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Ayala Fader: Mitzvah Girls

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Introduction

HASIDIC JEWS, who claim to be the bearers of authentic Jewish religion, arrived in New York City after the Holocaust and, defying all predictions, flourished. Women and girls are essential to this community's growth, for it is they who bear and rear the next generation of believers. Women's and girls' responsibilities include mediating the secular world for Hasidic men and boys who study the sacred Torah. This book is an ethnographic study of how Bobover¹ and other unaffiliated Hasidic women teach their daughters to take on their responsibilities and become observant Jewish women. Studies of religion often focus on sacred texts, prayer, or special rituals. My research with Hasidic women and girls led me instead to listen to everyday talk in homes, classrooms, and the front yards of the Brooklyn neighborhood of Boro Park. Language organizes social life and is a springboard into broader issues such as the ways Hasidic mothers and girls talk about authority and desire, about the body and autonomy, about power and morality. Everyday talk between women and girls offers insight into how those who critique the secular world imagine it and themselves. Girls' willingness to civilize the secular world through Jewish practice has the potential to create an alternative religious modernity, one with the power to perhaps, one day, transform New York into a modern-day Garden of Eden.

Hasidic Jews (Hebrew, Hasid 'pious one'; Hasidim 'pious ones'), who organize themselves into sects, are a distinctive kind of religious group, what I call a "nonliberal" religious community.² In contrast to other nonliberal religious communities in North America, for example, evangelical Christians, Hasidic Jews have neither the ability nor the goal of engaging in national politics beyond lobbying for laws and rights that support their own interests. As sociologist Samuel Heilman (2006) has noted, Hasidic Jews have done so well in New York not in spite of, but because of North American urban diversity, with its increasing tolerance for public displays of religion. Rather than gradually assimilating, as have previous generations of Jews, Hasidic Jews have increasingly become religiously stringent. For Hasidic women and girls, this heightened religious stringency requires new forms of femininity, which include their participation in the secular city around them.

Hasidic women complicate stereotypes about women in nonliberal religions by their involvement in the North American public sphere. In order to facilitate Hasidic men's and boys' study of sacred texts, Hasidic women adapt the cultural, political, and economic life of the city to the needs of their community. Their fluency in secular modernity, evidenced in their education, their relatively unmarked clothing, their use of English (rather than Yiddish, the traditional vernacular of Eastern European Jews), and their work outside the home, enables them to create a sheltered enclave for boys and men who study Torah and later also join the workforce.

The participation of women and girls in the life of New York City is tempered by the critique they make of what they call the "*goyishe* 'Gentile' world," the "secular world," and "modern" Jews. These categories, discussed below, are certainly not monolithic; they are differentiated by, for example, race, class, gender, and ethnicity. In interactions between Hasidic women and children, however, these categories often functioned as ideal types that provided a shorthand for articulating Hasidic distinction. In fact, Hasidic descriptions of the secular world, Gentiles, and more modern Jews are often based less on regular interaction and personal experience and more on Hasidic women's ideological beliefs about an authentic Judaism that includes imagined others. When Hasidic women and children observe and talk about others who represent what *not* to be, we gain insight into Hasidic notions of the nature of Jewish difference.

In the chapters that follow I show how the Hasidic women I spent time with teach girls, through everyday talk, to use their autonomy to "fit in" with communal expectations and how they deal with girls' questions and defiance; how Hasidic girls in first grade begin to speak a Hasidic variety of English (English mixed with Yiddish), which marks them as distinctively Hasidic; and how the embodied disciplines of modesty form the basis for Hasidic alternative narratives of romantic love, consumption, and the family.

Hasidic women I worked with disrupt what anthropologist Webb Keane calls "a moral narrative of modernity," which, he suggests, emerged out of Western liberal thought, rooted in the Enlightenment and entwined with an earlier strand of Protestantism (2007:49). In this narrative, progress is associated not only, for example, with urbanization, industrialization, and secularization but also with increasing individual freedom and autonomy (ibid.:6, 46).³

The Hasidic women I worked with engage with this narrative of modernity, but they change its meaning.⁴ They do not want to be what they call "modern," meaning Jews who are similar to Gentiles (see below), but they do want to be what they call "with it" in their interac-

tions with other kinds of Jews or Gentiles.⁵ The version of Hasidic femininity I describe is defined by the ability to be “with it” enough to selectively use and even enjoy the secular and the Gentile world, while never becoming Jews who are modern or secular. Instead, these women envision a religious way of life, which I call an “alternative religious modernity.”⁶ Real freedom, progress, and self-actualization, Hasidic women tell their daughters, can only come about through the self-discipline that is learned through Jewish religious practice.

Hasidic women’s authoritative version of religious modernity dismantles an opposition between the secular and the religious that is central to social scientific definitions of the modern.⁷ In their moral narratives, Hasidic mothers promise their daughters that when they learn to make the religious and the secular, the material and the spiritual, the body and the soul complementary, and not oppositional, they will find true personal fulfillment, be rewarded by God in the afterlife, and even, perhaps, do their part to hasten the final redemption.

This book is about the everyday projects of Hasidic women and girls as they strive to redefine what constitutes a moral society. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood has argued that by creating culturally and historically specific forms of sociability, members of nonliberal religious groups attempt to change the moral terms of everyday life. Movements that advocate moral reform, she notes, though often seen as apolitical, are in fact about how “embodied attachments to historically specific forms of truth come to be forged” (2005:34).

Embodied attachments to truth, however, are produced not only by adults in synagogues, churches, or mosques. Equally critical to a movement of moral reform are the everyday exchanges between adults and children and between children themselves in the more intimate spaces of the home, school, and neighborhood, where children may become very different from what adults intend (Kulick and Schieffelin 2004). A grounded analysis of the Hasidic moral project through everyday talk between women and children reveals a modern religious way of life with redemptive possibilities.

RELIGION, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN

A series of related questions with theoretical implications are central to this book. What do the terms “modern,” “religious,” and “secular” mean to Hasidic women and girls, and how are these categories engaged in everyday life? This includes Hasidic women’s and girls’ notions of power, difference, and discipline, as well as the everyday practices that shape the meanings these concepts hold. Further, how do

embodied practices across the life cycle (e.g., language, comportment, and dress) produce the desire or its opposite in girls to become Hasidic women? My approach to these questions integrates scholarship in the anthropology of religion and of childhood with linguistic anthropology and Jewish ethnography.

Talal Asad (1993) has persuasively shown that the social scientific categories of the secular and the religious are themselves a socio-historical product of European modernity.⁸ According to Asad, any discipline that tries to understand religion must also try to understand its “other,” the secular. Contemporary nonliberal religious groups are an especially important topic for investigation, because, despite cultural and religious differences, they often share an explicit critique and rejection of the normative categories of the religious and the secular. Studies of nonliberal religious groups cast into relief the historical lineages to which anthropology of religion has long been tethered.

