

Edah* in Israel: Engaging Israeli Modern Orthodoxy and Partnership with *Ne'emanai Torah va-Avodah

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From *De`ot*

The Challenge of Unmarried Women: Does Defining Them as a “Problem” Meet a Social Need?

Hagit Bartov

Abstract: This article argues for the need of traditional Jewish community to rethink the ways it regards the status of single women, understanding that for many “singleness” is not a temporary condition. This recognition has implications for both ritual and the traditional social structure of the observant Jewish community.

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Rabbi Saul J. Berman

For the past four years *Edah* has engaged in programming in Israel with a number of Israeli Religious Zionist organizations that share *Edah's* ideals of Modern Orthodoxy. During *Hol ha-Mo'ed Sukkot* of 2001 our Jerusalem Conference was attended by over 700 people. The following year, 800 people attended a similar one-day conference, and an additional 34,000 people around the world participated through our webcast of the proceedings. During *Hag ha-Sukkot* of 2004, we sponsored a series of nine evening programs spread throughout Israel, at which both American and Israeli scholars and rabbis spoke on issues of contemporary religious, ideological and ethical concerns. Over 1,000 people participated in these special evenings.

Edah initiated these programs in 2001 in a simple desire to show support for Israel and to promote North American Jewish tourism to Israel at the height of the *intifada*, when few were traveling there. The partnership was originally formed with *KeLavi Yakum* and its constituent organizations, *Kibbutz HaDati* and its yeshiva at Ma'aleh Gilboa, *Bet Morasha* of Jerusalem, Bar-Ilan University and *Kolech*.

Since then we are happy to announce that *Itim* and *Ne'emanai Torah va-Avodah* have joined this group.

The real long-term benefits to Modern Orthodoxy and the Jewish People of this cooperative venture are clear: An intense linkage between the North American and the Israeli Modern Orthodox communities breaks down isolation and demonstrates the enormous intellectual power of our community. As a result of this partnership, we have significantly increased the number of Israeli participants and presenters at the Biennial *Edah* Conference in New York and our lecture series conducted by *Edah* at the Jewish Community Center of Manhattan. Videotapes of the Israeli conference presentations are posted on *Edah's* website (www.Edah.org), which gets over 300,000 clicks a month, and are amongst the most frequently visited elements at the site.

Second, as communities we share many strengths and weaknesses, and learn from each other's experiences. We are now engaged in planning the Joint Leadership Conference where we will address a

single issue faced by the North American and the Israeli communities. Through intense preparation and discussion, we hope to achieve a consensus for a single approach that can be implemented in both communities.

Third, we have become deeply aware of the richness of published thought in each of the communities. Thus far, this material has not been easily available across linguistic boundaries. This awareness has led us to the initiation of a joint venture between *The Edah Journal* and *Ne'emei Torah va-Avodah*, the publishers of *De'ot*. Beginning with this issue *The Edah Journal* will publish a regular flow of outstanding articles translated from the pages of *De'ot*, while *De'ot* will publish exceptional articles translated from *The Edah Journal*. Our plans call for making entire issues of *De'ot* available to English readers on our website and to publish annually a joint issue of both journals that would include the

best thought and scholarship that has appeared in the preceding year.

Edah's partnership with Modern Orthodox leaders in Israel and the cross-fertilization of ideas enrich our communities. The North American Modern Orthodox community will be able to draw more effectively on the Torah and communal wisdom of our Israeli counterparts, and they will more easily be able to draw on ours. Modern Orthodox Israelis are eager to learn from our community's experience with American democracy, tolerance and separation of church and state. We will gain from the Israeli community's experience in the formation of a new and vital Jewish culture. And the richness of the exchange for the evolving spiritual life of both communities may outweigh all of the other benefits.

We invite you to join in this rich conversation.



***Ne'emanai Torah va-Avodah:* Preserving the Values of Religious Zionism**

Moshe Tur-Paz

The fusion of *Torah* and *avodah* was a fundamental premise of the Religious Zionist movement whose founders regarded *halakhab* as dynamic. They believed that Judaism's traditional values provide a basis for the establishment of a modern society in the Land of Israel. The integration of observant citizens in all walks of life in the newly established State was essential to that vision

In recent years some leaders of the religious community have advocated a policy of isolation and seclusion, particularly in social and educational matters. This policy widens the gaps between traditional and secular communities. If embraced by our society, it would effectively deny religious Jews integration into modern Israel and threaten the delicate fabric of cooperation that has been patiently woven between religious and non-religious Israelis.

