theme among many religious women (Bagley & McIntosh, 2007). However, religious feminism truly became part of mainstream culture in the 1970's when the second wave of feminism found its own strength and following in the United States. Some of this resulted from an increase of opportunities for religious education and understanding for the "common" woman; more women than ever were able to access texts and writings that had once been viewed as solely for the elite and most learned, which usually referred only to men. Writings from women from all faiths became more commonplace (Bagley & McIntosh, 2007).

As a result, a new key element of religious feminism developed – the interplay of one's own personal experience. No longer were women simply trying to approach a realm of religion designated for men, nor were they simply criticizing misogynistic texts, they were also infusing their advocacy efforts of change with their own unique experiences as religious women, which sometimes lead to the development of new rituals altogether (Bagley & McIntosh, 2007). For instance, the practice of having a baby naming ceremony for girls has become a common tradition among Jews today. It is not the same service used for a boy's *brit milah*, or circumcision ceremony, but it allows the family the space to create a meaningful ritual to celebrate the new addition to their family (Ochs, 2007). Through this openness of ritual, there has become a sense that women can create a new practice for themselves potentially filled with personal experience as women. One influential Jewish theorist and activist of this time, Judith Plaskow, noted this process and remarked [in one of her writings] that the study of religion through a feminist perspective comes in three stages, which include first understanding the foundation of the religion or ritual practice, then finding the female voice or point of view within

it, and finally transforming or re-appropriating it into something meaningful for women (Plaskow, 1993).

Interestingly, this trend seemed to occur within the Jewish faith as well. Almost in a parallel fashion, the 1970's presented an influx of opportunities for Jewish women of all denominations to study biblical texts, rabbinic commentary, and other fundamental sacred texts thanks to the work of several influential leaders within the community. For instance, this decade saw the first American women to be ordained in both the Reform (1972) and Reconstructionist (1974) movements, bringing female voices to the forefront of synagogue practice in a new way (Grossman, 2005). The trend of greater accessibility to sacred text was attractive to many traditional Orthodox Jewish women as well, and more and more of these women sought out inclusion within other realms of traditional Judaism such as in tefillah services, and in 1972 the first formal women's tefillah group was formed (Joseph, 2001). However, as described with other religious feminist groups, a new element of personal experience came along with it. To be described further in the following section, women's tefillah groups were not formed out of a desire to oppose men and male practice within Judaism. Rather, it has and continues to follow the steps laid out by Plaskow, in first understanding the actual ritual, finding the female voice within it, and then making it meaningful for women.

A New Movement Initiated

At some point in Jewish history a tradition arose in the Orthodox movement that women were not allowed to touch or carry a Torah such as every Shabbat when the men promenade the Torah at the start and close of the Torah service. This was also deemed custom on special occasions such as *Simchat Torah*, the Jewish holiday which commemorates the Torah itself and the point in which traditional Jews have completed a year of reading the entire Torah and will

once again start at the beginning. Many of the rituals associated with this holiday exclude women, including physical dancing with the Torah, as well as special *davening* and Torah reading in the synagogue. Beginning in the 1960's, women began speaking up against this alienation they felt in association with the Torah. The first record of any change occurred in Manhattan's Lincoln Square Synagogue under the auspices of the rabbi during that time, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin. It began simply with a special celebration held by the women where they could dance and read from the Torah in an acceptable way (Becher & Marcus, 2009). By 1972 this gathering transitioned into the first formal women's tefillah group. According to their website in addition to meeting on multiple Shabbat occasions, they use *Simchat Torah* to mark the beginning of their year with great celebration as they describe it as a "gala service on Simchat Torah" (Herlands, 2012).

This slow progressing trend also occurred in other communities including the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale which officially formed its women's tefillah group in 1979 (Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, n.d.). Though most had expanded to holding services on a monthly rather than yearly schedule, each community structured themselves differently. Some organized their gatherings around Rosh Chodesh (the start of a new month of which the marking is commonly associated with women), and others focused on the arrival of Shabbat, sometimes designating the Shabbat morning Shacharit services or Shabbat afternoon Mincha services for their monthly assembly (Becher & Marcus, 2009). Through the 1980's, these new groups met primarily in members' homes, as most Orthodox rabbis were still heavily opposed to the practice being made public through the synagogue arena. However, there were two rabbis during this time who were openly supportive of the women's tefillah group movement and welcomed it into their congregations. The first was Rabbi Avi Weiss who led the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and the

second was Rabbi Haskel Lookstein who led Kehilath Jeshurun on Manhattan's Upper East Side (Becher & Marcus, 2009).

Despite the growing support, opposition continued and spread into formal publications and prohibitions declared by certain Orthodox rabbis. One well-known public opposition was made in 1984 by a group of five men associated with Yeshiva University's seminary, in which they declared that women were not allowed to form separate groups for any kind of prayer service or Torah reading (Adler, 2001). However, many women pushed back against responses like these; in some cases more women responded to this than had ever expressed interest in women's tefillah groups before. In fact one organizer of a women's tefillah group in New York commented in 1997 that she was receiving such increased interest for the group's next meeting, that she hoped she would have enough chairs to accommodate everyone (Cohen, 1997). In addition to increased participant interest, Rabbi Weiss came out with his own supportive publications in response to the declaration made by the group of rabbis. Another result of declaration made by the Yeshiva University rabbis was women's tefillah group movement was the establishment of the Women's Tefillah Network (WTN). This group served as a connector for many women's tefillah groups and a private space where women could share advice, encouragement, resources, etc., with other women involved in women's tefillah groups. The WTN also actively created its own resources and publications to share with the groups around the country, until 2000 when the organization fell under the supervision of a new organization called the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) (Becher & Marcus, 2009). JOFA's activism and current relationship with the women's tefillah movement will be explored later in this paper.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to assess the current state of the women's tefillah group movement as a whole. First, since opposition has sometimes been fairly aggressive as seen with the rabbinic declaration described above, there is a high chance that some groups gather more quietly than others to not draw attention to themselves (Becher & Marcus, 2009). Second, after JOFA absorbed the work of the WTN, there is no strong central place where participants of women's tefillah groups can connect. Through my research, I learned from a woman on the east coast that an online forum still exists where anyone with an interest in women's tefillah can contribute. However despite my efforts I was unable to find such a resource. There is a link on the JOFA website, but the only response is that the group no longer exists. At the start of my research, the JOFA website also supplied a lengthy list of groups throughout the world, however today the link appears to be broken. They did not return my emails regarding either of these issues, and in conversations with Los Angeles participants, none of the women used any resources like these; many did not even know that they at least at one point had existed. Whereas it may be difficult to have a current count of existing women's tefillah groups, other records have indicated that as late as 1997 there were more than forty groups throughout the world, ranging from North America, England, Australia, and Israel (Becher & Marcus, 2009). It is important to keep this difficult access of resources and information on women's tefillah groups in mind when assessing the feelings and thoughts of Los Angeles participants.

Women Studying Judaic Texts

In addition to the radical element of allowing women to read and carry the Torah, most women's tefillah groups also include an aspect of Judaic study. This may not seem as revolutionary a component, as women have achieved increasingly more opportunities to study Jewish text since the early 20th century when the first yeshiva style school opened for Jewish

girls in Poland. It was established by Sarah Schenirer who also started the Bais Ya'akov educational movement (Weissman, 2009). Up to that point women were restricted from studying any kind of Jewish text or laws, aside from the ones directly affecting them, based upon some rabbinic commentaries that were made regarding the obligation of studying Torah. Men are obligated according to traditional Jewish law to study Torah, and according to the Talmud women are permitted, though not obligated, to study the Torah if they wish to do so. However Rabbi Eliezer commented in Mishnah Sota 20a, "Anyone who teaches his daughter Torah [it is as if] he is teaching her *tiflut.*" Many commentators including Rashi and Rambam have debated over the essence and meaning behind the rabbi's use of the word "*tiflut.*" For example Rashi translated *tiflut* as "immorality," explaining that Rabbi Eliezer considered women who wished to study the Torah to have inappropriate and impure intentions and would thereby taint its principles. Rambam though considered *tiflut* to mean "triviality," explaining that this statement teaches us that women do not have the skills or capability to study the Oral Torah so teaching it to them would be only trivial. Within these commentaries there is still much complexity, depending on the level of intention and skills a woman brings to the act of studying Jewish texts, as well as whether she wants to study the Written or Oral Torah. However the overall sense that was established was that most women should not be taught the Oral Torah, which would include everything outside of the actual Torah scripture, with the basic belief that they would not understand it (Kahn, 1989).

Even though the types of texts traditional Jewish women study is still a significant debate within many Orthodox communities, particularly when it comes to the education their young girls receive in comparison to their young boys, a special piece of a women's tefillah group

service tends to be studying Jewish texts together as women. The format in which they study these texts and the selection of texts tends to be crafted and designed by each individual group.