Ethnographies of nonliberal women, in particular, have made important contributions to increasingly complicated understandings of power and agency. A rich body of scholarship examines the religious practices of nonliberal women. Perhaps attempting to explain why so many women began embracing patriarchal religions since the 1970s, much of the scholarship focuses on the unexpectedly progressive outcomes of women’s increasing involvement in religion. For example, evangelical Christian women’s participation in North American and Latin American churches and prayer circles have created opportunities for these women to acquire newfound authority in their families, combat inequalities of gender, class, and ethnicity, and even reinterpret secular Western feminism to serve women’s religious aims.⁹

More recently, scholars have shifted their focus to nonliberal women’s religious goals and desires—for piety or submission, for example—in order to develop new approaches to the study of religion and gender more broadly. Nonliberal religious women’s critiques of the secular world, especially goals for individual freedom and autonomy, require that scholars acknowledge the secular liberal assumptions that are at the foundation of their disciplines and research questions. Saba Mahmood (2005), for example, uses her study of Egyptian women’s involvement in the mosque movement, part of the wider Islamic Revival, to show how liberal beliefs about action, freedom, and the individual have been naturalized in feminist theory.¹⁰ She argues, based on the time she spent with Egyptian women engaged in religious study, that the desire to grow closer to God and create a more ethical world can be as meaningful and legitimate for some women as gender equality or progressive change is for others. In a different cultural and religious context, R. Marie Griffith’s (1997) study of the Women

Aglow movement, an evangelical Christian prayer network in North America, similarly argues for more complex understandings of the concept of agency through an analysis of religious submission. Griffith shows that evangelical women's submission to a patriarchal religious hierarchy does not preclude their individual autonomy or fulfillment. These scholars and others attend to nonliberal women's religious activities in order to develop approaches to the study of religion that are unbound by secular liberal assumptions about the person, power, and action.¹¹

I build on this scholarship to propose a different approach, one that focuses on everyday life in order to account for the ways that nonliberal women's lives and desires transgress easy distinctions between the religious and the secular. Analyses that exclusively address nonliberal women's religious practices, I contend, reproduce a definition of religion that is artificially discrete from wider social life. This social scientific category of religion, one informed by Protestantism, cannot account for the realities of nonliberal women's lives. Consider Hasidic women who criticize goals of progressive change without rejecting participation and pleasure in the secular realm or hopes for personal fulfillment. The desire for piety and, say, shopping or romantic love can be complementary if women discipline their bodies and minds to conform to Jewish religious practice. Hasidic femininity is predicated on developing the autonomy to discipline the self to religious practices that include a particular engagement with the secular world. Indeed, Hasidic femininity is formed through the very collapse of the religious and the secular.

Ethnographic attention to children and everyday talk reveals the processes by which nonliberal desires and gendered ways of being in the world are negotiated, produced, and sometimes changed.¹² Scholarship in the anthropology of childhood has shown that children and childhood are critical to understanding the politics of cultural production and change. In this literature, children are approached not as immature adults but as agents themselves who participate significantly in social processes, particularly in the production of differences of gender, class, and race.¹³ However, with some notable exceptions, little research has been conducted with children in religious movements.¹⁴ Perhaps this is because nonliberal religious childrearing practices trouble secular liberal thought in much the same ways that women's participation in nonliberal religion has challenged feminist theory and politics. Investigating nonliberal religious childhood requires rethinking what are often naturalized assumptions about children and how childhood should unfold, especially around topics such as creativity, discipline, curiosity, and questioning.

A language socialization approach can be a powerful tool for examining gender, cultural production, and change in nonliberal religious communities, because it makes interactions between children and adults the primary site for delving into broader cultural themes and relationships (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). A language socialization approach contrasts to earlier anthropological work on socialization, which often treated children as the passive recipients of culture and overlooked everyday language, a key medium of socialization.¹⁵ Instead, language socialization centers on the negotiations, by and through language, between adults and children, and among children themselves, to explore how children acquire or reject culturally specific ways of being in the world (Kulick and Schieffelin 2004:352).

An ongoing challenge to language socialization studies, however, has been how to embed the analysis of micro-level interactions within broader political processes. Recent attention to morality and ethics in the anthropology of religion can clarify how micro-level practices constitute broader frames of knowledge and power, thus politicizing language socialization studies. This is especially true in nonliberal religious communities that legitimize their very existence to their children by laying claim to one moral "truth." A focus on children and their interactions with adults offers a grounded methodology for ethnographically studying the intersection between morality and politics, especially as it is negotiated with the next generation.

Another challenge to the language socialization approach has been to go beyond its exclusive focus on language and begin to examine broader relationships between semiotic registers such as language, clothing, hairstyles, and comportment. Researchers in linguistic anthropology are beginning to theorize how beliefs about language interact with beliefs about the body and material culture in specific historical and cultural ways. In a community where the Torah is believed to be the words of God, the relationship between religious signs and their referents is not arbitrary; it is divinely intended, as scholars working with sacred languages have noted (e.g., Elster 2003; Haeri 2003). A central question in this book is how beliefs about divine truth which shape sign relationships in explicitly religious contexts, such as prayer, interact in everyday signifying practices in other contexts. How, for example, does the belief that Hebrew-Aramaic sacred texts are God's words affect how little girls, who will not study Torah, learn to read and think about texts in other Jewish languages such as Yiddish or a non-Jewish language like English? Or how is God's commandment to dress modestly interpreted on a shopping trip to Macy's? Throughout the book

I examine Hasidic “semiotic ideologies,” that is, cultural and religious beliefs about the nature of signs in different contexts (Keane 2007).

This study of the Hasidic women and girls I worked with in Brooklyn, then, engages topics with broad implications, including the cultivation of nonliberal femininity; the relationships between language, the body, and materiality; and what the dynamics between the secular and the religious in a nonliberal religious movement today can tell us about multiple inflections of modernity.

HASIDIC JUDAISM HISTORICALLY AND TODAY

In the eighteenth century, European (Ashkenazic) Jews wrestled with modernity and the rapid social changes it brought, including urbanization, industrialization, religious reform, and, in many places, unprecedented opportunities for Jewish participation as European citizens.¹⁶ Some Jews responded by participating, for example, in the secularizing Jewish Enlightenment (*haskalah*), becoming, what they called in Yiddish, *modern* (Weinreich 2008:733); others became involved in the nascent Zionist movement and its Jewish nationalist dream; and still others were part of a traditionalist response that included the Hasidic movement.¹⁷

The Inception of the Hasidic Movement

Radical for its time, the Hasidic movement offered a transformed and transformative Judaism.¹⁸ Sparked by the teachings of Israel Ben Eliezer, known as the *Baal-Shem-Tov* ‘Master of the Good Name’ (a reference to his reputation as a worker of miracles), Hasidism spread quickly throughout much of Eastern and Central Europe where pogroms against Jews were common and many, especially in Eastern Europe, lived in poverty. Hasidism is messianic.¹⁹ Hasidic Jews hope that by fulfilling their religious obligations they will bring the *geulah* ‘redemption’, which includes an end to Jewish exile and a rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem by God. The Messiah has been delayed, many believe, because of impieties in the diaspora (Mintz 1992:2–3).

All Orthodox Jews, including Hasidim, lead lives circumscribed by the 613 commandments (*mitsves*) found in the Hebrew Bible, as interpreted by Jewish sages, believed to have been divinely inspired, and preserved in the Oral Law, the Talmud. But the Hasidic movement was distinct from other forms of orthodoxy in its emphasis on Jewish mysticism, the creation of a new style of worship, and a unique social organization. Hasidic teachings asserted that any Jew could commune with

the divine through a joyous expression of faith, including singing, dancing, and ecstatic prayer. This contrasted with the existing rabbinic tradition, which was based on ascetic study of the Torah, primarily the domain of the elite (Hundert 1991; Rosman 1996).