Ne'emanai Torah va-Avodah was founded in 1978 in response to this threat. We are socially and ideologically oriented and are intentionally not affiliated with any political party. They represent different segments of the population, who for the sake of our cause put political issues aside. Through

Ne'emanai Torah va-Avodah, we concentrate on questions of modern observance, Jewish identity in a modern state, and issues that are critical to the internal workings of Israeli society.

Ne'emanai Torah va-Avodah aims to achieve its goals through a wide range of scholarship and programming. The following are the titles of some of our recent Hebrew publications:

- Women as Public Figures
- The Change through Generations in How *Halakhab* Views Women
- How Judaism Views Secular Studies
- Studying Torah Versus Army Service
- Authority of *Halakhab* as Represented by Rabbis vs. the Free Will of Observant Jews
- Recruiting Women into the Army
- The Proper Relationship with Our Arab Neighbors

Our journal, *De'ot*, is published three times a year and explores topics that are burning issues within the religious community. With high quality writing, *De'ot* is a popular journal that presents authors with

differing points of view. There are few publications of equal standing that offer a platform for such pluralistic opinions. *De`ot* is mailed to members, subscribers, public personalities, *yeshivot*, libraries and institutions of higher learning.

Ne`emanei Torah va-Avodah runs parlor meetings, seminars and study groups, and weekend seminars for older circles. Separate programs for singles and younger groups provide an opportunity for dialogue on many important topics. Some of the subjects discussed have been: conversion and the status of converts, *agunot*, *halakhab*, Judaism and the media, relationships between observant and non-observant Jews, and ethics in time of war.

Here is a partial listing of our current programs:

- **The Charles Liebman “Beit Midrash Re`im,”** the official *Bet Midrash* of *Ne`emanei Torah va-Avodah*, is on its way. Approximately thirty men and women are devoting their time to study *gemara* and Jewish intellectual history, in study groups and classes for four hours every Friday. The atmosphere is wonderful and the study is enjoyable and productive.
- ***Shiurim* at Ohel Nehama Synagogue in Jerusalem** have resumed every Monday evening. We continue to discuss issues of *halakhab* and State, religion and ethics, tradition and modernity.

- **2004 Members Meeting** will convene on December 30, 2004 to evaluate activity for the past year.
- **A *Shabbat Iyun* on “Halakhic Questions in the Modern State”** will be held on *Shabbat, Parashat Vayechi* at Shefayim Guesthouse. The inter-organizational cooperation on *Shabbat* proved to be successful (following *Shabbat Parashat Noach* with ‘*Kolech*’). This *Shabbat Iyun* will be in cooperation with the organization, Mosaica.
- ***De`ot***, published by *Ne`emanei Torah va-Avodah* and *Mercaz Ya`akov Herzog*, has now concluded seven years in which *De`ot* was issued every four to five months. We have recently concluded an agreement with *Edah* to translate and exchange articles regularly with *The Edah Journal*.
- **Essays** written by the board members of the movement were published recently in various media. Some are published in the website of *Ne`emanei Torah va-Avodah* (www.toravoda.org.il) under the title, ‘*Emdo?*’.
- **The Be`er Sheva Branch** has begun. The branch activities will take place primarily at the campus of Be`er Sheva University. Members are invited to open new branches at their place of residence.

More information about *Ne`emanei Torah va-Avodah* can be found in our website: www.toravoda.org.il or at our offices at 972 2 5611761.

The Challenge of Unmarried Women: Does Defining Them as a “Problem” Meet a Social Need?*

Hagit Bartov

Author’s note:

In his recent book, A Tale of Love and Darkness, Amos Oz wrote:

To seek the heart of a story in the space between the work and its author is a mistake: it makes better sense to search not in the expanse between the writing and writer but in the expanse between the writing and reader. ...Not that there is nothing worth seeking between the text and the author—there is a place for biographical research, and gossip itself has a certain sweetness.... But the pleasures of gossip are merely pink cotton candy larded into an entire mountain of sugar. (Pp. 38-39)

