Meaning and Authenticity in a Contradictory World: Thoughts on Spirituality, Modern Orthodoxy, and Meaning

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It’s 11:45 P.M. I am standing in front of the sink, washing individual leaves of Swiss chard, holding each leaf up to the light to check for the creepy-crawlies that come attached to my farm share’s local organic produce. My alarm is set to go off in exactly seven hours; in eight hours, I will be en route to work. Behind me, yams boil away on the stove for my 9-month-old daughter, who is going to wake up every two hours between now and then as her first teeth poke through. But I am determined to get all the produce bug-free, because I’m trying to get a jump on Shabbat.

It’s Tuesday.

How did I get here? It’s a question that crosses my mind every day. How did a feminist, culturally affiliated Ashkenazic Jew from small-town Connecticut —by way of Northeastern University, Harvard Divinity School, Hebrew University, a backpacking jaunt through Europe, and a new-age kibbutz—end up meticulously checking chard in a Sephardic Modern Orthodox home?

The journey may actually be less mysterious than it seems. Distilled, it comes down to a love for Jewish texts, a sense of responsibility to history, and, perhaps, a “religion gene” that skipped two generations.

I decided to compare notes with other women in my demographic about their own Jewish journeys, to see if any themes would emerge. I recruited five women between the ages of 26 and 32 for a mini study. All the women are married, and all but one currently live in the Pacific Northwest. Three identify as Ashkenazic, two as Sephardic. One converted as an adult. I asked them the following questions:

• Please describe your journey to Modern Orthodoxy (e.g., how were you raised? What appealed to you about a more observant lifestyle?).
• What do you value most about a Modern Orthodox lifestyle?
• What do you find most challenging? (I.e., niddah, tseniut, synagogue participation, family opposition, and so forth)
• In what way(s) would you like to see Modern Orthodoxy change or grow?

The answers were more diverse than I expected, but indeed, certain commonalities emerged.

I. The Jewish Journey

I’ll start with an abridged version of my own story.

As a participant on myriad Jewish service trips and programs, I have answered the ubiquitous “Jewish journey” question more than once. Above all, my strong Jewish identification comes down to a positive relationship with Judaism growing up. Raised in a small Reform congregation, I looked to my temple friends as allies, my rabbi as a mentor, and my Jewish side of the family—my mother’s—as the Jewish holiday fun-makers. At the same time, attempts throughout high school to help me find Christ, a strong suggestion by a teacher to reconsider my priorities when I failed to turn in an assignment the day after Yom Kippur, and a number of hurtful incidents forced me to think critically about who I am. I needed to answer to this inherited identity.

As a teen, these experiences were coupled with my first trip to Israel. It was there that I experienced Shabbat fully for the first time, with an American ba’al teshuvah couple that took my group in for a weekend. Instead of finding Shabbat oppressive or backwards, as I had always imagined it to be, it was calming and liberating. Although I spurned traditional observance for years to come, those 25 hours in 1998 softened my stance toward Orthodoxy and have stayed with me to

this day.

A third strand entered the picture in college. When I sat down in my first class of freshman year—“Understanding the Bible”—I began to fall in love with religious studies. This led me to graduate school, where I immersed myself in Biblical studies, Hebrew, Midrash, and folklore. Inspired by my ancestors’ words on the parchment, I found leading an otherwise non-observant life incongruous. I began attending a Modern Orthodox, partnership minyan, where the participants—all my age, mostly single— showed up (shockingly) of their own volition. They were there for tradition. They were there for God. They were not there out of guilt or obligation to another person. They were enthusiastic. They didn’t construe the Torah’s meaning to their own liking, yet the community remained progressive and engaged with the secular world. It seemed to me the way Judaism should be.

Still, only when I met my husband another few years later did I feel that I had the support and strength to make the leap into full-time observance. I appreciate the structure it gives my life, the moral behavior it commands, the thoughtfulness it requires. I feel like I make better decisions. Furthermore, I feel an obligation to history. I am a link in a long, durable, but endangered chain of tradition, and in my greatest moments of challenge with observance, my commitment comes down to this.

Of the four out of five women I surveyed who were born Jewish, all had a positive relationship to Judaism growing up. Three—all Ashkenazic, I should mention—shared the element of a “spiritual awakening” similar to my first encounter with Shabbat in Israel.