Continued Mixed Feelings within the Movement

Since the women's tefillah group movement is still a relatively recent development within Orthodox communities, there is little published research on the dynamics of these groups or even the arguments for or against them. However the small amount that is available points to a range of positions on the subject. For instance, while creating a unique space for women through women's tefillah groups can be a significant spiritual step for many, it is not a practice that connects to every woman. In fact some women are highly concerned with the impact it may have on the community and on the identity of Jewish women. Some Jewish women argue that it may only lead to a state of separate but unequal. The question of whether the women are simply copying the actions of the men is a common concern and argument against the practice. This perspective came up in an article published in the magazine *Tikkun* entitled "Roundtable on Feminist Spirituality" (Kaiser, 1998) where five prominent Jewish feminists from multiple denominations debated the nature of women's spirituality as Jews, how society has shaped it, and what problems still face Jewish feminists today. They discussed the effects of separate and distinctive roles for men and women within Judaism, such as separate realms of tefillah, as opposed to one unified and equally led service. Within this discussion, one leading Orthodox feminist, Blu Greenberg, adamantly pointed out her belief in the importance of not creating imbalances of power based on gender, but rather to note gender differences by highlighting the uniqueness of each of them in suitable ways, such as separate women's tefillah groups. Even within this roundtable discussion, there were differences in opinions and points of view that continued to develop throughout the conversation.

Another supportive perspective is explained by Bat Sheva Marcus (1997), who breaks down some of the typical criticisms of women's tefillah groups as described above in her article "Walk Humbly with your God," in which she also explains the *halakhic* basis that she uses to frame her responses to these objections. She continues to explain some of her strong beliefs for having women's tefillah groups as a whole regardless of frequency or specific practices. Her focal argument is that the development of these groups encourages women to take a more active role in Jewish practice and increases their overall knowledge. Within her experience, many women had been reluctant to participate because the majority of their experience with communal prayer had been from an observer perspective, never being expected to participate or learn the required steps involved.

In contrast to Marcus's arguments, there are many people who oppose women's tefillah groups for a variety of reasons. One major reason interestingly enough involves the element that makes women's tefillah groups stand out – that women can touch and read directly from the Torah. In some of my interviews it was alluded that much of the hesitancy or clear opposition rested in that taking on these particular roles would disrupt the traditional nature of the family unit, because then women might be expected to read and participate as actively with the Torah as men, thereby making it difficult for them to care effectively for their children. Another common argument that has been shared almost since the beginning of the movement has been that the creation of women's tefillah groups is offensive to traditional rabbinic commentaries that guide Jewish life because it is perceived that, in creating new rituals, women are making the statement that they know equally as much, if not more than these scholars and religious leaders. For many people, it is as if they are denying the validity of rabbinic writings, which are believed by traditional Jews to be guided by the Oral Torah received at Mount Sinai. There are men who

therefore view this as almost complete contradiction to the basis of Orthodox Judaism (Kobre, 2011).

Another argument against women's tefillah groups which also arose from my interviews with participants is that since women's tefillah groups do not consider themselves a *minyan* there are elements some women miss when they are not part of a regular service. Being that the women's tefillah group is not a *minyan*, there are some services such as Shabbat Shacharit that several of the women interviewed felt was more important or spiritually meaningful when joined with the entire congregation. Depending on the specific service and the personal associations a woman may have with it, praying in a women's tefillah group may not be as satisfying because it does not possess some of the same magnitude as can happen in a mixed setting. In such a setting, they can recite all of the blessings, even if it is with the men's leadership. There were also those who felt their voices and prayers could be better heard when there was a *minyan* present – that it was more of a "real service." From the various perspectives and beliefs that have been shared either in writing or through in-depth interviews, it seems then that the development of religious feminism continues to be an on-going conversation within Orthodox Judaism which continues to be challenged even today.

Development of the Partnership Minyan Movement

Another feminist-oriented development that seemingly stemmed from the women's tefillah group movement is the *partnership minyan.* While it follows some of the same practices, for many it is much more problematic from a *halakhic* standpoint. Similar to the women's tefillah group, women in a partnership *minyan* can have more roles than in traditional settings, such as reading from the Torah and having an *aliyah.* Yet the major difference is that women do this while in the presence of men. The *minyan* is mixed, with some groups requiring different

combinations of both men and women to be considered a *minyan* as opposed to the traditional requirement of ten men (for instance many of these groups consider a *minyan* to consist of ten men and ten women). Some of the traditional elements still included in this type of service though are the traditionally recited prayers, the fact that only men can lead the traditional *minyan* blessings such as the *kaddish*, and that the *mechitza* dividing the men and women (JOFA, n.d.).

For some women (and men) the partnership minyan setting is even more spiritually fulfilling than women's tefillah groups. In fact the movement was led by a woman named Tova Hartman who had felt disconnected from the community because she could not participate in the way she wanted. Ultimately joining together with other people who felt the same way, they created a new type of synagogue in Jerusalem. Known as Kehillat Shira Hadasha, this synagogue not only has established a very large and extensive community, but it also continues to reach out to many women who share Hartman's original feelings of emotional and spiritual detachment (Hartman, 2007). The movement has since spread to many cities in North America, and there is currently one in California, again located in Los Angeles (JOFA, n.d.).

Some of the major criticisms and opposition to the movement however have left the partnership minyanim to function independently of a synagogue. As it was explained to me by both women's tefillah group participants and one rabbi within my research, there are still many halakhic debates surrounding the partnership minyan's style of prayer – even more than with women's tefillah groups – which have kept most Orthodox rabbis from wanting to affiliate with them. The debate can even be clearly illustrated from the comments and arguments made in response to a 2010 blog posting on the website "Morethodoxy" (a website designed to include writings from five Orthodox male rabbis and Rabba Sara Hurwitz, one of the few women to be ordained in the Orthodox movement, regarding their thoughts on Judaism today). In the blog the

rabbi does not advocate for the partnership minyan format to become the format for all Orthodox prayer, but rather that as a movement it should be supported by the Orthodox community, as he says:

> We are in an age of independent and outside-the-box religious expressions, in which institutional support is no longer necessary (and in fact often hurts)… collectively we will be doing the Jewish people and the Orthodox community the largest of favors by recognizing Partnership Minyanim, and welcoming their emergence onto the Orthodox landscape (Kanefsky, 2010).

The responses to his argument were very mixed, with definite pushback that echoes some of the comments I heard through my research. While there were multiple interviewed women who discussed attending both the local partnership *minyan* (which meets about once a month) and the women's tefillah group, there were several others who feel it is not quite permissible according to *halacha,* so they only attend the women's tefillah service. The perception I gathered is that a small part of the Los Angeles Orthodox community is discussing this issue, while other sections of the community do not find it to be a desirable issue or option to provide.

Other Feminist Influences in the United States and Israel

Influences of religious feminism have also spread into other areas of Orthodox communities beyond prayer. One of the most recent controversial issues has been the rabbinical ordination of the Rabba Sara Hurwitz. In 2010 Rabbi Avi Weiss, referenced earlier as a major supporter of women's tefillah groups, gave her the title of "Rabba" in place of her previous title of "Maharat" ("Maharat" indicates a certain level of knowledge and expertise in Jewish law and spirituality). She earned this after studying with Weiss for multiple years and serving in a rabbinical capacity in Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. However this definitely got attention from the rest of the Orthodox community. In an interview with Heeb Magazine, Hurwitz explains that

there was "much conversation and dialogue within our community to see if that title is the appropriate title for me and my community for now" (StevenM, 2010). In the end, Hurwitz was allowed to keep her title of Rabba, but Rabbi Weiss has since been forbidden from ordaining any other women (Kobre, 2011). After this was settled, Weiss and Hurwitz founded a school to train Orthodox women to be religious community leaders, with the given title of "Maharat." The program, known as Yeshivat Maharat with the tagline of "confirming Orthodox women as halakhic and spiritual leaders," trains women in Jewish text, *halacha*, and pastoral counseling and communal leadership (Yeshivat Maharat, 2012).

Orthodox women with an interest in serious text study can also find those opportunities through the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education. Located in New York, Drisha first opened in 1979 and has expanded into a wide range of programs and opportunities for Jewish women ranging from bat mitzvah study, part time Judaic learning, and even full time summer and year-long courses of study. While most of their programs focus on expanding learning experiences for women, they also offer courses for men (Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, n.d). Another institution encouraging women's study is Nishmat. Located in Jerusalem, it has initiated a unique opportunity for women seeking more specialized training in Jewish text, law, and issues relating to women's health. In what is known as the Yoetzet Halacha program, women rigorously study for two years, learning both Jewish laws and physical health concerns relating to women. These women then serve as a resource and support system for Orthodox women with questions they do not want to address with their rabbis. In fact, in addition to the Yoetzet Halacha hotline and email service, Nishmat has also created a website with basic questions women have submitted. The range in topics includes menopause, finding the right type of contraception, levels of intimacy with one's husband, and determining *niddah*, the state in which

a woman cannot have sexual relations with her husband often, but not always, associated with menstruation (Nishmat, n.d.). In Los Angeles, three Orthodox synagogues and their communities have agreed to sponsor a Yoetzet Halacha who travels to the city periodically to lead workshops for women, couples, and high school girls. From my observations this woman has been well-received and demonstrates clear experience and knowledge of the different issues many women face in their health and how it relates to Jewish law. She also approaches the women and the topics in a welcoming, sensitive, and respectful manner to build a sense of trust.