Amos Oz suggests that the reader seize the opportunity to examine a story via one’s inner world. The encounter between the story’s protagonists and that inner world can serve to ease loneliness and pain. I want to use this master writer’s observation to clarify something about what I’ve written here. I am a single woman, a fact that may lead many, perhaps justifiably, to wonder about the expanse between the writing and the writer. But I invite my readers to seize the opportunity to search the expanse between the written words and their own inner worlds, as Amos Oz goes on to say:

*Do not ask...what is going on with this author.
Ask yourself; ask about yourself.
And you may keep the answer to yourself. (P. 40.)*

What follows is neither a literary work nor a learned academic study. It is, rather, an exposition of some thoughts and ideas that have occupied me in recent years; and I believe they can provide some insights regarding religious society.

In recent years, the question of unmarried women** has preoccupied the religious community. Symposia abound at which educators and rabbis ask themselves, “Where have we gone wrong?” “How do we account for the large number of single men and women in our community?” And, most importantly, “How do we solve ‘the problem’?” It is important to note at the outset that many of these inquiries are concerned specifically with unmarried women, a point I will return to later. And the inquiries are a phenomenon associated with the religious community. I have encountered no examination of the question on the part of secular educators, even though female bachelorhood is proportionately no less characteristic of the secular community. It is clear that these inquiries originally grew out of the religious conception of marriage and family life as something sacred; but it seems to me that the proliferation of the inquiries, and the sense of foreboding that emanates from them, require a deeper explanation. What is it about this issue that so disturbs religious society?

On the surface, these symposia appear to be concerned about the well-being of unmarried women, living bereft of love and children. As a practical matter, however, little is said about the lives of these women and their multifaceted implications. The first, perhaps only, person to consider such matters was Hefzibah Shatul, who presented, at the second “*Kolekib*” conference (Summer 2001), a study she had conducted of single women in Jerusalem;

the study was later published in *De`ot 11 (Elul 2001)*. Shatul defined the “process of *hitranqut*” (“bachelorization”) that women undergo during their unmarried years, as they grapple with the expectation of religious society, internalized as part of their education: “a woman needs to marry young.”

One interviewee remarks to Shatul:

In invitations to social events and similar occasions, they don’t treat you as an independent adult until you’re married. This is expressed at holiday times, when they don’t pick up a phone to wish you happy holiday. It is enough to telephone the family; that covers you as well.

And further:

...If you want to talk about symbolism, I decided this year that in anticipation of next Hanukkah I would buy a Hanukkah *menorah*. Until now, I didn’t have my own *menorah*; I’d light candles here or there and I didn’t take great pains to light, since my father had me in mind [when he lit his candles]. But this year I said “there’s no alternative; this isn’t such a temporary situation; I’m not under my father’s protection; this is now my life and I don’t live suspended in air.”

As Shatul explained in that article, these quotations evidence society’s attitude toward the meaning of unmarried women’s lives: even if they have passed

the age of thirty, they are still regarded as appendages of their parents; even if they lead rich personal lives with successful careers, advanced academic degrees, or significant accomplishment in Jewish learning, they are regarded as children. Similarly, many single women see themselves the same way: they are cautious about building independent religious lives, just as they are cautious about establishing their physical homes. One interviewee, for example, accounts in that way for avoiding the purchase of a washing machine. The single woman internalizes the social concept that a woman does not become a woman until she marries and establishes her home. Society's voice becomes an inner, critical voice, inducing a deep sense of something missing.

“A single woman internalizes the social concept that a woman does not become a woman until she marries and establishes her home.”

What interests me is why religious society has this need (conscious or not) to relate to single women as children rather than as independent players within society. In a certain sense, *halakhab* treats women in general as children, excluding them, for example, from being counted in a prayer quorum, just as children are excluded. Nevertheless, married women attain an aura of maturity through their husbands while single women, lacking a “maturing” factor,

remain children in society's eyes.

Whom Are We Worried About?

I want to examine the latent meaning of the inquiries and symposia concerning the question of single women. Do they express genuine concern about the well-being of these women, or might the concern really be about the stability of society? For if society were primarily concerned about the contentment of women, it would rejoice with them in any decision that enhanced that contentment: living together without marriage (and finding ways to resolve the associated halakhic issues), single motherhood, or independent life with no partner or children, tending to one's professional life or personal spiritual development. “Contentment” is a subjective concept, flowing from each individual's character and needs. It seems to me that not one of these symposia offers alternative choices such as these; instead, all try to steer unmarried women into choosing a single, exclusive version of “contentment”—namely, marriage.