One subject shared her experience of growing up staunchly Reform and encountering observance practically by accident:

During winter break of my freshman year [of college], I went on the Hillel Birthright Israel trip. Surprisingly, this was my first true exposure to the concepts of kashruth and Shabbat. These laws actually excited me. I felt like for so long I had been looking for more and more in Judaism, and finally here it was! How could this have been kept from me for so long? Celebrating Shabbat brought me in touch with my soul like nothing ever had…

Once I made the decision that as a Jew I couldn’t get in a car with good conscience on Shabbat, there was no way I would put the action off for a later date. At that moment of realization, Shabbat became a way of life. Once I learned the beauty of tsanua, I subconsciously made the decision to put a skirt on every

morning. It wasn't until two months later that I realized I wasn't wearing pants any more. Within a year and a half, I was externally a Torah-observant Jew.

Another woman encountered observance upon joining NCSY as a teenager. She says, "I saw peers who were leading a life that seemed more fulfilling and seemed more meaningful…The life I was leading was very shallow…[There was] so much more sense of purpose and a sense of happiness that went along with that."

Yet another warmed to a religious lifestyle through a personal connection:

As a teenager in high school, my best friend's family started becoming more religious and decided to send her to a religious high school. In an effort to continue our friendship and see her regularly, I started spending Shabbat with her and her family. She would teach me about what she was learning in school, and we would discuss the deeper aspects of Judaism together. The combination of being opened up to a deeper, more spiritual world of Judaism, and the beauty of Shabbat I observed in her home and in the religious community made me decide to become more religious.

Casual conversations I've had outside of this small study have indicated similar paths to observance. Shabbat is almost exclusively a turning point, and while we take it for granted, it is notable that the "beauty of Shabbat," rather than one of the many other elements of Jewish observance, is so frequently cited as a gateway to observance.
Interestingly, my Sephardic subjects tended to relate to Jewish observance on a more cerebral level. One, who was raised in a "moderately observant" home, reported:

I just wanted to learn—initially I just wanted access to classical Jewish text—and from learning I gleaned what I could and started to construct a life of observance of mitzvoth…I can't necessarily call them "steps," because I didn't climb them one at a time, nor all at once. I dabbled here and there over the course of five years.

Another tried out various denominations before settling on one that exemplified a satisfactory level of consistency:

I visited various Modern Orthodox communities around the city and was very drawn to the educational opportunities (classes on Shabbat) and seemingly more uniform observance level within those communities. I also became increasingly frustrated by what I felt was a "pick and choose" mentality of Jewish observance in my Conservative congregation and how tikkun olam seemed to become its sole

strategy of engaging its congregants.

Neither of these women cited the beauty of Shabbat or a spiritual awakening as part of their main narrative. For them, like me, observance has to do with a pull toward the “right” kind of Jewish observance. While the Ashkenazic-Sephardic split is curious, I venture to suggest that this is due to historical, stylistic, and vocabulary differences. But that is for another study.

II. The Value of Modern Orthodoxy

When it comes to what they value most about a Modern Orthodox lifestyle, two themes emerged among my subjects: meaningfulness and authenticity. Maintaining an observant life in the midst of the world at large provides grounding and a moral compass, and it eliminates the contradictions of the more liberal denominations. “I know that there are expectations I set for myself based on mitzvos,” said one woman. “I don’t have to change my entire life plan based on society.”

One woman particularly enjoys finding deeper spiritual dimensions of the secular world, particularly in the realm of pop culture and TV. Technology, she believes, was brought down by Hashem at this point in time to better understand the world. “I really enjoy the balance of Modern Orthodoxy and the challenge of bringing out the Godliness in the seemingly mundane things of modern life,” she wrote. “Modern Orthodoxy makes you really think and evaluate what you are doing and why—for both secular and religious things.”

She continues:

I don’t believe in being shut off from society, but rather I see the role of Jews as to elevate secular society. The only way to do that is to understand secular society and then give them a deeper understanding of what is really going on based on the Torah…For example, the Internet and Facebook have proven what the Hafetz Hayyim has been saying for years, which is that lashon (tov or ra) has a real effect and cannot be taken back easily. Modern Orthodoxy allows for us to delve into the modern world and see in a real way many of the theoretical or esoteric concepts that the Torah has been teaching for years.

The two women, and myself, who worked through the denominations before finding a home in Modern Orthodoxy, focus on the authenticity of the movement. “I find that a lot of the other forms of Judaism are really created by man,” wrote one. “Men have taken the traditions they enjoy about the ‘Judaism of their ancestors’ and transformed them into whatever makes them feel good in the

moment. I believe that living an observant lifestyle is living a religion created by God, rather than man."

