How and Why I Became a Hasidic Feminist



My story from radical feminist to Hasidic feminist begins where most feminist stories do: a march.

In the spring of 2010, as a freshman in college, I joined some friends at a feminist march in New York City protesting sexual violence. The idea of the march was to wear whatever clothing one wanted (even if that meant none) to make the statement that a woman's clothing has nothing to do with being a victim of sexual assault. I remember watching the marchers with a detached, almost unreal feeling: How is walking around naked emblematic of feminism's success? Am I the only one missing something here?

This moment of the Emperor's New Clothes began a process over the following year in which I studied feminism as both an ardent believer and a cautious skeptic. I felt that the feminist movement had accomplished essential changes for women—the right to vote, to own property, to have bodily autonomy, and political representation, to name a few. But regarding a woman's social role, I was confused as to how human nature, biological instincts, and a woman's reproductive role in preserving the species could be vilified, explained away, or "dismantled" by feminist thinkers.

Concurrent with these philosophical concerns, I was also presented with a more existential one. As I returned to college for my sophomore year, I fell out with my peer group and was feeling quite adrift. In October, I received a call from my father that my grandfather, who had been sick for many years, had passed away. Eerily, the previous night I had dreamt that someone in my family had died and afterwards I fell into a deep, black sleep, oversleeping my alarm by two hours. I woke up disoriented but tried to brush it off. After the call from my father, the dream rushed back to me. At that moment, for the first time in my life, the realization crystallized within me that there is more to this world than we can fathom using human intellect alone.

Alongside this realization, G-d had begun my journey toward Judaism that semester. After attending a BBQ at Hillel, I received an email offering me a free trip to Israel on Birthright. As a teenager with wanderlust, I was not going to decline. During the Shabbos afternoon of our trip, I walked with a Religious Zionist woman who shared a very basic introduction to a woman's role in Judaism. It was all so new to me, and what I sensed from her comments was that something very fresh about womanhood was awaiting my discovery. During our trip to Tzfat, in a little artists' gallery, I heard the name "Chava"—meaning Mother of All Life—for the first time. I knew it was meant to be my name.

I spent my last two years of college studying Judaism and feminism with a constant eye to their disagreement and synthesis. I wrote a senior thesis called *The Possibility of an Orthodox Jewish Feminism: The Empowerment of Body and Soul*. (My thesis advisor, a Black feminist activist, said my chapter on *shomer negiah*—guarding one's touch, especially in dating—kept her up all night doubting her past relationships.) By the time I graduated college, I was keeping Shabbos and kosher, so I headed off to Israel to enroll in a seminary for the newly religious.

After months of trying different seminaries in the non-Hasidic world, I struggled to find my place. I saw brilliant, sincere, professional women who were deeply and passionately religious, but the community's emphasis seemed to revolve solely around men's Torah study. I was finding my place as a Jew, but not as a feminist.

A few weeks later, a horrific terrorist attack in the Har Nof neighborhood of Jerusalem—directly across the street from my seminary dorm—left me sleepless with fear. I decided to head back to Tzfat. There, I was introduced to Chabad Chassidus for the first time. I began learning the *maamarim*– Hasidic discourses– of the Alter Rebbe, R. Shneur Zalman, the first Chabad Rebbe, and I fell in love. His use of interwoven themes, associative language, and existential questions strangely reminded me of the poetics of feminist theory I had loved in college. The relationship between the feminine and messianism in Chabad Chassidus, as well as the very public role of Chabad women in religious life, intrigued me.

Within a few years, I was a full-fledged Lubavitcher and I eventually worked for an Ivy League Chabad House as a teacher and program director. There I realized my academic interest in feminism and Judaism was not over. I saw that being a campus Chabad Rebbetzin, while interesting and stimulating, would not provide me much time for research, writing, and publishing. I was accepted to a PhD program in Religion the same month I met my future husband. Over the last six years, I got married, had three children, and completed a PhD with a dissertation entitled *The Hasidic Face of Feminism: Gender Between Modernity and Mysticism in Chabad-Lubavitch*.

Hasidic Feminism is less a movement than a way for me to describe my identity and life trajectory, but I am hopeful that my research will introduce my questions and discoveries to others. Perhaps together we can develop a "Hasidic Feminism" that can stand on its own.