There are also other similar feminist developments taking place in Israel. One interesting piece has been the television show called "Srugim." This show, which began airing in Israel in 2008, revolves around the lives of Modern Orthodox women and some men they meet in their community, and deals primarily with issues relating to how they are able to intertwine their feminist and traditional Jewish beliefs (Weissman, 2008). Similar types of conversations have continued into other realms of Israeli society as well, particularly relating to social change and justice. One group in particular, known as Women of the Wall, actively works to achieve more prayer opportunities for all women at the Western Wall in Israel. It began in 1988, and has since been fighting for the right to use a Torah on the women's side of the *mechitza* and pray in the way they believe is right for them (for some women this includes wearing a *tallit*). While it has become a legal debate within Israel, the conversations and support have extended internationally (Women of the Wall, n.d.).

Similarly the current struggles of *agunot* in Orthodox communities have achieved international coverage and recognition. A woman becomes an *agunah* (singular for *agunot*) when she and her husband are no longer together, but he refuses to give her the official Jewish divorce document called a *get*. As an *agunah*, there are certain rights she is denied such as

remarrying, as she will be considered to be committing adultery and it will render her children for several generations as *mamzerim*. *Mamzerim* are denied certain rights in the Jewish community, such as that they can only marry another *mamzer* or someone who is not Jewish (Levy, 1994). The man who refuses to give his wife the *get* however can remarry and have children from this new marriage without any halakhic conflicts. This abuse has become a major problem in Israel and in other Jewish communities around the world. According to the JOFA website there are more than fifteen organizations involved in this issue, with their work ranging from assisting and defending *agunot* in Jewish courts with the legal aspects, spreading awareness to Jewish communities around the world, prevention efforts, research, and counseling for *agunot*. The issue of *agunah* recently received American press time, as Congressman David Camp's senior advisor, Aharon Friedman, has refused to give his wife a *get*. A large social campaign is currently trying to put pressure on the congressman with the argument that this abusive man should not be considered fit for this political position (Herzfeld, 2011). In the Los Angeles community specifically, February 26th, 2012, marked the city's first International *Agunah* Day, which brought in speakers to educate attendees about the dangers involved with this issue, as well as motivate them to speak up against it. In fact, there are current efforts to create California legislation that would address the issue of *agunot*, but leaders of the movement believe this will be a particularly tricky process considering its religious implications (Wizenfeld, 2012). While their efforts may not be successful due to the American value relating to a separation of church and state, their endeavor brings the conversation and issue to greater attention in American society.

Israeli citizens in the city of Beit Shemesh also made a recent attempt at a public statement regarding their rights as Jewish women in January of this year. Beit Shemesh has

unfortunately witnessed numerous violent attacks and demonstrations on women by several members of Haredi society who have justified their actions with accusations such as the women were not modestly dressed. One situation which received international coverage was the on-going discrimination an eight-year-old girl faced on her way to school, where she was not only verbally ridiculed, but often spat on as well. As a result, she became frightened of walking to school every day (Kershner, 2011). To respond to this and other similar instances, Miri Shalem, director of the city's Women's Council, decided to create a large demonstration to gather women together in a positive way – they held an all-female dance flashmob. In an interview with Kolech, one of the original Israeli Orthodox feminist organizations, she reported that the two goals of this demonstration were to give a new image to the city (that not everyone there was Haredi or right-wing religious), as well as a peaceful and motivating way for the city's women to express themselves in response to recent events. The flashmob, which was made up of over two hundred women of varying denominations and levels of observance, danced to the song "Don't Stop Me Now" by the American band Queen. Shalem's reflection on this particular song choice, rather than Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" which had also been suggested, was that, "after all, we are more than surviving women, we are strong women" (Carlson, 2012). The video has since received over 181,000 views on YouTube, as well as much international attention (Carlson, 2012). While there is still violence against women taking place in Beit Shemesh between the different religious sects surrounding women and their religious as well as societal rights, positive strengths-based demonstrations such as this flashmob give women around the world courage and a sense of empowerment to continue fighting against such injustices. Whereas the violence occurring in Beit Shemesh is very different from the exclusion felt by women in traditional tefillot, there still remains a feminist undertone in their respective responses. In each situation –

the flashmob and rise of the women's tefillah group movement – Jewish women sought a way to have their voices heard, and as bell hooks explains, strove to "end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (1).

History of Los Angeles' Women's Tefillah Group

While there are numerous feminist oriented events and practices occurring around the world, the focus of my research took place in Los Angeles. The one women's tefillah group located there has been gathering women in traditional prayer for the last fourteen years. This group is a part of a local Modern Orthodox synagogue, and the official formation of the group came with the appointment of its current rabbi. However, as explained to me by multiple sources, prior to this rabbi's joining the synagogue there was already an unofficial women's tefillah group present within the synagogue and the general sense in their community was that it would soon become official. This unofficial group met periodically and did not use a *sefer* Torah, but rather a *chumash* to read the Torah portions. The rabbi commented in my interview with him that he was very intentional in letting the women who were interested in creating a women's tefillah group approach him about it, rather than initiating the conversation himself. He wanted it to be their project and something they felt empowered to do, though he said he was "pleased to facilitate the process." He said within his first six months at the synagogue the formal structured women's tefillah group was formed.

The leadership started with about five or six women, most of whom are still active participants. They met with the rabbi to decide which aspects of the service were considered halakhicly permissible for them to include as women. For instance, since they are not a *minyan* the Torah service is seen as a Torah study with the use of a *sefer* Torah. There was an issue then that arose with saying the blessing when one has an *aliyah* that made it problematic for the

women to recite it. So together with the rabbi's help, they replaced it with a similar blessing that was more suitable halakhicly. Once issues such as this were resolved, the plan was for the women's tefillah group to only meet for Shabbat Mincha on a periodic basis and for some major holidays. The rabbi commented that he was pretty insistent on this arrangement because he did not want women who did not wish to participate in such a group to feel ostracized or pressured in any way, which he felt might happen if a large section of the women were not in the usually more frequently attended Shabbat Shacharit services. Since then though, many changes have and continue to take place in the efforts of strengthening the group and adapting to the needs of the community. I was very fortunate to begin my research at such a pivotal point in this group's history.

My first observation was of a Shabbat Mincha service. The large synagogue was relatively quiet, compared to many of my later observations of the larger community culture. The women's tefillah group did not meet in the main sanctuary, but in the smaller *beit midrash.* The room was fairly large, as it contained 40-50 chairs lined up comfortably for services, a free standing ark, a large *shulchan* on which to place the Torah, as well as three or four tables set up in the back of the room for food and text study. Plus there was still more than enough room to move around comfortably. With its high ceiling and windows there was quite a bit of natural light. The bookshelves were filled with all kinds of traditional Jewish literature, various types of prayer books, *tanachim*, etc. The room seemed modest but well-kept and frequently used by different synagogue gatherings. I later learned that the group uses this room for the majority of their services.

There were about thirty-five women who attended the service in total – the group started with twenty-five and grew throughout the hour. The majority of the women looked as if they

were in their thirties, forties and fifties, with a handful of others from either side of the age spectrum. Aside from one other woman who looked like she was in her late teens/early 20's, I was likely the youngest woman present. This was the case for the majority of the services I attended, except as the year progressed more and more teens began participating in the services for various reasons including a bat mitzvah and holidays. Probably about 75% of the participants at this and most other services had a hat or head covering, and all wore skirts. The weather was particularly cold that day, so everyone was well covered up, however I received the impression that this was general attire. While the clothing appeared special for Shabbat and being in services, there was not a feeling of extravagance, but rather one of casual yet respectful as many women wore sneakers.

About ten minutes after we were scheduled to begin, the service finally commenced. The service resembled an ordinary Mincha service, with the same prayers and Torah service – only no *mechitza* and solely women were present. The melodies were new to me, and I wondered how familiar they were to the group as well, as only maybe half of the group was singing aloud. However when I looked around the room, everyone had a siddur out and opened, and was reading along; there was no more chatting as they had done when they first arrived. One thing that I found interesting during the Torah service was the third *aliyah*, which the *gabbait* (feminine form for someone who assists in facilitating the Torah service) asked anyone who wanted to partake in a group *aliyah* to come up. She suggested that perhaps it could be for anyone who was celebrating something in their lives. There were at least six women who quickly walked up to the *bima*. After that section was read (and by two women who tag-teamed that *aliyah* reading), the *gabbait* asked if any of the six women wanted to share with the group

what they were celebrating. A few answered with responses ranging from issues relating to health to family celebrations.

The first holiday celebration I partook in was their annual Simchat Torah Shacharit service. This was clearly a celebration, conveying a similarity of spirit expressed by the women's tefillah group at Lincoln Square Synagogue who refer to their Simchat Torah services as a "gala" (Herlands, 2012). Whereas at most of the services I attended there were on average 20-30 women, excluding the bat mitzvah which drew in new friends and family members, Simchat Torah hosted more than seventy. The age range also grew, as the group's leadership had invited new women and their children to join in as an "open house" for their group. There were young children about a year old all the way through older teens. Excitement flowed through the room, especially when it came time to dance with the Torahs. With all of the attendees and the chair set up, there was little room for the circles of women to dance comfortably, but they found ways to move or weave between any physical obstacles. One touching point during the Torah service was when the leaders invited any moms with young girls to have a group *aliyah*. They brought chairs for the little girls to stand on so they could see the Torah up close. The level of interaction and experience with a physical Torah was something I had never seen for girls in an Orthodox setting before.