Hasidic Jews developed allegiances to different rebbes, who were charismatic, spiritual community leaders. A rebbe, his followers believed, provided an actual conduit to God, and many stories have been handed down about the wonders wrought by particular rebbes. Through his familial dynasty a rebbe cultivated adherents who formed a court (*hoyf*) or sect, with court leadership generally passed from father to son or the closest male relative. Hasidic sects were often named after the region where a rebbe's authority was established. For example, Lubavitcher Hasidism originated in the small town of Lubavitch, in what was then Russia (now Belarus). Followers of different rebbes distinguished themselves through dress, ethnicity, ideology, and religious practice. They were often dispersed across the Eastern and Central European landscape, and Hasidic Jews made pilgrimages, often a long distance from their homes, to visit their rebbe if he lived far away. Hasidim historically have been linked to one another through networks of faith that crossed geographic boundaries and borders.²⁰

Other traditionalist Jews based in Lithuania opposed Hasidic Judaism from its beginning, arguing that religious authority should come from scholars in *yeshivas* (institutions of higher Jewish learning). These Jews were called *misnagdim* 'opponents' (of Hasidism) or, alternatively, *litvish* 'Lithuanians' referring to their place of origin or, later on, *yeshivish*. Litvish Jews followed the authority of the head of a yeshiva, rejecting the all-encompassing authority of Hasidic rebbes, the focus on mystical texts, and the ecstatic democratizing forms of worship.

Hasidic Judaism in Postwar North America

By the close of World War II, the vast majority of Hasidic Jews in Europe had been killed in the Holocaust. Some fared better than others as a result of geography and political circumstance. Those living close to the Russian border, for example, had a greater chance of escaping across to the relative safety of the Soviet Union. Similarly Hungarian Hasidim survived in greater numbers than Polish Hasidim, because the Nazis did not take over Hungary (an Axis ally) until 1944. In contrast, the Nazis took over Poland in 1939, and consequently the vast majority of Polish Hasidim were killed in concentration camps (Mintz 1992:27). The Hasidic Jews who survived came after the war and settled in the United States, Israel, England, Canada, and Belgium, among other urban centers internationally.²¹ The Holocaust provided Hasidim

with a mission of reconstruction that made it their responsibility to rebuild and repopulate their communities.

Hasidic courts and dynastic leadership in New York City today are not simply transplanted from Central and Eastern Europe, nor are they completely discrete communities, although they have sometimes been represented as such in the ethnographic literature. Indeed, almost all the ethnographies of Hasidic Jews have focused on one “community” or court.²² However, Hasidic courts were created, not re-created in North America.²³ Upon arriving in New York, the Hasidic rebbes who survived the war, such as the Hungarian Satmar rebbe and the Galician-Polish Bobover rebbe, attracted not only their own followers but also European and North American Jews who had very different backgrounds and histories. In his ethnography of Satmar Hasidim, for example, Rubin (1997:46) estimates that in 1961 40 percent of the Satmar court had not been Satmar or even Hasidic in prewar Europe. Hasidic courts established themselves anew in New York by building yeshivas for boys, schools for girls (only Satmar and Lubavitch), *mikves* ‘ritual baths’ and other community institutions that observant Jewish communities require.

Although Hasidic Jews in New York share many beliefs and philosophies, diverse courts, or “circles” as many women call them, can be distinguished by a number of features that most prominently include their attitude toward religious stringency (*khumre*), religious interpretation and practice, language use, clothing, and level of participation in North American life. This is not to diminish that significant differences also exist within each Hasidic circle based on familial history, religious practice, and opinions on Hasidic politics, to mention only a few.

Over time different courts have become associated with distinct Brooklyn neighborhoods, though these neighborhoods also include other Jews and Gentiles. There are more than thirty courts (Mintz 1992), but I provide a brief discussion of three of the largest and most prominent in New York City: Satmar, Lubavitch, and Bobov. My aim is to highlight the range of Hasidic variation. I also address the rarely discussed category of unaffiliated Hasidim.

Hungarian Hasidim form the largest population of Hasidic Jews in New York; the biggest and best-known Hungarian court is Satmar, with other Hungarian courts including, for example, Pupa, Spinka, Vizhnits (from Bukovina), and Munkacz.²⁴ Satmar dominate Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where they have had tensions with their Latino neighbors (see Mintz 1992; Rubin 1997) and, more recently, with the *artistn* ‘artists’ who have moved to Williamsburg and sparked its gentrification. Although some Satmar have great wealth, at least half of the Hasidic families in Williamsburg live below the poverty level.

Satmar have also built a satellite community, Kiryas Joel, in upstate New York, where there have been conflicts over funding for schools that went to the national courts (see Boyarin 2002). In the ethnographic literature and according to different Hasidic women I spoke with in Boro Park (some Hungarian themselves), Satmar are considered the most religiously stringent and isolationist, evidenced in part by men and women's fluency in Yiddish, which is a result of limited exposure to secular education and cultural forms. Satmar have the strictest standards of piety and modesty that include distinctively Satmar forms of Hasidic dress for men and women, as in, for example, the flat, round, black-velvet brimmed hat worn by men on top of their yarmulkes. A number of Bobover and Lubavitcher women described Satmar as "radical" and "very Hasidic" (*zayer khsidish*). Satmar women, however, are also reputed to have a penchant for luxury and to be good cooks who make highly spiced food. Anthropologist Israel Rubin (1997:54) suggests that, philosophically, Satmar place a greater emphasis than other Hasidic groups on an unquestioning belief in God, which leads to an avoidance of questioning more generally. Satmar have had an ongoing dispute most particularly with Lubavitcher Hasidim, with whom there has been a rivalry for the hearts and minds of the young men of the community (Mintz 1992).

Lubavitchers, the majority of whom live in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights, are known for their messianic fervor and their outreach efforts toward unobservant Jews.²⁵ Crown Heights is a predominantly Caribbean/African American neighborhood with Lubavitchers a small but vocal minority. There has been racial and religious tension between these groups, most notably the violence of 1991 (see Goldschmidt 2006). The Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who led the community from 1951 until his death in 1994, inspired unusual levels of devotion, with many suggesting that he was the Messiah himself. Upon his death, and with no successor, the Lubavitcher community was thrown into turmoil, as community members debated how to proceed and whether the rebbe would return as the Messiah. This continues as an ongoing struggle between the *meshikhists* and the anti-*meshikhists* (those who believe him to have been the Messiah [*moshiakh*] and those who do not) (Levine 2003:3). Satmar find this belief particularly objectionable.

In his efforts to rebuild after the war, the Lubavitcher rebbe institutionalized an unusual campaign: the active recruitment of unobservant Jews in order to bring them closer to Orthodox Judaism. Because of their successful outreach, Lubavitchers have the largest population of *baley-tshuves* 'returnees to the faith', known informally by the abbreviation "bts. (singular, baal tshuve "bt")". This has influenced wider Lu-

bavitcher life, as many new members have skills and experiences outside Hasidic Judaism that they often integrate into Lubavitcher life. For example, I was told many times about a woman who became a Lubavitcher bt and gave up her successful singing career. She now gives concerts exclusively for Orthodox women.²⁶ In the hierarchical world of Hasidic Judaism, bts, with their dubious Jewish upbringings, are often not considered good marriage partners for Jews who are *frim* or 'religious from birth' or "ffb". Yiddish is not often spoken among Lubavitchers, partly because of the many bts who do not know it. Lubavitcher clothing and style is often less marked than in other Hasidic circles. Men, for example, wear dark double-breasted suit jackets rather than the long black coats that other Hasidic groups wear, and young girls often wear very long skirts, casual shirts, and shoes, something other Hasidic circles, such as Bobover, find unfeminine.