Another expressed her disillusionment with the Reform and Conservative approaches to Jewish continuity and the authority of halakha:

The problem is that halakha is like the Constitution of the United States. It came to us a long time ago; some of its tenets don't make much sense now and a few of those tenets are seen as not applicable in this time. Others are studied by scholarly experts that tell us how they apply in our modern times. Without the Constitution we will crumble as a nation; by rejecting and fiddling with halakah the Jewish people's future is similarly threatened. I don't think expecting less of Jews while simultaneously trying to make them more "Jewish" via its institutions that promote a hollow tradition is a logical thing to do…

Similarly, she rejects a closed, ultra-Orthodox approach that "views the world as a place that is scary and bad and has the very lowest of expectations and confidence in its followers." Modern Orthodoxy, on the other hand, neither rejects halakha nor requires its adherents to extricate themselves from society at large. "Throughout our history Jews have had to make a living (even our sages), interact with non-Jews, and learn and utilize knowledge that is beyond the scope of what is offered in our holy texts," she wrote.

I relate to each one of these responses, and I would add that the structure of an observant lifestyle, via the calendar, the community, and the obligations, provides a foundation in a world where choice can be paralyzing and "the right thing" can be utterly ambiguous. Modern Orthodoxy preserves the essence of Judaism — Torah and halakha—and the traditions of our ancestors without requiring us to opt out of secular society. And, in my experience, Modern Orthodoxy allows for a spectrum of observance-level according to where each individual is in his or her spiritual process. This implies an awareness of certain challenges.

III. The Most Challenging Aspects of Modern Orthodoxy

I asked my study participants what they felt were the most challenging aspects of Orthodoxy. "All of it," answered one woman. "I find Jewish life to be stifling and frustrating. I feel as though I'm sacrificing things of value—art, music, entertainment, education —by choosing to be part of the small, fairly insular community of Orthodox Jews."

This brave woman admitted her discomfort and personal struggle with remaining in a community that doesn't share the values that she has always held close. I

sympathize with her, and while I am thankful to have built a circle of friends who share the values of secular subjects I brought over from the “old world,” nonetheless, there are times I would like to throw on a pair of skinny jeans and grab a glass of wine and a slice of pizza, to mingle with Seattle’s artsy-foodie crowd on a Friday night, and to sleep in on Saturday before heading out to brunch. Choosing an observant life means constantly pulling out my compass and veering away from these no-nos. Couldn’t the Torah have prescribed just one day off for vices, like a 24-hour Amish Rumspringa?

I admit that to this question I expected a certain set of complaints along the lines of modesty and taharat haMishpaha. Perhaps I was projecting. The answers were diverse, and each one touched on a different intersection between observance and modernity.

Two women reflected on the difficulty of acclimating to a more modest dress code, but, as one cheerily concludes, “When I find a halakha challenging, I can usually find a more spiritual understanding of why it should be that way. While there are many spiritual arguments for tseniut, there are not many (or any) for the specifics of the elbows-collar bones-knees points. The only way I have been able to resolve these for myself is based purely on faith and love for Hashem (which is hard to justify on 110 degree days!).”

Another participant struggled with the obligations of Judaism while juggling all the tasks of a typical, twenty-first-century day: Aside from child rearing, there’s a 40-hour workweek, the commute, the “bewildered colleagues” who don’t understand your hard-to-explain religious needs, chores, meal prep, and exercise/self-care. Where do study and tefillah even fit in?

The same respondent added:

The thing I find most challenging and frustrating about being Modern Orthodox is the double standard women face and the static state of mainstream rabbinical discourse as it applies to women and families…There are a number of practices that, while they are not viewed as ideal, are viewed as permitted by the Modern Orthodox community, such as for a man to not wear a kippa at work if he fears that it would negatively impact him in the workplace and his parnassa…Wearing tseniut clothing and hair coverings can negatively impact women at work, yet I do not know of any Orthodox rabbi in my community that would give me a thumbs up if I said that covering my hair was negatively impacting my parnassa, and I found it to be physically uncomfortable, that it would be OK for me to go bareheaded at work…My “modern” sensibilities are disgusted by the

inconsistency of how women are treated and held to a different standard (although I am not advocating for anything beyond halakha) especially as it is becoming increasingly necessary for both parents to work outside the home to keep up with the costs of Day School, summer camp, kosher food, and synagogue dues.

Raising children to inherit the “right” set of values also presented some of my subjects as a challenge. The same woman as just above is troubled by certain intolerant, xenophobic attitudes that are both tolerated and endorsed, and fears her community’s growing isolationism: “These things give me serious reservation about sending my children to Day School as I want to limit my kids’ exposure to these things, and I want them to have some friends that are from different backgrounds than they are.”