Purim is another popular holiday celebration for this women's tefillah group every year. Held Purim morning, which is a traditional opportunity for women to hear the *Megillah* read a second time, many of women came festively dressed for the holiday. Even the *chazanit*, prayer leader, was dressed in full costume. The *Megillah* reading was divided ahead of time among at least five different women ranging in age. Sometimes the readers used voices to illustrate the story a little more, such as using a deeper voice when it was something the King was saying.

Whereas the service for Simchat Torah began with a personal story from one of the participants and some announcements, the service for Purim had a quicker start. It also ended rather abruptly, with no announcement or text study to follow the *Megillah* reading. In some ways, compared to other services I observed, it felt a little flat. However, this brevity was likely due to the fact that this year's Purim fell on a weekday and many people likely had to leave and go straight to work – perhaps this is also why some women were not dressed in costume.

Through these observations I also learned that within the Los Angeles group the text learning is led by different women, after being approached by someone within the group's leadership. In this community the text learning tends to come at the end of the service, partially to make a real distinction from the prayers, as well as to make sure they have enough time to finish the service properly. Most women have stayed for the learning, which has been filled with engaging conversations, often relating in some way to the Torah portion for the week. Participants are attentive, openly asking questions and offering numerous comments to the text and each other.

Feelings of Empowerment and Meaning through Educated Participation

In each of the interviews conducted with the women participants, there was a general consensus that the practice of women's tefillah groups had either brought a sense of empowerment and deeper spiritual meaning for themselves or other women they knew. These moments come about in different ways for each of them. One important reason is simply due to the increased opportunities for participation and ownership in the service. Some women commented that being part of a women's tefillah group provides them with a "role in the congregation beyond" the committees she sits on within the synagogue that she would not normally be able to achieve when praying with the rest of the congregation. Another woman

reflected on the different feeling she receives exclusively from a women's tefillah group: "I think there's something spiritual that happens when it's just women that you don't get when men are leading and women are playing a more passive role." Though the practice may not always be as spiritually fulfilling for the women interviewed as it once was, there still appears to be a general understanding that participating in women's tefillah has the potential to be a really powerful and moving experience. Also as mentioned, some of the women had grown up outside of the Orthodox community and women's tefillah also allows them to engage in a ritual practice they had missed when first joining an Orthodox synagogue.

Many of the women also feel more empowered by the actual heightened physical connection they can have with the Torah. One woman commented: "It's the access that I don't get in any other way, and there's something that for me... just the tangible connection to actually touch the *sefer* Torah, to read from the *sefer* Torah. For me that connection and that ability to build my skills through that tangible connection is very meaningful." Others relayed a sense of awe and amazement each time they approach the Torah to read from it as they gain a deeper connection than when they only listen to others read. One woman recalled her previous resentment toward the holiday of *Simchat Torah,* relaying details similar to the women who initiated the movement of women's tefillah in order to create a *Simchat Torah* experience where women could participate and celebrate. She said she remembered thinking, "Why can't we have our own fun? Why can't we do our own thing?" There is also a sense that the empowerment these women experience motivates them to take on more and more roles within the service and ultimately in their Jewish community. For instance one woman I interviewed said her responsibility for some time in the women's tefillah group was to ask people if they would have an *aliyah*, dress the Torah or other similarly small roles that are needed throughout the service.

Her experience had been that many newcomers quickly turned her down the first or even the first few times. Her response was to accept their decision because she often found that once they watched it being done a couple of times, they would eventually agree to a small role and then maybe something else the next time. Though this was not always the case, she did see it become a way for women to become increasingly more involved in their community.

Another common theme for these women in finding spiritual empowerment came simply from gaining the knowledge of how to *layn*. Many women described learning trope as simply learning how to read properly. One interviewee explained her feelings toward *layning* this way: "I would encourage people to *layn*. I think it's an important skill, but the truth is it's an important skill for Torah learning, not necessarily to *layn* but to be able to recognize the notes of trope." Some women who learned trope as an adult had feelings of shock when they discovered there was a whole element of learning Torah no one had shared with them before. As one recalled her feelings, "I was so angry… there I was all those years, wrong because I didn't know words go together, because that's what the trope teaches you, which words go together."

A fourth common theme associated with empowerment did not necessarily relate to their personal experiences. Every woman I interviewed acknowledged an importance of maintaining these opportunities for young women in the community today and in the future. Creating a safe and encouraging space for girls to celebrate their bat mitzvahs has been an important focus of the women's tefillah group. One woman said that the group is "becoming a vehicle for bat mitzvahs," as it allows young women like the one I described in the introduction to take on more roles and responsibilities in the experience. Even beyond bat mitzvah aged girls, women's tefillah groups appear to have created a safe space where adult women who have never had the opportunity to *layn* or lead *davening* before can gain those skills. As one rabbi commented on

the significance women's tefillah groups have had in Orthodox women's lives, "I think that women's tefillah has demonstrated itself over decades to be an effective means for giving women the opportunity in an Orthodox setting to take leadership of tefillah, to read Torah, to feel that they've created a meaningful spiritual prayer community."

While several of the interviewees had personally experienced *layning* in other women's tefillah groups and other denominational settings prior to this group, there were a few who only had that opportunity thanks to this particular group. All of them feel a sense of commitment that this opportunity continue to exist, at least for the time being, while there are still young girls (or women) who seek out the opportunity to have their bat mitzvah or other kinds of skill building through them. In fact, the group is in the process of creating a "teen-takeover" Shabbat service, where teen girls post bat mitzvah, and potentially even some who are preparing for their bat mitzvah, will run the entire service of the women's tefillah group. This effort to continue empowering and engaging these young girls is important to participants, especially as a few have commented to me that in the junior *minyan* at the synagogue where teens usually participate, there is no role for the girls to play as it is all run by the post bar mitzvah boys. This is their first attempt at a "teen-takeover" service and there seems to be much excitement and enthusiasm for it amongst active participants looking toward the future progress of the group.

Building Community

Another commonly felt important piece of women's tefillah groups is the opportunity to create a unique community in a special way. One primary way in which the group develops feelings of community and connection among the women is through the text study. One woman commented that part of what makes the learning component important to her is that it is seemingly more approachable, as the "feeling in the room is friendly, warm and inviting... [And]

it doesn't feel as big and vast as the main *minyan* [with the rest of the congregation]." The majority of the women brought this part of the group up in the interview without my initiation and explained that it would feel lacking if that part was removed from the service. At one of the recent planning meetings this was also something that was brought up as an element that needed to be included no matter what other changes were to be made. Some though did wish there would be more intimate types of conversations, rather than simply someone teaching a Judaic text and discussing it. Instead they would prefer to learn from each other's personal experiences and process their feelings together openly as women.

In addition to the Jewish learning, there are also other ways in which the group creates a sense of community while praying. One element that someone discussed was the way in which they often initiate a *misheberach*, a prayer for those who are ill. As opposed to saying the names quietly to one's self as they might in the large congregation of the synagogue, the group tries to regularly go around the room and allow each woman the opportunity to the recite the names of the individuals she is praying for aloud. She explained that not only do people hear the names, but they then "know that this person is *davening* for someone – the power or energy in the room, everyone is just focusing on them and who we're all praying for." The power of community is something multiple people discussed as a priority of this tefillah group.

Need for Change

Despite the high level of commitment and positive intentions for this group and its future, some interviewees expressed feeling that this passion is not always carried through as intended. For instance, a sense of community and enthusiasm for prayer is not always felt in the room. One woman expressed her concern: "I feel like it's like a dying room and I [would] just like energy to come back to it because I want it to succeed." Others mirrored this comment,

identifying the potential for this group to take advantage of the fact that they "get to meet and interact in other ways that we wouldn't necessarily in the main service"; however most felt that this element was lacking compared to other programs and opportunities within the synagogue. One went so far as to call it "boring," explaining that now that it has become a more accepted practice the real passion she once had is gone.

This feeling of apathy or "boredom" is something that reportedly many of the other women are feeling. In fact, this year the group has made several efforts to try to address this concern and make participation in the group more accessible as well as meaningful for participants. For instance, instead of gathering for Shabbat Mincha as had been the group's custom since its inception, there was a shift to more Shabbat morning services. Many women had voiced difficulty in attending *shul* both in the morning and in the afternoon, and said even though they wanted to participate in the women's tefillah group, it would be problematic if not impossible some months. Therefore the majority of the group decided to try out Shabbat mornings. Even with this decision came some other complications such as whether they would do a full Torah service with *haftorah* as well as *musaf*. The first Shabbat morning service I attended with the women's tefillah group ended with the Torah reading, as it had been decided that the women would join the rest of the congregation for the rest of the service. However one woman commented that this bothered her because the services did not end up aligning well, causing her to miss part of it when she joined the main synagogue. Also she said she did not enjoy feeling rushed that way. Another woman voiced concern for another reason. Since the women wanted to quickly join the rest of the community and to continue praying, they did not have any kind of learning as they usually do. Even as an observer, I could sense that some element of what makes the group special was missing when the learning was taken out.