Bobover Hasidic Jews also lived for a time in Crown Heights, but when crime began to rise in the 1960s the Bobover rebbe, Shlomo Halberstam, moved his community to the Brooklyn neighborhood of Boro Park, where they have grown to be the largest court there today.²⁷ The Bobover women I met often called themselves "moderates" in terms of religious stringency and openness to North American popular culture. Mintz (1992:123) suggests that in contrast to other Hasidic circles, Bobover are "peace-loving," avoid controversy, and practice a "homey" (*haymish*) variety of Hasidism. After the war this welcoming Judaism appealed to many, and an unusually large number of these European non-Hasidic Jews sent their sons to the Bobover yeshiva. This created a strong new generation of young men who became loyal followers of the Bobover rebbe. Following the death of the Bobover rebbe in 2000, struggles ensued over issues of leadership, with one splinter group eventually building its own schools and synagogue. As the moderates of the Hasidic world, Bobover speak Yiddish and English. Men and women dress in a Hasidic style, but they are not as immediately distinctive as the Satmar or Lubavitch. As I discuss below, the neighborhood of Boro Park that Bobov dominate has become increasingly bourgeois over the years, with expensive real estate and bustling shopping boulevards, a destination point for Orthodox Jews from all over the world.

Despite these important and real distinctions among Hasidic circles, I found that in everyday life the common goal of religious stringency united Hasidic Jews, especially women, often muting religious, political, or ethnic differences. I had initially planned to work with Bobover women and children, but even in Bobover institutions, like the girls' school I introduce below, many of the teachers and administrators, and even some students, were from other Hasidic groups such as Satmar,

Lubavitch, Ger, and Vizhnits, or were not even Hasidic at all. Although all the teachers and administrators answered to the Bobover school principal (the rebbe's granddaughter) who is overseen by the Bobover rebbe and his advisers, they differed in terms of religiosity and involvement in the non-Jewish world, especially in their educational level. Nevertheless, they worked well together and often socialized among themselves, inviting one another to family weddings and celebrations. The boundaries between courts were more fluid than I had expected among the women I met. In fact, one of my early questions, "Which court do you belong to?" was always met with uncomprehending stares. Women eventually reframed my question as, "Do you mean, where does my husband *davn* 'pray'?" This seems to imply that Hasidic courts and allegiance to a rebbe may have more salience for men than for women.

Further, in the course of my research I met a number of Hasidic families who call themselves "unaffiliated," meaning they do not follow any one rebbe exclusively. They do, however, identify their level of religiosity and family history with Hasidic Judaism. In response to this population, a school for girls and one for boys opened about twenty years ago in Boro Park. The majority of its students come from unaffiliated families who still consider themselves Hasidic. The school expects girls, boys, and their families to adhere to a certain level of religious stringency, but the administration does not promote the position of any one rebbe. Being Hasidic, especially for women and girls, can be a stance toward religious stringency and a style of Jewish observance. This is evidenced by the terms that the majority of Hasidic women I met used to describe themselves: *hasidish* (*khsidish*) 'Hasidic' and *haymish* 'homey' (idiomatically, Jews like us). I heard these terms far more often than I heard women refer to a particular Hasidic court.

The Wider Geography of North American Judaism

Hasidism is only one variant of Judaism in North America today. There is tremendous variation that ranges from the strictly observant to the liberal interpretation of Jewish law, and even to secular Judaism. Despite the differences between Hasidic Jews, they are generally considered, and consider themselves, the most religiously stringent. But large communities of non-Hasidic Orthodox Jews also exist that continue to be known as *litvish* 'Lithuanian' or Yeshivish (also Black Hat) Jews. Litvish Jews also rebuilt their communities in North America after the war, establishing a network of rabbinical yeshivas, all of which are affiliated with the Agudas Yisroel, the Orthodox Jewish Union, and governed by the Council of Torah Sages, primarily yeshiva deans

(Heilman and Cohen 1989).²⁸ A large community of Litvish can be found in Lakewood, New Jersey, and the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Flatbush, Midwood, and Kensington are known for their large Litvish populations.

More liberal forms of orthodoxy include the Modern Orthodox, who attempt to maintain Jewish religious practice while participating more fully in North American life, such as, for example, going to the movies or getting college degrees. The Hasidic women I met in Boro Park often called these “Young Israel types,” a Modern Orthodox network of synagogues. I heard a number of women gently make fun of Modern Orthodoxy and its efforts at compromise between religious observance and secular participation.

Finally, there are certain religious and social distinctions between Jews in North America that Hasidic Jews do not recognize, although the distinctions are significant for the rest of American Jewry. These include the more liberal Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements of Judaism.²⁹ For Hasidic Jews these are all negatively called *fray* ‘free’ Jews, that is, unbound by literal Torah observance. As I discuss later, Hasidic Jews have negative beliefs about freedom when it includes what they perceive to be a lack of religious discipline.

THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS STRINGENCY:

GENTILES, SECULAR, *FRIM* ‘RELIGIOUS’, AND MODERN

In postwar North America and Israel, Hasidic Jews and other ultra-orthodox Jews, broadly called *haredim* (Hebrew, ‘those who tremble before God’) have gradually chosen stricter religious observance in their communities where Jewish law offers alternatives.³⁰ In postwar North America, Hayim Soleveitchik (1994:77) suggests, the “diminution of otherness” evoked a new vigilance among second-generation *haredim*.³¹ He notes that in voluntarily separate communities, or “enclave communities,” there must be continual reinforcement and heightening of difference. A central arena where *haredim* claim Jewish difference is in increasingly stringent interpretations of sacred texts that they cast as the true essence of a shared Jewish past, although the texts actually reflect contemporary concerns with accuracy and authenticity for a community whose transmitters of memory were obliterated or uprooted by the Nazis (Soleveitchik 1994:70-71). This invention of tradition was shaped not only by the experience of historical rupture but also by new opportunities for Jewish participation in North American life as citizens (Soleveitchik 1994:74-75; see also Friedman 1987, 1993; and Heilman 2006).

Despite increasing religious stringency, the Hasidic women I worked with do not withdraw from the wider communities where they live. Instead, they “hyperbolize” their distinctiveness, as they simultaneously participate in a range of contemporary spheres that allows them to flourish.³² The hyperbolization includes a heightening of the ways that religious observance has been carried out, which especially emphasizes Hasidic gender differences and a renewed effort to mark Jewish difference from Gentiles and other Jews in very public ways. A generation or two ago, for example, many Hasidic women in Boro Park obeyed the modesty laws by covering their hair with a wig upon marriage. These days, women in the same families cover their hair with a wig *and* a hat, hyperbolizing the injunction to cover the hair. Similarly little girls today (third and fourth generation) are given exclusively Yiddish and Hebrew-origin names like Raizy, Tobe, or Chaya. These girls’ grandmothers, however, often had English names, like Lily or Rose, along with their Yiddish/Hebrew names. Many of these same women whom I met had now given up their English names and used only their Yiddish names.³³

The hyperbolization of Hasidic difference is especially notable in the stark contrasts drawn between Jews and Gentiles. Perhaps this is especially relevant in interactions with children who are in the process of learning claims to Jewish distinction amid the diversity of Brooklyn. Hasidic mothers and teachers asserted to me and their children that, based on the biblical text and rabbinic commentaries, Jews had been chosen by God from among all the other nations for special responsibilities and special rewards in this life and the next. Anthropologist Henry Goldschmidt (2006:22–24), in his study of blacks and Lubavitchers in Crown Heights, notes that in the founding text of Lubavitch Hasidim (the Tanya), there is the claim that although Gentiles and Jews share a *nefesh beheymes* ‘an animal soul’, only Jews have a *nefesh elokis* ‘a godly soul’. I also heard from Bobover and unaffiliated Hasidic teachers and mothers in Boro Park that the Jewish *neshume* ‘soul’ is “just different” (from that of Gentiles). Hasidic women I worked with tell their children (using English terms) that Jews are more “refined,” “disciplined,” and “civilized,” that they have more *mentshlekhkayt* ‘humanity’ than Gentiles. Gentiles, many suggested, do not have the internal strength to discipline their desires. As one Hasidic woman told me, “*Goyim* ‘Gentiles’ (sing. *goy*, pl. *goyim*) do whatever they want, do what they feel like.” This hierarchy of peoples, legitimated by a God-given soul and developed through the discipline of religious practice, engages with and inverts a particular narrative of modernity where a Protestant-inflected secularism represents the peak of civilization.