What is it, then, that troubles religious society (and, in many ways, Israeli society as a whole)? I would argue that, in the eyes of religious society, a woman who is not tied to a family unit disrupts the social order, the sexual order, and the religious order and thereby threatens the stability of society. It is that problem that preoccupies the educators and rabbis who deal with this issue.

Challenging the Social Order

The social philosopher Friedrich Engels argued that the family is a tool used by society to preserve the existing social order. Accordingly, the existence of the family is in the interests of the ruling class, which seeks to preserve its dominance over society and the subservience of society's members to the rules and laws that promote the existing social order.¹

In a recent article in *Devarim* (published by *Mercaz Ya'akov Herzog*), Ariel Picker noted that unmarried, religious young men and women tend to pursue diverse religious and spiritual opportunities, while married couples tend to seek stability and conformity.²

“Unmarried young men and women tend to pursue diverse religious and spiritual opportunities, while married couples seek stability and conformity.”

This implies that an unmarried person threatens the stability of society, for he or she derives less benefit from submission to its rules. He has less need for communal institutions—such as those related to education, society, or religion—and he can therefore challenge the arrangements on which those institutions are grounded.

But it appears that unmarried women represent even

more of a threat to society than do unmarried men. The feminist critique argued that while the family may regulate both spouses, transforming them into an efficient and submissive component of society, the family as a patriarchal institution in fact maintains the woman's inferior position in society: the wife is clearly tied to domestic tasks and to responsibility for the private aspects of life rather than the public aspects that society regards as central.

The complex feminist analysis of the bourgeois distinction between the private and the public, and the multi-faceted implications of that distinction, are beyond the scope of this article. For present purposes, it is important to note only that a woman who is not directly tied to a conventional family unit disturbs the existing social order and challenges the power relationships within it. As we saw in the remarks of the interviewees quoted earlier, religious society does not know how to relate to a woman alone—how, for example, to invite her to family events—and it has difficulty in situating those women who depart from the adage “his wife is his household”: to what household, if any, does such a woman belong?

One of the family's functions is to order and regulate sexual relations. In the religious world, sexual life is termed “family life,” and it is regulated by the laws of *niddah*, requiring separation of husband and wife

during menstrual impurity. Unmarried women raise a concern about impairing the sexual order and, as a result, about undermining both *halakhab* and society.

Undermining the Religious Order

The most interesting question in this context is that of the religious order. Samuel Heilman, an American sociologist and Orthodox Jew, conducted an anthropological study of a Modern Orthodox congregation in the United States. In his book, *Synagogue Life*, he argues that a woman's path to status within the synagogue, and thence in the community, runs via her husband. The benefits of belonging to a community and achieving status within it are attained by a woman through her husband, who bears the obligation of public worship and other public religious rituals. Moreover, he argues, this arrangement binds the couple together and forges them into a single social unit.³ The fact that men are the focus of Jewish congregational ritual in both synagogue and home applies as well with respect to religious society in Israel, where men act on behalf of their wives (and their daughters or their mothers) in pronouncing various blessings.

The comments made by Shatul's interviewee in recounting her decision to purchase her own Hanukkah *menorah* this year evidence an unmarried woman's recognition that her bachelorhood is not merely a brief interval between her father's home and her husband's. No longer passively biding her

time, this woman has decided to embark on an active religious life, symbolized by the purchase of a Hanukkah *menorah*.

"Some women recognize that their bachelorhood is not merely a brief interval between their fathers' homes and their husbands'."

This is part of the process of bachelorization, as Shatul terms it, a process that compels religious women to change the conventional religious order. In contrast to the accepted religious norm, under which women refrain from kindling Hanukkah lights (even though *halakhab* permits them to light), a religious single woman is compelled to kindle the lights herself in order to celebrate the holiday more fully. Similarly, unmarried women must themselves recite *Kiddush* at the start of the Sabbath or *Havdalah* at its conclusion and take upon themselves other obligations that men typically discharge on behalf of their wives, daughters, or mothers. I use the term "compelled" because for many women, the choice flows not from religious feminist notions but simply from the reality of their lives.