When I asked the rabbi about his feelings of the shift away from Mincha to Shacharit, which he had been adamant about not doing in the beginning, he said the group has become so well-established as part of their synagogue community that he did not think it would create any sense of pressure or social stigma anymore. While this may be true, the sense I gathered from one interviewee is that this shift in format could be evidence of a deeper issue occurring right now for this group. She explained it as moving from the "profound" to the "routine." This is what she had to say in response to some of the comments and pushes that came up last year to move away from the Mincha service:

> The phrase that comes to mind comes out of organization theory – the routinization of charisma. It's in the nonprofit literature as well because there's the storming, now there's the norming… it becomes a routine, something that you do. And it's no longer ground-breaking – you've broken the ground… and because it's no longer groundbreaking, because it's no longer a little deviant, it's no longer radical, it's routine, it's obligation…which means it's not exciting anymore. And the comments I heard in August was 'it's boring'. Yeah, it's boring. That's what we want – we want it to be standard, boring, accepted. We need to be part of the wallpaper…but this is to me where the rubber really meets the road. This is going to be the difference between something that's going to survive and something that isn't… Yeah, it's not going to be exciting all the time and it's not going to be profound all the time. It's not even going to be particularly spiritually fulfilling all the time because this is the hard work of making a framework, making a basis that is going to endure. And it's when you make that transition, that's when I've seen other things fail…If we don't withstand that test, then all that criticism really gains traction, and it will shut the door for others.

These powerful words reveal where a real dilemma lies for this group. The gains they have made to establish a sense of normalcy within their community are noteworthy, yet how do the women sustain the passion and commitment they once had when they began?

The theoretical stages addressed in the above quote refer to Bruce Tuckman's (1965) article "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups." Tuckman describes a four-stage process that he theorizes most groups follow: forming, storming, norming, and performing. "Forming" occurs when group members become well-acquainted with one another and certain roles are formed within the unit. Once these details are established, the group transitions into the "storming" phase, played out through various conflicts within the group. How the members begin to process them and ultimately conclude any decisions that need to be made to successfully achieve its goals is the third stage referred to as "norming." The fourth stage in the group process is known as "performing," and it is here that the internal processing of the group occurs more naturally and the flow of the group toward communicated goals is achieved.

The woman quoted above believes that this women's tefillah group is in the "norming" stage, that practices have become routine and as a result not necessarily as exciting as the "storming stage" when there were more conflicts to tackle as a group such as social stigma in Los Angeles. There is a great deal of validity to her point. It can be a real challenge to sustain a movement beyond the point when it loses its edginess, the excitement that draws attention to it. Ultimately the group includes conflicting perspectives – those who find the group's current sense of normalcy to be unappealing and those who see it as evidence of their achieved success. Listening to both opinions, it seems that this group is really focused on trying to assess the community's needs and adapt their format in a way that can be both refreshing for women who have been active for some time, as well as engaging for women and young girls who are just

beginning their experience with women's tefillah groups. Doing so will hopefully carry the group on for a successful future.

Though there was a consensus among interviewees that the group should continue to strive for this goal, interestingly some of this community's leaders share recognition and admittance that while they whole-heartedly support the women's tefillah group, it may not be the practice that connects to future generations. They recognize that changes occur within communities, and as more girls become bat mitzvah and have more opportunities for learning outside of the women's tefillah group within Modern Orthodox settings this practice may not be one that is fulfilling to them. As one woman pointed out, "the thing that's always a struggle for women's tefillah groups is that there's no next step [within prayer]," and so perhaps new developments will emerge as new generations of girls grow up with the normalcy of women's tefillah groups. Similarly one interviewed rabbi commented that this community has brought up a generation of young men and women with an understanding that women's tefillah is an accepted practice, and it will be interesting to see what their responses will be as they become adults and venture into other communities around the world.

Another area with room for improvement that some women pointed out was the makeup of the group's leadership and those who are involved. There is definite consensus within the group that a strong group of women are needed "to carry the ball," though only a few people could actually confidently identify who is part of the group's current leadership. Everyone did identify one founding member who they viewed most often as being in charge of the group. However one woman who has become increasingly more involved said that one year this leader could not participate in the planning of a Simchat Torah service because of a family emergency. This new leader and a couple of other women immediately stepped up and took care of

everything that needed to be done. So it is clear that other people are available to assist in more leadership roles, and in fact some of the younger participants I interviewed outwardly voiced interest in getting more involved though feeling a little unsure of how to do so. One of them actually commented: "I'd be happy to lead the service if someone talked to me about it, but I don't like to necessarily always volunteer for things. So if someone came up to me and said 'would you lead it?,' I'd say 'Yeah, can you show me what to do?' Rather than putting it all on us [the participants], like please volunteer for this." Though an announcement is usually made at the end of the service that if people want to participate in a future service to please see so-and-so, it seems sometimes the personal ask may be more effective in gaining a strong group of leaders. As someone within the leadership pointed out, "it can't just be one person's initiative, it has to branch out"; there is a clear sense among many of the women that greater success will come when more people are involved with a real vested interest and knowledge of how the group functions.

Interestingly, one general observation I made was at times there was a lack of transparency within the group. Frequently the women I interviewed demonstrated misunderstandings relating to the history of the group, as well as the reasoning behind some of their unique practices. Even though there is pride in it being a teaching environment, there is potentially some education that could be done relating to the movement or group as a whole and its halakhic perspectives. Another interesting observation I had among the women I interviewed also related to the issue of the group being a teaching opportunity. Almost every woman I interviewed critiqued her own *davening* or *layning* skills. I recognize that some people can be tone-deaf, but it seemed to relate more to feelings of self-consciousness, and I cannot help but wonder if this relates to the more common experience of observer rather than leader for these

women. If they had grown up with more opportunities to take an active role within the service, I wonder if they would have more confidence in their skills. Most of the women I interviewed who had grown up with such experiences expressed more pride and confidence in their skills relating to public prayer, including both *davening* and *layning*. Thankfully, though, this group seems to have a strong balance of women who feel more confident *layning* than leading the *davening*, and vice-versa, (as well as women who still actively participate even if they are not always so comfortable because they recognize the importance of it) that it seems to work fairly cohesively.

Feelings of Unsatisfied Obligation

As mentioned in an earlier section, not all of the women who I interviewed continue to feel a sense of satisfaction or fulfillment in attending services in the women's tefillah group. However, every woman I interviewed used the word "obligation" to either describe the reasons why they used to or still do attend. One said, "Sometimes I wonder if I go… just to support the idea of it because sometimes I'm actually more connected and happier… in the larger *minyan*." Many related to this idea of supporting the concept of women's tefillah groups more than finding their own fulfillment. One commented that "the service [became] uninspiring," and another explained that she still attends because it "just feels like the right thing to do – even if I don't want to go."

Part of this common disconnect comes from the fact that in many ways the group still serves as a learning service. There are still many women they reach out to who are not familiar with *layning*, leading, or the practice of women's tefillah groups altogether. For instance, the first time I attended one of their services, two women in essence shared a Torah reading section like a tag team. When I inquired about this later on, one leader of the group stated that the

majority of the group is open to this arrangement when women do not feel they could learn an entire piece on their own, as they want to encourage as much participation as possible. One interviewee though voiced real concern that this is a lack of consistent expectations set for participants, feeling that this type of arrangement only perpetuates a feeling that this is not a serious service. While this woman brings up an interesting point, several others referred to feeling a higher value on the learning opportunity for others (for instance those who have never had the chance to *layn* before) that is associated with their group rather than the spiritual connection of regular attendees. One even said:

> It's a learning service, exactly. Which is why for me it's not a necessarily really profound spiritual experience like where the prayers are so meaningful and the melodies, are whatever... it's more that I really appreciate that it exists. And I'm really happy that there's this opportunity for women where there wouldn't otherwise be. And for that reason I'm very much in support of the group.

Others realize that if they do not continue to support the movement despite their frequent feelings of spiritual disconnect, the practice will not last for future generations. Opportunities for involvement and participation in this way would be closed. One woman commented that she feels an immense sense of responsibility to continue teaching women who ask to learn because others went out of their way to teach her and she needs to "pass it on."

Overall the women who *layn* do a good job and typically make few mistakes. From my observation, as echoed in some of the interviews, the *davening* can sometimes feel like something is missing in the room. Whether it is enthusiasm from participants or a stronger presence of a leader, a couple of the observed services seemed to be lacking a real sense of energy and perhaps level of comfort among participants with the *davening* and its melodies.

Copying of Men or Making Something New

One aspect that continues to be a source of internal conflict for women's tefillah groups is the nature of how they conduct themselves. The question often becomes whether they should do things the way in which the men traditionally do them, or whether they create something new for their own experience of the ritual. According to *halacha*, Jewish law, women's tefillah groups are not a *minyan* and the women do not think of themselves in that way, which is why there is much room for creative alterations in the service. One woman described it as "freeing" because the group can decide to change a song, tune, or practice so that it fits better with their participants. For instance one distinction which several women commented on during the interviews is the opportunity for group *aliyot*. Instead of calling one participant up to the Torah for the honor of receiving an *aliyah*, the women come up in categories. So for instance during one observation, I noticed that some of the *aliyot* were announced for anyone who had been to Israel in the last year, worked as a Jewish professional, or wanted to celebrate or commemorate something in their life. Each one had a different category, even if the last one was for anyone who had not yet had the opportunity to have an *aliyah*.