Moderate Hasidim, Bobover, and others in Boro Park, however, have different histories and religious texts than do Lubavitchers in Crown Heights, where Jewish and Gentile difference is almost always closely shadowed by racial tensions. For Lubavitchers in Crown Heights, Goldschmidt (2006:22) argues, religious claims supersede what Lubavitchers perceive to be superficial black and white racial distinctions or the cultural claims made by many less observant North American Jews.³⁴ But in the more diverse neighborhoods of Boro Park and nearby Sunset Park, the religious category of Gentile is not always monolithic, nor is it always framed in religious terms. An illustration is the Hasidic woman who told me that while “on an essential level, goyim are goyim,” there are also the exceptional “good goyim.” Good goyim are moral, reasonable people who attempt to perfect themselves by fulfilling the Noachide Laws (the seven laws that the Torah requires both Jews and Gentiles to observe).³⁵ Often good goyim are neighbors with whom a Hasidic Jew has had friendly interactions or a business partner who has proven to be fair and honest.

Some Hasidic women and children I worked with use racist discourse to distinguish between black Gentiles and white Gentiles, creating a racialized distinction within the broader religious trope of Jewish-Gentile difference. Other non-white Gentiles in Boro Park, such as South Asians or Chinese, in my experience, are generally ignored or simply relegated to the category of goy.³⁶ In addition, a wide range of Muslims, distinguished through their dress, are called “Arabs.” Black Gentiles, in contrast, are often called *shvartzes* (‘blacks’, a derogatory term) and may be described as “scary” and unappealing. The ways that a child learns to recognize and distinguish between Gentiles is a topic of much discussion, both between Hasidic women and children and between children themselves.

Whereas the word “Gentiles” has specific meanings, women used the English term “secular,” often coupled with “North American,” as a vague description, which, they said, depended on the context. At times it may mean a Jew who is not observant, especially referring to Jews who came before World War II and discarded most forms of religious observance in their efforts to assimilate. At other times “secular” may refer to North American popular culture such as books, movies, fashion, magazines, or North American bodies of knowledge, for example, psychology or education. I believe the term “secular,” as it is used most often by Hasidic women I worked with, provides a broad label for North American cultural life that is not explicitly Gentile or Jewish. The secular world is often opposed, in the everyday talk of women and girls, to those who are *frim* ‘religious Jews’ or to Jews more generally. Hasidic understandings and uses of the terms “secular” and

“frim” are, however, different from the way most North Americans understand the secular and the religious, a theme I explore throughout this book.

Jews who are less *frim* than Hasidic women and girls or not even observant at all are much more troubling to narratives of God-given Jewish distinction than Gentiles or secular North Americans. Hasidic girls and women expressed a great deal of ambivalence toward what they call more “modern” ways of being Jewish. Modern activities or objects either bring a Jew in contact with Gentiles or blur a boundary between how Jews and Gentiles live. Technology and capitalism, for example, are not inherently modern if they support a Hasidic way of life, something sociologist Solomon Poll (1962) noted many years ago. In contrast, modern activities include watching a movie, going to dinner at a restaurant where men and women sit together, having a pet dog, or even celebrating one’s birthday, because they are activities that North Americans engage in. Being modern is not so much about adherence to Jewish law; rather, the issue is how an observant Jew interprets the spirit of the law. A girl, for example, may be dressed modestly, but if her clothes all come from the Gap, she will be perceived by other observant Jews as more modern because she looks more like the Gentiles around her. These categories—Gentile, secular, *frim*, and modern—are all important for understanding how Hasidic girls come to understand themselves and ways of being in the world.

JEWISH DIFFERENCE: EPISTEMOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY

Dressed in a conservative skirt, blouse, and black tights, with my unruly hair tucked under a black cotton beret, I clutched my backpack on my lap as I sat on the Brooklyn-bound B train. At Grand Street in Chinatown the subway went above ground, snaking through closely packed tenements with laundry flapping on lines strung between buildings. Then the subway crossed the Manhattan Bridge, the sun glinting, first off the steel and glass skyline and then the choppy surface of the East River. This train took me to Boro Park, Brooklyn, where I conducted fieldwork intensively from 1995 to 1998. But because this study is an example of anthropology at home, over the years I have continued to cross the Manhattan Bridge and visit Hasidic women friends, and also keep in touch with them by phone. I have kept track of changes and continuities among the women I worked with, as well as the broader neighborhood of Boro Park, so that mine is both a longitudinal and contemporary account.

I chose to work in Boro Park partly because I hoped to avoid problems of representation given past critiques of anthropology, as I, too, am a Jewish woman from New York. Anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin (1988) has similarly noted that by choosing to work with Jews he hoped no one could accuse him of “cultural imperialism.” I also confess to harboring romantic notions about shared history and identity. I knew I would not share a common faith with Hasidic women, but my great-grandparents had been Orthodox and came from the same parts of Eastern Europe that many Hasidic Jews do. I hoped that I would be accepted, at least partially, because of who I was. Of course, this proved to be more complicated than I expected.

The encounter between me and Hasidic women and girls should be understood as representative of contemporary struggles over Jewish authenticity in North America, as well as the politics of contemporary ethnography where the “informants” are literate, politically active, and engaged in their own representation. That I am a nonobservant Jewish woman from New York, and a graduate student in anthropology, shaped the research in many ways. While I was studying Hasidic socialization, I was simultaneously socialized into professional anthropology and, by Hasidic women I met, into appropriate Hasidic femininity. Meanwhile, Hasidic women were using my presence to socialize their own daughters about how to interpret Jewish difference.

Like every anthropologist, I explained that the goals of my research were a doctoral degree and, eventually, a book. However, the Hasidic women I worked with framed my presence in a religious discourse of redemption through return. For them, God had led me to my research topic in order to help me return to the faith. My very presence legitimized their critique of the secular world. That I, who had a liberal Jewish upbringing and such extensive exposure to higher education, might still end up among them was evidence of the power and truth of their Judaism.

As a Jew studying other Jews, I take up a conversation started by other Jewish anthropologists working in Jewish communities.³⁷ Anthropologist Susan Kahn (2000), in her study of assisted reproduction in Israel, has noted that because of her own identity her research was marked by a blurring of the line between subject and object. For those conducting research with Hasidic Jews, as in any nonliberal religious community, the potential conversion or return of the anthropologist remains a key issue (see Harding 2000), to which I return in the coda to this book. Other Jewish women ethnographers who have worked with Hasidic women in Israel and North America have noted the tension between communal efforts at *kiruv* ‘Jewish outreach’ and goals for ethnographic research.³⁸ Like me, these anthropologists struggled with

Hasidic women's expectations of Jewish return and their own hopes for gaining access to communities that are often closed to outsiders, including Jewish outsiders.

In my case, the confounding of observer and observed was increased when I got married during the research period, which meant that I then occupied a series of social positions shared by the very women I was studying: Jewish "girl," bride, wife, and, after a time, mother. When I attended a class for Hasidic brides, there was little separation between researcher and participant. The last class was exactly a week before my own wedding, and the merging of positions challenged my sense of professional self as I wondered who, exactly, was attending the classes. Was it the anthropologist? Was it an observant Jewish bride? A nonobservant Jewish bride who was thinking about becoming more observant? I never considered becoming Orthodox, something Hasidic women I met puzzled over, but my experience did force me to wrestle with many of my own assumptions about religious observance, my commitment to Judaism, and my responsibilities as a Jewish ethnographer.