For another, “it’s wanting to make sure I can pass on to my children ideals I’ve struggled to attain, at the same time knowing they have to figure things out for themselves.”

IV. How Modern Orthodoxy Can Change or Grow

Up to now, my subjects responded according to their own conceptions of “Modern” Orthodoxy. At this point, I received pushback about the definition of the movement itself. The term “Modern Orthodoxy” turned into its own challenge. One woman replied:

I don’t know if I would necessarily consider myself “Modern Orthodox,” for the sole reason that I am not a fan of labels. I think of Judaism in terms of “Torah observant” or “not Torah observant”…Why all these labels? They only serve to further divide the body of Torah observant Jews. Honestly, I would like to see modern Orthodoxy stop trying to create its own identity independent from the Orthodox. If those who consider themselves “Modern Orthodox” observe the laws of Torah, then what exactly makes them different from the other groups?

Another answered in a similar manner, but from a different point of view:

I wish we would stop calling it “Orthodoxy” as if it were some kind of closed room. There is a continuum of Jewish observance; I wish people on all parts of the spectrum could be more tolerant of those who aren’t “like them” in their manner or style of observance.

Two of the women took the question head-on. One argued that rabbis are afraid or unwilling to find creative solutions to community problems, defaulting to

“outdated” rulings on issues like agunah and kol isha. Similarly, she complained of congregants’ tendency to avoid particular behaviors, despite their legality. “For example,” she wrote, “women choosing not singing at shul even though there are three or more women present, or dancing in shul even when there is a mehitzah.”

Along this line of extra fences, another woman shared that her “greatest fear is that Modern Orthodoxy will become paralyzed at the crossroads where we now find ourselves, and will eventually become the road kill of denominations that are not stalled by navel gazing. Modern Orthodoxy must not be deferential or defensive to the ultra-Orthodox who seek to transform communities into fifes and only recognize the existence and apparent triumph of the yetzer hara.”

She added: “Our leaders need to expect more of us than the lowest common denominator; if we have a community that can provide us a place for reflection, spiritual grounding and inspiration to be better Jews and better community members, then we can successfully operate in both the Jewish and secular worlds.”

One of the women took issue with Modern Orthodoxy’s spiritual level:

There is a huge lack of spirituality (Hassidus, basic kabbalistic concepts) taught in Modern Orthodox schools that leaves students missing many of the inspirational and deep concepts of Judaism. I have seen many people my age who have gone through the modern orthodox education system, and while as adults they are keeping some sort of Shabbat and kosher, they are completely uninspired and see Judaism as something inherited rather than for the beauty it has to offer.

Personally, with time, I am hopeful that some of the obstinacy to women’s concerns will start to be worked out. Halakhah wasn’t written in a day, after all, and tradition changes slowly. I hope that the attitude of “the woman’s place is in the Ladies’ Auxiliary” will evolve, and that women will further empower themselves and their daughters to engage with Torah, and to carve out a space for themselves. Just because we are not obligated to many commandments does not mean that we are barred from participating.

I further hope that we can attract more modern, secularly minded Jews by building a strong presence in their world, in their language. Creating user-friendly websites, maintaining a social media presence, writing literature, and marketing programs to this demographic would be useful; still, for many this is an enormous step out of the comfort zone. At a meeting of the mikvah committee, I had to remind the attendees that if they want to bring women to this mitzvah, they

might benefit from understanding the lifestyle of women outside the Orthodox world, and their probable (strong) opposition to taharat haMishpaha. Advertising a bowling night would surely be of little use.

Finally, I value Judaism's call for introspection and self-improvement, and I am disheartened when I see our base, animalistic natures emerge to fight our own friends. When it comes to community conflicts, fear for our own survival as a community translates to sinat hinam and lashon haRa. I cannot shake certain concepts I internalized over the course of my Jewish journey, namely, ohr l'goyim and tsedakah. A quotation I heard attributed to Tolstoy goes: "Everyone thinks about changing the world, but no one thinks about changing himself." Most of us have had to change in some way to become, or stay, observant. Becoming better humans should be no harder.
As one of my participants wisely stated, "The internal process of Torah observance takes a lifetime."

These experiences and opinions are but a miniscule fraction of the observant world, and by no means point to some grand conclusion. However, they do provide insight into the realities of Modern Orthodox women, and could well be another starting point for the ongoing study of women's roles in Judaism.

I would like to thank the women who took the time to participate. They were all brave to share their personal experiences and trials. Each one inspired me to continue developing my own spirituality, and to keep asking questions.