The majority of the women interviewed noted that when the women's tefillah group sets itself apart in some way, making itself distinctive, that is when it is the most meaningful and successful overall. This seems to be an instance of Plaskow's third stage of religious feminism: re-appropriating a ritual into something more meaningful for women. One woman even commented that she "finds the imitative model to be very unsatisfying," and the majority of interviewees voiced feelings that the group's members need to determine what excites them in order to keep it viable for the future. One tied this back to the Torah learning, explaining that

this is an opportunity to learn from extremely intellectual and profound women on Jewish subjects that women may not likely hear otherwise.

Similarly in women's tefillah groups, as explained, women do not simply want to pray in the same way as the men, but instead wanted to take the basis of the tradition and transform it into something new and meaningful for them. As a result, the women of the Los Angeles-based group include in their Shabbat morning and afternoon service "the *agunot* prayer." It is a modern prayer recited in both Hebrew and English about *agunot*, This is one way that women have included elements of their own personal experience to create new meaning within ritual prayer. Finding those elements to include or create in order to provide a deeper meaning within prayer for women is a constant challenge, especially since women are typically kept at a participatory distance in most Orthodox communal prayer settings.

Even though there is a strong desire to have that unique female voice in the services, many of the women commented that they seek to create a service that feels as professional as when the men lead in the main synagogue. One participant described that when she tries to lead a women's tefillah service,

> Every time I'm confused by what goes when and what everyone's supposed to be doing… there's so many moving parts… when the men are up there on the *bimah*, you just kind of go 'oh ok… they're just doing it, it seems so easy.' But when you're up there and you have to think of who stands where and they do what, and going where… there's just a lot to remember.

Similarly, several of the women commented that they appreciated the fact that young girls can have their bat mitzvah in a similar way that young boys do. Girls in the community are not expected to, but have the opportunity to celebrate their coming of age by learning and participating in rituals in the same way as boys. For instance at the bat mitzvah I observed, the

bat mitzvah girl gave a speech in front of the entire congregation after reading the Torah in the women's tefillah group; however one interviewee shared that her daughter did not want to participate in the main sanctuary, solely the women's tefillah group. Interestingly a few of the women even described situations where a girl may have been better at *davening* than her male counterpart and how that often led to mixed feelings since the boy was given the opportunity to read before the entire community not based on skill, but simply based on his gender. These conflicting feelings – acting like their male counterparts or creating something new – is something many feminists have struggled with and debated for many years, and is something that seems to keep this women's tefillah group questioning their identity and how they want to function as a group.

Opposition from Others in the Community

While some women described more opposition than others, most of the women acknowledged various objections to women's tefillah groups they had either experienced first-hand or heard of, both in and outside of their community. As described previously, historically women's tefillah groups have received great opposition from various Orthodox leaders. Even the women's tefillah group in Los Angeles faced immediate opposition when it formed from various community leaders of other synagogues who tried to keep the practice away. One reason that is often given against women's tefillah groups in general is that they are seemingly trying to be radical, wanting to desecrate Jewish traditions and practices. Today, there is a general sense that communal opposition to the women's tefillah group has decreased in Los Angeles, though it may still be felt by particular individuals.

The stories of relatively recent opposition that were shared by some of the interviewed women came from their male and female peers. Two of them described instances where it

interfered to some degree in social situations and inhibited certain relationships from forming. Some of the comments they received revolved around the message of equality between men and women. One woman described the first objection she received when she said she wanted any future daughters to mark their bat mitzvah in a women's tefillah group: "Doesn't that not make sense, because then you're not saying that they're just like their brothers… that you're different from your brothers – you can only do it in private in front of women, and your brothers can do it in front of the whole *shul*. So isn't that making it more stigmatized and worse for the children?" Although one woman said many of her friends still would not come due to their religious beliefs that this was not a permitted practice under halacha, some younger participants said more of their peers would attend the women's tefillah group if they were leading in some way, such as the text study. Other opposition related to the nature of the service, as interviewees recalled some friends saying that it is pointless to have a women's tefillah group when they do not count as a true *minyan* so their prayers do not actually have value.

Some of the women who serve in leadership roles within the group though said they had never experienced discomfort discussing their involvement with others. In fact two women reported times when they initiated the subject, almost as a way of flaunting their participation, to people in the community who they knew were not in favor of women's tefillah groups. Both stories interestingly involved school officials, though neither experienced any kind of backlash from it. Whereas these women's experiences with Orthodox schools in Los Angeles had felt difficult, another woman described a more positive experience when one of her daughter's male teachers openly discussed her daughter's ability to *layn* Torah in front of the rest of her daughter's classmates.

Some of the opposition the women discussed was less direct, but still very powerful. Often it came from close friends in the synagogue revolving around the decision to have a daughter's bat mitzvah through the women's tefillah group or even family members' level of acceptance. However, an important distinction, as one woman noted, is that the members of the synagogue do not want to prevent others from having the opportunity, but simply do not want to participate themselves. There has been no report that this has become any major source of conflict in the synagogue.

Another interesting source of opposition comes on a very individual and personal basis. It was explained in one of the interviews that often people who are relatively new to the group are hesitant to take an active role, even a small one such as wrapping the Torah. This is believed by some to be because these women do not know how to do certain things or they feel uncomfortable engaging in a practice they thought was against Jewish law for women (Marcus, 1997). One person related it back to her own first experience with women's tefillah groups and how she had questioned the legality of what she was seeing in relation to Jewish law. Even as I interviewed one of the women, I found myself with my own experience of internal struggle and opposition as she offered me the opportunity to carry the Torah on one upcoming Shabbat service in the main sanctuary. My first reaction was "No, I can't do that," even though I had seen many women do this and felt fine with their participation in this way. Yet for me there was this immediate hesitation because of my background and the way I was taught to understand my relationship with a physical Torah. However, what differed in this moment from when I was approached to carry a Torah in college is that my hesitation was coupled with a greater sense of self-awareness thanks to the conversations and reflections shared with the interviewees.

Commitment to the Orthodox Movement

Many of the women I interviewed had strong feelings of connection and commitment to the Orthodox movement as a whole. While there are multiple aspects and limitations that arise for women in this setting that create internal tension for them as Jewish women, many expressed a sense of acceptance for the situation. Whereas some people outside of the Orthodox community may think that Orthodox women blindly accept their roles within the community, this is not the case at all – these women are fully aware of the decisions they make and the realities that come with it. One woman said she chose "the Orthodox side of the *mechitza* so-to-speak," in that she was making the conscious decision to continue living an Orthodox life despite the more egalitarian attitudes and practices she might find in another denomination. Many interviewees feel similarly to this woman, expressing that at a certain point there were only so many points or issues they felt they could push before accepting the fact that these are a part of Orthodox Judaism. If they were really unhappy with those conditions, they could find differing traditions in other Jewish denominations. The following is a profound comment one woman made, demonstrating her understanding and reflection of her decision to live as part of the Orthodox community:

> You know even if you push the envelope, and push the envelope, and okay we're going to have women's tefillah and women are going to carry the sefer Torah… at the end of the day, they're not equal. Women are not equal for ritual purposes in Orthodox Judaism. And no matter how much you push it and how feminist you want to be, you're never going to get there. You're never going to get all the way there. You have to make a choice – am I going to be a full blown feminist and say I'm done with all of this and I'm 100% equal even when it comes to ritual things… or are you going to say, I have feminist ideals but I'm still Orthodox. You know, I choose to live in that conflicted zone.

Even though other denominational settings, even traditional egalitarian ones, are available in Los Angeles, many of the women I interviewed commented that those settings were typically not satisfying for them. Several of the women alluded to halakhic issues within certain settings such as Conservative Judaism that made them uncomfortable. While some do also participate in some of the local partnership *minyan* services, others found that even this was not halakhicly comfortable for them. One might think that an independent *minyan* with a traditional egalitarian service might be a pleasant option, as it can create a unique space where certain flexibilities and traditions can be blended, especially since they are not affiliated with any particular synagogue or denomination. One study also points out that independent *minyanim* "see themselves as meeting needs not being met elsewhere, by providing experiences and activities that they believe to be unavailable in conventional congregations and other such settings" (Cohen, Landres, Kaunfer, & Shain, 2007, 3). However in addition to the halakhic problems these women have with other denominations and with some independent *minyanim*, my observations conclude that there is also a very strong sense of community carried throughout this synagogue as a whole, to which most of the women really seem to connect. Perhaps it is a sense of appreciation that these practices and in-depth conversations regarding women's roles in Orthodox Judaism can exist, for which several interviewees credited the community's rabbi. Regardless of all the factors that go into the decision to live within the Orthodox community, the intense level of self-awareness and the amount of thought that went into it really struck me. The decision entered into every realm of their life – dating, raising children, commemorating loved ones – and their decision of how to express their Jewish (and for some feminist) identities was very intentional.