Hasidic women and I were constantly reframing the meaning of Jewish difference that our encounter personified. My presence in the community could be confusing. The modest dress I wore out of respect for community members and also to facilitate my entrance into the community hinted that I was attempting to participate in a more Jewish life, whatever the reason. Initially I denied that status, claiming simply to be working toward my degree. However, my denials were countered by knowing nods indicating that perhaps I was not ready to accept why I had been drawn to my research topic. I eventually decided to follow the lead of the women I was meeting and neither made claims nor denied the influence of being exposed to their community. Issues common to every ethnographic encounter became especially charged. In everyday greetings, for example, Hasidim often respond to the question, "How are you?" with *burikh hashem* 'blessed be his name'. Although most anthropologists will aim to follow local rules of politeness, my attempts were charged with the uncertain status of my Jewish soul. I was initially uncomfortable to respond with *burikh hashem*, because I felt I was misrepresenting myself. When I did respond this way, several women expressed their approval, as they did to my other attempts at ritual behavior. Motivated by their belief that the first step of Jewish observance is religious practice, followed by understanding, my actions were a step in the right direction, no matter what my motives were. Indeed, this is an issue for Hasidic children that I discuss in chapter 3.

Hasidic women and girls' interpretations of my own Jewish difference helped me recognize certain key themes that shaped the research. For example, those who first met me often initially asked if I was from "out of town," or if I was a Beys Yaakov girl (a more Litvish girls' school). The clues they cited for these impressions were my accent, which is, in fact, a typically Manhattan one, and my shearling coat, which was, coincidentally, what all the more modern Beys Yaakov girls were wearing. These interpretations were the first clues I had that embodied signs, such as a different vowel or a style of coat, formed a system for understanding and producing Jewish difference among women and girls.

I tried to accommodate to communal practices and not to be provocative. I said the appropriate prayers before eating. I was always conscious, especially in my work with young children, of my position as an outsider whose contact with the Gentile world was considered potentially polluting. I felt it was my responsibility (as well as in my research interests) to conform as best as I could to the practices I was attempting to understand. Perhaps it was my efforts to offend no one that made my time in Boro Park feel constraining and stifling. Despite close friendships and the generous invitations of many Hasidic families, I often breathed a sigh of relief as the subway crossed the Manhattan Bridge and brought me back to my own Upper West Side home after spending part of each week in Boro Park.

My initial entry was facilitated by another anthropology student who had done research on modesty in the community and introduced me to a Hasidic woman. Little by little, I obtained the phone numbers of other women—friends, neighbors, and relatives. In the more formal, institutional realm of a Bobover Hasidic girls' school, Bnos Yisruel, I walked in off the street and offered to be a "helper" (cutting out arts and crafts projects for the children) in exchange for the opportunity to observe in several classrooms. I believe my research topic, Yiddish and children's education, aided my entrance. It was not threatening in terms of challenging gender relations, and their educational system is an area of which many Hasidic families and educators are proud.

After the several months I spent building social networks within the community and establishing myself in Bnos Yisruel, my research began to take shape. I regularly attended and audio-taped in two kindergarten classrooms in Bnos Yisruel and in the second year I followed the same girls into the first grade. *Morah* 'teacher' Chaya, the kindergarten teacher, and Mrs. Silver, the first-grade teacher, appear frequently in the coming pages. Both were young, energetic, and earnest Bobover women who were recently married. Overall, I had less contact with older teen-aged girls, who are closely protected, and older boys and

adult males. I was able to attend the Bobover boys' preschool for three months where I also helped out. But when I tried to switch from a nursery class to a kindergarten and began to come more often, the principal telephoned and asked me to come see her. I entered her office with a pounding heart. She told me that parents had seen me in the class and complained, asking about the "strange" woman in the class. They wanted me out. She had to accommodate them, she told me apologetically, and so I stopped visiting there. This experience led to an unexpected and important finding: Hasidic girls are less protected from outsiders than are Hasidic boys.

Over time I developed close relationships with three families who allowed me to collect longitudinal data on their children: the Klein family (Bobover Hasidim), the Gross family (Dobrizhiner Hasidim), and the Schwartz family (unaffiliated Hasidim). I also visited extensively with the Katz family (also unaffiliated). I have made minor changes to everyone's lives in order to protect privacy, and pseudonyms are used throughout.

When I visited the families, I audiotaped and transcribed everyday interactions between women and children and between children themselves. This included bath time, homework, dinnertime, and playtime. Rifky Katz and Esty Schwartz, two young mothers, are especially insightful commentators on Hasidic life, and their thoughts and words appear often. Even though I worked so closely with these women and we have remained friends, they told me years later that they only allowed me to visit them at first because they hoped my research would become more than "just a project for school"; they hoped that I would become more observant.

In preparation for the research, I brushed up on the Hebrew I had learned as a child and learned Yiddish in the YIVO program at Columbia University. However, Hasidic Yiddish, as I discuss, is distinct from the standardized Yiddish I had learned, and so I arranged to have a private Yiddish conversation tutorial with the daughter of a friend, something many Hasidic women found amusing and a bit odd. My tutor, Gitty Fried, was a newly married Bobover woman, just nineteen years old and a recent high school graduate. Our lessons quickly became two-way informal interviews. I brought Gitty all my questions that had come up that week during research and practiced Yiddish, and she asked me many questions about more modern Jews and my own experiences growing up. We met in her house when her husband was in *kolel* (the post-yeshiva institution of higher Jewish learning for married men). Gitty, a bright, matter-of-fact, and curious person, was just enough of a newcomer to married life to be an especially thoughtful commentator.

In addition to my work with women and children, I also attended wider communal events. I went to many Hasidic weddings and holiday celebrations, as well as inspirational lectures for women. I visited the Catskill Mountains to see a girls' summer camp and to visit Rifky Katz's bungalow colony. Finally, in order to understand broader Hasidic community building activities, I regularly attended local community board meetings, interviewed non-Jewish neighborhood residents, and followed local and national media coverage of interactions between Hasidim and others that usually reported conflicts over resources, privileges, or representation.

Throughout the book I often use the term "Hasidic" without qualifying which court. In these instances I refer to the range of Hasidic women and girls that I worked with during my research; many of them were Bobover but others included Lubavitch, Satmar, Vizhnits, and the unaffiliated. As noted earlier, I do this because although court distinctions are often important in marriage, school considerations, or distinctions in ritual practice, these distinctions are rarely noted in everyday interactions in school, the streets, or at home by women I spoke with. For this reason, I adopt the local term women used to express widespread commonalities: Hasidish or Hasidic and haymish. Both imply a shared level of religious stringency as well as a shared way of life. Nevertheless, at times when court differences among Hasidic women and girls are important, I note them appropriately.

THE EVERYDAY WORLD OF HASIDIC GIRLS AND WOMEN

Among the Hasidic children I met in Boro Park, boys have very different experiences than girls have as they grow up. They go to separate parochial schools, camps, and social events; they pray in different parts of the communal synagogue, with women and girls upstairs or behind a curtain, hidden from men and boys for whom they pose a potential distraction. Girls can shop in any New York store for skirts, blouses, or dresses as long as they are appropriately modest and do not mix linen and wool, a biblical prohibition. Boys, however, wear distinctive black pants and white dress shirts. From age three on, boys have long side-locks (*payes*), wear black velvet yarmulkes, and, eventually, sport beards and hats appropriate to their Hasidic sect. Boys and girls even come to speak different languages once they enter first grade: boys speak Hasidic Yiddish and girls speak Hasidic English, which I describe in detail in chapters 4 and 5. Boys' and girls' separate socialization prepares them for the gender segregation that increasingly characterizes adult Hasidic Jewish life in Boro Park.