'The Rebbe is the Biggest Feminist'

"You know, after all, that there are no women Hasidim, right?" a Ger Hasidic woman asked the women she was teaching who laughed in response. "There are only daughters of Hasidim and wives of Hasidim."

This anecdote from Tamar El-Or's book, *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and Their World*, shows how these women's experience of Hasidism, and Jewish education in general, is mediated by their husbands, fathers, and rabbis. Although every society has its leaders and its laypeople, categorically, women do not receive their Hasidic identity as Lubavitchers through the channel of a male relative. In fact, quite the opposite: Several times a year during the Rebbe's leadership, the large men's section of 770 Eastern Parkway, the Rebbe's synagogue, would be emptied for the women to attend talks tailored to the unique role and mission of Jewish women. Instead of listening from the balconies, the women would flood into the downstairs room to hear words of Torah directly from the Rebbe. The Rebbe felt that Judaism could only be sustained by women: First, by bringing Jewish children into the world, and second, by their passion and investment in transmitting the teachings and values of Judaism to another generation—whether that is their own children or assimilated Jews beyond their family.

To empower women to achieve this goal, he instituted a number of directives.

The Rebbe encouraged women's Torah study in every area of the Jewish canon, including the Oral Torah. (See "On the Obligation of Jewish Women in Chinuch and in Limud HaTorah," Shabbos Parshas Emor, Erev Lag B'Omer 1990)

He imbued Chabad women with the passion for Jewish outreach and directed them to be community leaders, influencers, and educators.

He introduced a directive to have large families, thus intensifying the Chabad community's investment in home and family life, a woman's realm of influence.

The Rebbe called upon women to use their voices as writers, professionals, organizers, and *shluchos*. In one memorable private audience, Diane Abrams, the wife of the New York attorney general, herself an accomplished lawyer, was listening to the Rebbe speak with her husband, when the Rebbe turned to her and said, "This is the time of Women's Liberation, what do you think? Surely, you have an opinion on this?"

These are the "Hasidic feminist" teachings of the Rebbe. No, he is not a feminist in the sense that the liberal feminist movement has sought to dismantle a woman's traditional role and remove all gendered barriers to her attainment of men's social position. Rather, I use this term "Hasidic feminism" filtered through the Rebbe's teachings as a way to finally confront the paradox of feminism from my youth: How do we open up women's role in society to one of great influence and authority, where woman have a clear, audible voice, and can grow in their professional, religious and personal lives, while *still* valuing all of the "traditional" aspects of womanhood that are essential for the well-being of our littlest members of society?

The Rebbe turns this question on its head by saying that a woman's essential connection to G-d is one that supersedes all of the masculine focus on externalities, and thus, she is the one who ultimately draws *kavod*—honor—into the world. It is through her investment in the very materiality of the world that it will become a home for G-d. When she rides the contemporary expansion of opportunities for women with a constant focus on bringing G-d into every place, she reveals the true inner reality of the world, whether that is in a classroom, conference room, or her own kitchen.

Naftali Loewenthal, a scholar of Hasidism, has made this claim by arguing that Chabad's emphasis on the mystical "Lower Unity", in which God's oneness is found in the material world, has made a woman's domestic and maternal role of great religious significance. The material world, therefore, in a Chabad Hasidic worldview is at the core of one's divine service and has the potential for the greatest religious impact. This is a realm, not only available to women but what has always been primarily associated with women.

Between Modernity and Mysticism, I Found a New Feminism

The morning I left the house to finish this article, I had to peel a one-year-old from my leg, make sure the challah dough was kneaded and rising, reassure my husband that I would be back in time for him to leave for work, and fit in grocery shopping and two Amazon returns.

The details of what it means to live as an empowered Hasidic woman, integrating work outside the home with being the CEO of the domestic sphere, comes down to everyday choices, honoring my own desires, and continually learning the Torah of the Rebbe to clarify my path forward.

Many early feminists, and some women today, choose not to have children or home life because of the sheer impossibility at times of this balancing act. But as Jewish women, we know we have the awesome responsibility to perpetuate our faith and peoplehood that has endured for thousands of years. As we come close to the ultimate redemption, the age where the voice of the kallah will be heard in the alleyways of Jerusalem, along with the chosson, it is the time of ultimate integration of below and above, tradition and innovation, private and public. It is time for the righteous women of our generation to herald the great shofar blast.

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