One study conducted on women's tefillah groups on the east coast found similar results. Ailene Cohen Nusbacher (2000) steered a study which primarily utilized in-depth interviews of twenty-seven members of women's tefillah groups throughout the city of New York. While they all lived in the same area, the women chosen ranged in other basic demographics such as age, marital status, etc. She found that most women had never considered leaving the Orthodox movement and subscribing to another denomination's principles. Even though they felt left out of important ritual activities in the community, they felt a strong connection and value of Orthodox traditions. Supporting this idea even further, as a response to the commotion created when a well-known feminist activist publicly announced that she was leaving the Orthodox movement, Blu Greenberg (1998) offered an explanation of what often keeps women connected to the Orthodox community even with the challenges halacha can sometimes create in their lives:

> To be sure, halakhah doesn't belong to the Orthodox alone; in varying degrees, other denominations follow the decisions of their rabbinic authorities. Little distinguishes between the religious observance of traditional Conservatives and the modern Orthodox. But the difference is that in Orthodoxy, everyone observes halakhah; the least member of the community is enjoined to live ritually exactly as the leader does. This is what enables us to keep our young in the community.... Yet staying Orthodox is more than commitment to halakhah. The system serves us well. As human beings, women, members of families and communities, we benefit from an intense, rich way of life – Shabbat, kashrut, mikveh, daily prayer, Torah study. Outsiders may see Orthodoxy as dour and coercive; within, we see light and joy, an exuberance born as much of the steadiness of ritual as from peak moments. (55)

Greenberg's comment touches on something at least every woman I interviewed mentioned in some capacity. Additionally, most of the women I interviewed acknowledged a comfort in finding women's tefillah because it allows two important commitments in their life,

Orthodoxy and spiritual leadership, to join together. One woman commented that her parents had left the Orthodox movement when she was a child simply so that she would be able to participate actively in her Jewish experience; her decision to participate in the women's tefillah group provides her with an opportunity to have both. She describes the experiences as being "almost a more natural fit." Another described it as a "nice compromise" for her and her religious beliefs. There is also a sense that for many of these women, despite living with "internal conflict" there is an appreciation in knowing there are certain arguably discriminating aspects that they no longer need to endure, such as not being permitted to touch a Torah.

Feminist Influences

In addition to the larger research goal to learn more about the presence of women's tefillah groups on the west coast and primarily in the Los Angeles community, I also wanted to do a small assessment of personal feminist feelings and perceptions among Orthodox Jews in the community. From the initial research I had done, the movement of women's tefillah groups felt very much in line with the larger secular feminist movement, as I demonstrated in the earlier historical comparison. However there are many women today who do not wish to associate with the term "feminism" even if they believe in its basic principles, as the assumptions and associations with the label tend to have fairly radical connotations that make people uncomfortable. However the reality is that there are actually numerous definitions of the term "feminism" to contrast the stereotypical image of an angry bra-burning woman. It is accurate and worth acknowledging that there is such a movement as "radical feminism" which strives for more extreme societal changes (Kreps, 1972). There are also other definitions that are not as forceful or exclusive. For instance, major feminist theorist bell hooks (2000) reasoned for a

more inclusive definition in her book "Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics," in which she explains:

> Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression...Practically it is a definition which implies that all sexist thinking and action is a problem, whether those who perpetrate it are female or male, child or adult. It is also broad enough to include an understanding of systematic institutionalized sexism. As a definition it is open-ended. (1)

In a specific focus on the Jewish community, there is also much internal debate and little consensus of a firm definition. However many scholars have written about ways in which the two worlds of feminism and Orthodoxy can actually align in significant ways. For instance in a 2003 article by the previously mentioned Orthodox feminist scholar and founder of JOFA, Blu Greenberg, entitled, "Orthodox, Feminist, and Proud of It" a definition for the term "Orthodox Feminist" is proposed. She describes it as: "a woman who believes in equal dignity of women within Orthodoxy; expanding the spiritual, intellectual, ritual, and communal opportunities for women to the fullest extent possible within halakah; the elimination of all injustice and suffering for Orthodox women arising out of hierarchal laws, such as Jewish divorce law" (54-55). Understanding the wide variety yet powerful definitions and understandings that accompany the term "feminism," especially for Orthodox women, I wanted to explore the personal perceptions of feminism for the women who participate in the women's tefillah group and make it a thriving practice in Los Angeles.

Feelings of Feminism

When I asked about feelings of feminism in relation to women's tefillah groups, the overall tone I perceived is that this has been and in some cases continues to be a source of internal struggle for each of these women. For some it depended on how the term "feminism"

was defined, or even how they defined it for themselves. However, many of them, in one way or another, felt a sense of tension between their feminist ideals and commitment to Orthodox practice and values. Some developed this tension as a result of outside pressures, as one woman recalled one such experience: "To me I had no problem being an observant Jew and a feminist, but then when I started using the term Orthodox rather than just observant, I got reactions from people that made me think 'oh, you can't be this – they're mutually exclusive.' But then I started thinking maybe feminism is more about the rights of women, and shouldn't any woman be in favor of the rights of women even if you're Orthodox?" For this woman and for some of the others there were some attempts to find a compromise, but then when one could not be reached they often put Orthodoxy first, as the same woman elaborated further, "I feel… that the feminism is sometimes what has to go under a little bit in favor of Orthodoxy."

Others described a more intense sense of tension and conflict between their feelings of feminism and Orthodox Judaism, ultimately accepting that they cannot go hand in hand with each other. One described a personal encounter with this conflict: "My daughter asked me just last week, 'why don't women count in a minyan?' And I had to, like through my teeth, give her the standard lines that don't really resonate with me. You know I don't have great answers for her because I don't think there are great answers. But on the other hand like I said, I bought the whole package. You can't pick and choose. You buy the package or you don't." Since she had decided to live within the Orthodox community, she recognized that there were certain pieces of "the package" that she would not enjoy but needed to accept in order to live this way.

Blu Greenberg (1998) also made note of her own personal struggle of "buying the whole package" in her well-known book *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition.* However,

she emphasizes a positive perspective of living as an Orthodox feminist and the frustration it can bring. She comments:

> Each of us makes personal choices in life; then we proceed to rationalize our choices as part of some legitimate world view. Mine, I think, can be articulated best as positive theory of conflict. For I find myself squarely located among those women whose primary orientation is as a traditional Jew, with all the family values and obligations that entails, but who are at the same time attracted to feminist notions of equality, horizons, self-growth. So I live with the conflict. I live with it every day, in a thousand ways that pull me in one direction or another. I have to realize that the conflict is a sign of my health, not of my confusion; the tension is a measure of the richness of my life, not of disorderliness. It is a sign that I am trying to have the best of both worlds – the traditional richness of the Jewish family and the new chances for personal growth that feminism offers me in ways that society never offered my mother or grandmothers.

Greenberg not only frequently writes about the struggles Orthodox feminists face, but she also founded the organization that focuses exactly on this issue. Everyone I interviewed had at least some previous knowledge of the organization known as Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA). Some knew only that they had read articles from them through the women's tefillah group Torah learning, whereas others had much more active levels of involvement in the organization. None of them recalled any other involvement of this particular women's tefillah group with JOFA though. Through my research I received a brief comment from JOFA that while they support the efforts of women's tefillah groups, they are no longer actively involved in their progress and networking even though they list resources for both women's tefillah groups and partnership minyanim throughout the world. I was not given an answer as to how frequently (if at all) that list is updated to ensure accurate information is available for women interested in participating in either of these movements. It is unfortunate because it seems as if such a list, in

conjunction with an online forum and other infrastructure for inter-group sharing and networking, could be a valuable resource for women such as those involved in the Los Angeles-based group who are struggling with transition. Such resources would allow them to seek advice and personal stories from other women who may have already faced similar challenges.

Feelings of an Uncertain Future

The overall sense that I gathered from the interviews and observations is that the community who supports the women's tefillah group in Los Angeles does not want to see it cease to exist. However, as previously noted, there also seems to be concern about how much longer this movement will be relevant for Orthodox women. Multiple people acknowledged that this worked for them for some time, but perhaps it may no longer work for the next generation of girls because of multiple factors, including the rise of partnership *minyanim* and the fact that women's tefillah groups do not exist in every city.

It seems that these feelings are where many of the changes the group has been creating originated – an effort to keep this practice relevant and connecting to today's youth. There is much hope that it will continue to become less stigmatized in the Orthodox community, but there is also much concern for achieving this, the nature of the changes being made, and who will be the ones to continue the movement here in Los Angeles. As one woman commented, "I think they do it for bat mitzvah and then they leave it. Or they do it for bat mitzvah and then realize they can have a whole egalitarian experience. I don't know its future, I don't know how long it's going to last. I think it might end up being an interesting blip… or not." Additionally, several people relayed a feeling similar to that of a glass ceiling. Young girls who have their bat mitzvah in a women's tefillah group may have a profound moment of spiritual empowerment, but then there is very little outlet for them to take the skills they have learned and use them.