Gender segregation is based on the different responsibilities that women and men have to the Jewish community as a whole. As already mentioned, boys and men study sacred texts, and therefore they are prominent in the Jewish public sphere such as the synagogue, the religious leadership structure of the community, and the social life of the yeshiva. Women and girls mediate the Gentile/secular public sphere and are responsible for interactions with, for example, pediatricians, social service agencies, and the electric company. They are also the ones who keep the domestic sphere running, although Hasidic men are officially the heads of their households.

In the intimate space of the family, however, gender segregation can be more muted. Hasidic fathers and mothers are both actively involved in child care, although, as children mature, fathers become more involved in their sons' educations and mothers increasingly supervise their daughters. Young boys and girls—neighbors, cousins, and siblings—often play together in front of their Brooklyn houses or apartments, riding bikes, playing tag, or jumping rope. Even as they grow older and their lives are increasingly separate, at home brothers and sisters live in close quarters. I was reminded of this whenever I used the bathroom in a Hasidic apartment and saw all the stockings hanging to dry in the shower or when I saw Hasidic boys, teenagers, expertly holding and playing with infants.

Educational Institutions

Educational institutions are a critical factor in boys' and girls' different childhoods. As noted, when Hasidic Jews arrived in New York after the Holocaust, private schools were quickly established for boys, teaching literacy in *loshn-koydesh* 'holy language' used for study and prayer and Yiddish, which was and continues to be the medium of instruction. Once the boys are literate in Yiddish and *loshn-koydesh*, generally by first grade, in class boys read a line of sacred text in *loshn-koydesh*, translate it into Yiddish, and then discuss the text in Yiddish. They receive limited secular education.³⁹

With no Hasidic school available for girls except Satmar and Lubavitch, other Hasidic parents sent their daughters to existing private Hebrew day schools, which were Orthodox, not Hasidic.⁴⁰ Yiddish was not part of the curriculum. Girls (today's grandmothers) learned English and gained passive competence in *loshn-koydesh* as the language of prayer. Additionally, some Hebrew day schools taught Modern Hebrew (*ivrit*), the language of Israel, which differs from *loshn-koydesh*. But when rabbinic leaders realized, in the 1970s, that girls were speaking less and less Yiddish and were exposed to more modern ideas, the majority of courts built private schools for girls.

Yiddish is the language used in kindergarten, and girls learn the Hebrew/Yiddish alphabet in preparation for literacy instruction in both languages. Once girls enter first grade, classes are in Yiddish in the morning, when “Jewish” subjects including *loshn-koydesh* and Yiddish literacy is taught, and English is spoken in the afternoon, when “secular” or “English” subjects are taught. Yiddish for the girls is both a medium for instruction as well as a curriculum subject in that girls are taught Yiddish grammar, spelling, and vocabulary. Girls even have different teachers for their morning and afternoon classes. Hasidic women teach the morning Jewish subjects and Litvish (non-Hasidic, Orthodox) women often teach the English subjects because these courses require a certified teacher with stronger backgrounds in secular education. Because of this educational history, Hasidic girls today are often more fluent in Yiddish than their mothers and their grandmothers, although their fluency starts to break down as they enter elementary school (see chapters 4 and 5).

Boys’ schools structurally and pedagogically reproduce the yeshivas of Eastern Europe, but Hasidic girls’ schools have adapted North American parochial and public school models. In preschool Hasidic classrooms, there are distinct areas for pretend play, blocks and games, and art. Girls sit in small groups at tables or in a circle on chairs. Colorful posters and students’ work are displayed around the classroom, although in most the writing is in *loshn-koydesh* or Yiddish and the work has explicitly religious themes. In one preschool classroom I observed, pictures of three food categories were displayed (fruit, baked goods, and juice), with the appropriate *loshn-koydesh* blessing for each.

Once girls enter first grade, the classrooms more closely resemble parochial schools. Girls sit at wooden desks arranged in rows facing the teacher. They also now wear plaid uniforms to school, much like Catholic school girls, but instead of kneesocks and short-sleeved blouses for the warmer months, they wear tights all year round and long-sleeved blouses to be appropriately modest (*tsnies*). They are also required to have their hair pulled back and are not allowed to wear long earrings or nail polish.

Throughout girls’ schooling, activities familiar to any North American schoolchild, such as arts and crafts, school plays, recess, and assemblies, are informed by Hasidic beliefs about gendered childhood, the nature of truth, and religious authority. For example, if a child hits another child, she may be given a “time out” as in any other North American school. The seat where she must sit during the “time out,” however, is called, in Yiddish, the *tshive-benkl* ‘the chair of penitence’, and the child may wear a red mitten to symbolize that she hit another child.



Two Hasidic women pushing strollers and Hasidic boy on a bike. Beryl Goldberg, photographer.

Hasidic girls' schools, except those that are unaffiliated, are supervised by a Hasidic rebbe and, as noted, directly linked to the authority of particular Hasidic courts. Schools also run sleep-away camps in the Catskill Mountains, where girls can spend the summer months; a number of adult women I spoke with reminisced fondly about these camps. Both boys' and girls' schools are from preschool through high school.

Once girls finish high school at age seventeen or eighteen, they either marry through an arranged marriage or go to a teachers' seminary in Brooklyn or in a Hasidic community abroad such as Toronto (common for Bobovers) or Israel. Most women and men do not pursue higher education, although with local colleges like Touro offering gender-segregated classes at night, attitudes toward higher education are changing (see Heilman 2006). Although they are not allowed to study Torah or, in some Hasidic schools such as Satmar, even to read the Bible, lifelong education has become increasingly important for Hasidic women.⁴¹ Women in Boro Park may attend countless Jewish inspirational lectures and courses, read Jewish books and magazines or *Reader's Digest* which has been communally approved, and listen to cassettes on Jewish themes and self-improvement.

Social Lives and Responsibilities

Hasidic girls and women I met are forbidden to participate in many forms of North American leisure activities such as going to movies, watching television, or reading certain books. However, they are neither isolated nor oppressed by their lives. Levine's (2003) study of Lubavitcher Hasidic teens in Crown Heights, and Davidman's (1991) and Kaufman's (1991) studies of returnees to the faith (bts), all capture the pleasures and strong sense of purpose and community that Lubavitcher girls and women can experience.⁴² Levine has shown that at a time when their North American counterparts often lose confidence, Lubavitcher teen-aged girls maintain a strong sense of self and purpose. She suggests this may come from spending most of their time in the company of other girls and women, as well as the especially strong belief among Lubavitchers that each girl's everyday actions have the cosmic potential to help bring the Messiah.

Because Lubavitcher women in particular are exposed to so many unobservant Jews, they are familiar with feminism and other ways of life more generally. Morris (1998), for example, in her historical study of a Lubavitcher women's magazine, notes how Hasidic women have consistently engaged with and rejected North American feminism. This familiarity with the very cultural forms they critique was also common among the Hasidic women I met, although to a lesser

extent, as was their elaborations around the Messiah. I should not have been surprised, although I was, when Esty Schwartz, the young unaffiliated Hasidic mother I worked with who is prominent in the upcoming pages, winked at me and told me that her daughter, Leye, “looks just like Cindy Crawford with that beauty mark on her cheek.” Hasidic mothers I spent time with liked to show me that they were fluent in much of North American popular culture but rejected its values nonetheless.