Nevertheless, this reality forges a new religious order. Religious rituals become part of women's religious and personal lives, without male involvement. And so, as a result of the life-situation of single women—and not necessarily out of a rebellious or critical stance—the conventional

ordering of religious life is shaken, and new possibilities emerge for feminine religious expression.

“If You’re a Feminist You Must Be Unmarried”

The familiar feminist slogan that “the personal is the political” expresses the idea that personal experience is also a political matter. Feminist thought proceeds from personal experience to political insight. Similarly, religious single women are likely to test their personal life-experiences against religious society’s conventional religious norms and challenge the force of those norms. The need to perform religious rituals on their own leads many women to ask why that should not be the accepted practice throughout religious society. The religious experiences of single women become an integral part of their religious world, something they want to preserve even in the absence of compulsion.

It thus appears that the lives of single women establish, at the very heart of religious society, an alternative in which women lead independent religious lives. That alternative is problematic for the religious establishment, as it grapples with the tendency to involve women in religious rituals.

“The proliferation of unmarried women is often termed, ‘the problem of unmarried women.’”

In the many analyses of this issue within the religious community, the proliferation of unmarried women is

often termed (both in titles and in the course of discussion) “the problem of unmarried women.” Pejoratively designating the phenomenon a “problem” distances these women from religious society and makes their lives into something irrelevant to that society. The negative designation implies an equation: an unmarried woman = a woman who says *Kiddush* = a problem; and that equation, in turn, deters women from consciously choosing an independent religious life, for no one wants to be equated to a “problem” or regarded simply as “a woman alone.” Labeling unmarried life as somehow problematic marginalizes the widespread phenomenon of women leading independent religious lives and makes it into something transient. And treating unmarried women as children similarly relegates them to irrelevance for “mature” married women.

It may be as well that the emphasis on unmarried women’s lack of contentment reinforces the equation of marriage with contentment and confirms the institution of marriage as the sole alternative. But that disregards the limitations on human contentment, limitations that exist as well—perhaps especially—within married life.⁴

I do not claim that the lives of unmarried women are free of frustration and inner pain. As noted, unmarried women internalize the values of the society of which they form a part; and many crave the societal validation that comes with a wedding

and the expected contentment of married life. But it must be understood that we are talking here not of each individual unmarried woman's personal situation but of a social phenomenon having aspects that are important for the entire community of women.

The social forces that distrust—consciously or not—all change in society's defining relationships thereby deny society, and the women within it, the possibility of benefiting constructively from perspectives that can be offered by unmarried life. The phenomenon of unmarried women maintaining a religious way of life that does not depend upon a man embodies both a challenge and an opportunity for society in general—or, at least, for that segment of society seeking social legitimization for the equal involvement of women in public and private Jewish life.

Terming unmarried women a “problem” diminishes the strength of that alternative and reconfirms the existing, “non-problematic” religious order. That

fact, it seems to me, weakens the efforts being made in some religious circles to find ways to broaden women's religious activity. It is important, therefore, to find new ways of considering the subject of unmarried women, seeing in it a complex phenomenon, some aspects of which can offer lessons for religious society, opening new horizons and revealing possibilities implicit in our Jewish world.

In one of her poems, Leah Goldberg considers the self-revelation undergone by a woman precisely when she is alone. One passage reads:

Were you to seek me now,
You'd not recognize your yesterdays—
I move toward myself
With a face that you sought in vain
When I moved toward you

Borrowing that image, one might say that unmarried women moving toward themselves find the paths that we sought in vain.

NOTES

* Translation by Joel Linsider from *De`ot 17*, Spring 2004.

**The Hebrew word here translated as “unmarried woman” or “single woman” has the specific meaning of “never-married woman”; in contrast to the English terms, it does not encompass widows or divorcees, and the translation should not be taken to extend the reach of the author’s observations. (A more precise translation might be “bachelorette,” but that term is objectionable on other obvious grounds.)—

translator’s note

¹ See Fredrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Chicago, 1902)

² Ariel Picker, “Family and Cohabitation in Our Times” (Hebrew), in *Devarim—the Many Faces of Judaism*

³ See Samuel C. Heilman, *Synagogue Life*, 1979, p. 71.

⁴ See Amit Hazzan, “The Silent Majority” (Hebrew), *De`ot 16* (Sivan 2003), pp. 42-43 (Hebrew) *De`ot 16* (Sivan 2003), pp.42-43.