"There's no next step," one woman described of this particular struggle. However she continued, "I think even given the inherent limitations it's still a really valuable thing to do." There are multiple factors why women's tefillah groups may not be relatable to future generations. Movements such as the partnership and independent minyanim may pull people away from women's tefillah groups because of the increased leadership opportunities for women. Similarly the feeling of normalcy, what some described as "boring" state, currently associated with this women's tefillah group may push a new generation away to strive for more seemingly exciting social campaigns. Yet other feminist-oriented developments, such as the appointment of the Rabba and the training of Yoetzot Halacha, may encourage and motivate today's generation of Orthodox girls to continue seeking opportunities within the Orthodox movement that allow them to feel empowered as Jewish women. It is difficult to predict how the community and the next generations of Orthodox women will continue to respond to the practice of women's tefillah groups with so many developments taking place in the United States, Israel, and other parts of the world.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is evident from this research that the Los Angeles women's tefillah group is in a period of transition. In its roughly fourteen years of practice, it has progressed to a point where it is no longer perceived by the majority of the Orthodox community in Los Angeles as such a controversial or threatening group. As a result this seems to be impacting some of the group's active participants. Some voiced feeling a sense of boredom or apathy toward the service from which they once found deep meaning. Others in the group see this as a sign of accomplishment, expressing that prayer cannot always be exciting – even for men – and that it is more important to be viewed with greater acceptance within the community. Both sides, however, believe that

there is great value and significance in ensuring that these opportunities of learning how to *layn,* reading from the Torah, and leading davening remain available for future generations of young girls. In order to sustain this commitment and enthusiasm for the larger goals of the group, its leaders continue to actively seek out ways to make the group more inviting for new participants and more engaging for active participants. These efforts have led to various changes ranging from service format, methods of outreach, and even time of day.

It is also clear that while spiritual connection is not always present for some of the more active participants, there is a deep level of appreciation for the practice as a whole. Several of the women interviewed vocalized feelings of frustration and sometimes even resentment for being denied such a tangible and personal relationship with the Torah before learning of the women's tefillah group movement. This format allows them the opportunity to take these rituals into their own hands and create new meaning and feelings of empowerment. It is also in those moments when new traditions or pieces of the service are created, such as using different voices to read the *Megillah,* when several of the participants say they feel the most energy within the group. Being that they are not considered a *minyan*, there is room for greater creative liberties to develop these pieces which set them apart from a typical Orthodox service. Being unique, rather than copying the men, is another source of motivation as well as debate within the group.

From my research it is also evident that the motivations for many of the interviewed women to participate in women's tefillah stem from a deep level of self-awareness. Feeling frustration for being denied physical access to the Torah and the knowledge of how to read it properly, many women still feel uncomfortable leaving the Orthodox community. Many of the women have and continue to think very consciously about their decision to live an Orthodox lifestyle, while knowing that it means "buying the whole package," as one woman described –

even if that means being denied certain rights and roles within Jewish rituals. Some commented that participating in this women's tefillah group allows them to in essence combine those two worlds, those personal conflict zones of feminist ideologies and religious convictions.

Based off of these findings, there are some steps that may help this group continue to grow and develop through this transitional period. First, it seems the group could benefit from strengthening its identity as a group. Now that they are more widely accepted, what will be their role within the community? Will they continue with the new format of Shabbat Shacharit, Torah and Musaf services, or will they alternate between the types of services they have? From an observation of one of their planning meetings, it was clear that great value and connection is felt in association with Simchat Torah and Purim as significant celebratory pieces in the group's calendar and identity within the community. There was much debate of whether it was appropriate to have a bat mitzvah on Purim when women make a special point to attend. It seems the functioning of the group as a whole and the appreciation of many of its participants would increase if there was a more structured strategic planning process to determine the answers to some of these questions. Having a strong framework or routine format would potentially allow for more of those moments of unique developments within the service that set them apart from the traditionally male-driven service. Encouragement of these developments may also bring more life and energy into the service, an element that would likely attract new and regular participants. Additionally a firmer framework may allow participants to improve their *layning* and *davening* skills and create a more professional-feeling service that some interviewees said was lacking for them.

Another recommendation for this group is to strengthen the core of those involved. First, members who are currently involved have voiced interest in taking on leadership roles, yet want

to be asked rather than stepping up on their own. While the group's leadership has rested on the shoulder of one or two people, there is evidence that when needed others are willing and capable of stepping up into those leadership roles. The more people who become involved and the more diversity of voice within that leadership – such as age, experience, knowledge-base, etc. – the more potential there is for growth. Fostering those relationships is a key step. The same applies for completely new participants as well, such as the next generation of girls in the community. Some steps have been made to engage this group such as the Simchat Torah open house invitation for mothers with young girls and the upcoming "teen-takeover" service. However, more steps need to follow, and once those people are brought to the service, those relationships need to be continuously cultivated to keep them interested and coming back.

A third potentially beneficial relationship to develop would be one with other women's tefillah groups. Whereas numerous factors may conflict, such as community environments, lengths of establishment, resources available, etc., there may be experiences to share that could benefit one another. If the online blog resource for women's tefillah groups truly does exist, it may be a good first step for the group's leadership to reach out to others and learn if any of them have also experienced similar transitional periods. Recognizing that the women's tefillah group movement seems to be in such a transitional period on the west coast, it may likely serve as an example for other existing women's tefillah groups, as well as other social movements finding themselves in moments of routine. If nothing else, it develops partners in other areas of the world. As a new generation of girls who have always had women's tefillah accessible to them become adults and travel out into the world, perhaps they will then know of other communities with similar resources and opportunities for prayer.

For those outside of the women's tefillah community, it is important to look at the progress and development of the group as a whole and the challenges currently facing it. Social movements are complicated and often difficult to sustain past a certain point when energy seems to fade. Most people seem to be searching for the next exciting thing to get involved in; this is even felt in conversations relating to fundraising and grant writing – what is "innovative" about that idea? What will draw people in? This is even seen through the recent rise of independent minyanim, as they allow a great deal of innovation and fresh energy to cultivate.

Social movements as a whole though are also difficult to fully evaluate, as they do not follow exact patterns and rhythms. As social theorist Elizabeth D. Hutchinson (2003) explains, "Like other human endeavors, social movements are neither completely successful nor completely unsuccessful" (p. 563). She uses the example of the feminist movement: although they have yet to completely eliminate sexism and misogeny from the world, the world has been greatly impacted as a result of their efforts. The Los Angeles women's tefillah group has also had impacts on the lives of young girls who are able to publicly celebrate their bat mitzvah in an empowering way, and the lives of older women who never had an opportunity to connect to the Torah and prayer in this way. It has not spread to other Modern Orthodox synagogues in the city, or even the state from what I can tell, but the difference it has made for these women has been significant. Only time will tell the rest of the story as the group continues to develop, and as a new generation of girls who have always had access to these rituals through women's tefillah enter into new communities. For the time being, the women's tefillah group in Los Angeles continues to have an impact on Modern Orthodox Jewish women of all ages.

Even though I was able to gather a general sense of the women's tefillah group movement in Los Angeles, this research project also brought up a number of questions. I cannot

help but wonder how the challenges experienced by this west coast group compares to one on the east coast, especially the one affiliated with Lincoln Square Synagogue which was one of the original groups. I also cannot help but wonder how this movement is perceived by Orthodox teens, both those with familiarity of it and those without. Is it just something their mothers do, a valued practice for their future, or something they do not really think twice about? It is curious to me that for a movement so intent on keeping this practice available for future generations, there seems to be little research or needs-assessment type studies to discover exactly what these young women seek for their spiritual lives. Future investigation of this topic on the west and east coast could be really helpful in continuing to understand the movement from an insider and outsider perspective. Personally, now that my eyes have been opened to the depths and complexities of this topic, this may be the end of this thesis project, but not the end of my research. It is only the beginning.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide: Interviews with Women Participants

- *What are the motivations behind separate women's tefillah groups?*
- *What are the perceptions of the women's tefillah movement within the Modern Orthodox community in Los Angeles?*
- *What feelings or associations arise from the use of the word "feminist" in relation to the women's tefillah movement?*

Questions:

1. Please tell me about your first introduction to women's tefillah.
2. At that point in time, what was your level of familiarity or background in leading prayers or reading from the Torah?
3. How often do you attend services with a women's tefillah group?
4. Why is it meaningful for you to participate in a women's tefillah group?
5. Are there things that are lacking or missing for you that you would like to see changed?
6. Is this something that you would encourage for others in your family, friends or potential future generations? Why or why not?
7. About what percentage of your friends participates in women's tefillah groups?
8. Have you faced any formal or informal opposition to your participation in a women's tefillah group? If so, what was the source and how did it affect you?
9. Have you ever felt uncomfortable speaking openly about your participation in a women's tefillah group?
10. How do you feel about the association of the word "feminist" with the practice of women's tefillah?
11. Do you consider yourself a "feminist"?
12. What types of changes, if any, would you like to see (think would be helpful) in regard to women's tefillah in Los Angeles?

Appendix B

Interview Guide: Interviews with Rabbinic Leaders of LA Orthodox Community

- *What are the perceptions of the women's tefillah movement within the Modern Orthodox community in Los Angeles?*
- *What is the need for women's tefillah in Los Angeles?*

Questions:

1. In what ways have you had experience with or learned about women's *tefillah* groups?
2. What are your perceptions of the women's *tefillah* movement as a whole?
3. What are your perceptions of the women's *tefillah* movement in LA?
4. Have you heard any interests or reactions of this movement from community members? In what ways?
5. Have you heard any interests of other "feminist" practices within Orthodox Judaism from community members? (for example: women holding text study groups, women giving a d'var torah in shul, women being responsible for saying Kaddish in shul with a minyan of men, Yoetzet Halacha, ordination of the Rabba? Etc.)
6. Do you believe there are any benefits of having women's tefillah groups in LA?
7. Do you believe there are any negative effects of having women's tefillah groups in LA?
8. Overall what would you say is your community's perception of women's tefillah groups?
9. Do you agree with this perception, and/or would you like to see it change? If so, what changes would you like to see happen?