When girls are still in school, they get together at one another’s houses and have group shopping excursions. At school productions and community events, such as slideshows and lectures, girls can see friends and socialize. Many do homework together or work on school projects. For married women, weddings are important social events where they catch up with friends and relatives, and spend the evening dancing, eating, and chatting. The constant cycle of Jewish holidays ensures time for visiting and relaxing with relatives and friends, as does everyday shopping with their children in tow.

When girls get married and have children, their responsibilities expand significantly. Primarily they care for their children, making meals, checking homework, playing, and teaching their children. Women do most of the housework, although many had a Polish or Russian “cleaning lady” (*goyte*, feminine form of *goy*) to help out. As mentioned, they are also responsible for mediating any outside services related to the home or the children, such as paying the bills and taking children to the doctor. Hasidic wives must manage and maintain a strictly kosher home, where, for example, dairy products and meat products do not mix and certain foods are prohibited, such as pork or shellfish. Even vegetables must be checked and cleaned lest they harbor tiny flies or worms which would make them nonkosher. A woman and her husband together must observe the complex laws of family purity (*tahares-hamishpukhe*), which regulate all conjugal intimacy based on a woman’s menstrual cycle. Women are also responsible for all preparations for the Jewish holidays that structure the year. During the spring holiday of Passover, for example, the Hasidic women I knew gave their homes the most exhaustive cleaning I have ever seen in their efforts to fulfill the religious requirement that all leavening be removed from the home. Women commonly stayed up all night preparing their homes for the holiday, and during school recess stressed-out teachers discussed how much they still had to do to get their homes ready. Many women with children continue to work outside the home, as teachers, businesswomen, or providing services to other women such as babysitting or selling ready-to-use bags of lettuce that were already checked for bugs. The women I met who



Boro Park side street. Beryl Goldberg, photographer

feature in the pages of this book are busy, active, strong, and, most of all, pious, certain that their way of life is the only one with any real meaning.

BORO PARK

The urban neighborhood of Boro Park, Brooklyn, has imprecise and expanding boundaries. Noach Dear, the previous city councilman, told me that the neighborhood spans 36th to 60th Streets from north to south and 8th to 20th Avenues from east to west. In 1992 a building boom took off when the city changed zoning laws to allow homeowners to build on 65 percent more of their lots (Heilman 1998; Sontag 1998). Boro Park, along with Kensington and sections of Bay Ridge, make up Community District 12, which is home not only to Hasidic Jews but to a diversity of other ethnic groups including Russians, Poles, Pakistanis, Chinese, and Latinos.

Boro Park is one of the largest, most affluent, and most diverse of the Jewish neighborhoods in New York City. The 2000 Census reports that out of 160,000 residents, 82,000 (51%) identified as Jewish and three-quarters of that figure identified as Orthodox (Heilman 2006:73). But with the birthrate in Boro Park double that of most of the city, that figure, according to community members, is much too low. They claim that there are at least 95,000 Orthodox Jews. The Bobover rebbe, Shlomo Halberstam, descendent of the Galician rebbe Chaim Halberstam, was among the first Hasidic leaders to move his congregation to Boro Park, Brooklyn, in the 1960s. Other Hasidic dynasties followed, transforming the neighborhood into a modern day “kingdom” of various courts mapped onto the streets of Brooklyn. With the influx of Hasidic and non-Hasidic Orthodox Jews, many of the long-time Italian, Irish, and non-Orthodox Jews left for the suburbs or moved to other Brooklyn neighborhoods (Mayer 1978). Today Bobover Hasidim form the biggest community, although they generally comprise less than a third of the Hasidic population in Boro Park. Smaller Hasidic groups, commonly identified by a rebbe, include Krasna, Ger, Skver, Munkacz, Pupa, Karlin-Stolin, and Satmar (Epstein 1987; Schick 1979; Sontag 1998).

Hasidic Jews in Boro Park have built many visible and invisible walls in the diverse neighborhood where they live. But to have influence with the city government in shaping their neighborhood, they participate in much of city and state life. Many Hasidic Jews run businesses, vote in blocs for representatives who serve their interests, sit

on community boards, and, when necessary, even use the federal court system to resolve disputes (see Boyarin 2002). Unlike the Amish, who attempt to withdraw into their own communities as much as possible, Hasidic Jews selectively make use of many aspects of contemporary society in order to strengthen their communities. For example, many Hasidim use new technologies like cell phones and computers for business, media for communicating with Jews across national boundaries, and minivans to ferry around their large families. Hasidic Jews have built their own organizations that serve state-like functions such as a volunteer ambulance service, neighborhood watches, and charities. They also have organizations that facilitate the use of governmental social services such as the (now defunct) Council for Jewish Organizations, which routinely helped Hasidic Jews file for state benefits without leaving their neighborhood or even speaking English.

At the same time, Hasidic Jews live in what they call *goles* 'exile'. Despite their participation in the city, state, and nation, for Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn, life is one more phase of historical dislocation and rebuilding, one that will continue until the Messiah arrives. Jewish diaspora reaches back thousands of years, with Jews experiencing multiple dispersals from many of the lands where they had established communities, sometimes over a thousand-year period (Boyarin 2002). Hasidic Jews in Boro Park were exiled and dispersed during the Holocaust from what they nostalgically call the *alte haym* 'old home' in Eastern Europe (most generally what is now Poland, Ukraine, Hungary and Romania). These Hasidic Jews yearn for their former destroyed Eastern European home, as well as the ultimate return to biblical Israel, which will come only with the Messiah.⁴³

The experience of dispersal creates ties of memory and everyday practices that cross time and space. Most Hasidic Jews have family members in enclave communities across the globe, and these ties to the diaspora are periodically activated through visiting, business, marriage, and study. Marriages are made across national boundaries, between Brooklyn and Argentina, for example. Young men and women from Brooklyn go to study in yeshivas and teachers' seminaries as far away as London, Israel, Australia, or Montreal. Through their own privatized transit system, Jewish networks are kept active. Buses (with separate sections for men and women), for example, regularly leave Boro Park for New York State (Monsey, the Catskill Mountains, and Monroe), New Jersey (Lakewood), and other places with large Jewish populations such as Montreal. These ties reinforce the experience of *goles*, allowing Hasidic Jews to claim allegiance to no nation, while simultaneously using the resources of any nation. As a religious dias-

pora their ultimate loyalty is to other Jews whom they call *haymishе yidn* as well as to Jews more generally.

Through an appropriation of urban space, Hasidim in Boro Park have built an alternative city that can, at times, cast its shadow over the mainstream New York City landscape. Hasidim attempt to control the morality of the built environment by patrolling its borders. For example, thanks to a wealthy Australian Hasidic donor, many Boro Park bus shelters display posters of Jewish holiday celebrations and products, rather than sexy underwear ads. Individuals monitor immodest store displays, and, on one occasion, photographs of women's faces were spray-painted out of an advertisement considered immodest. Several months later, the storekeeper changed his display. To further shield themselves from unwanted and unnecessary contact with the world outside their community, Hasidim have built political shortcuts through bureaucracies that enable them to get prompt and effective attention. Hasidic political power stems from their control over Hasidic votes, though they have become intricately involved in the political process, too. Officer Miller, a member of the local police force in the 66th Precinct told me that Hasidim call on their elected officials to put pressure on civil servants who are not accommodating.

One of their strategies for interacting with the city and state government of New York is to use the language of minority status, that is, democratic notions of tolerance for difference in order to define and protect their own communities—communities which themselves explicitly reject tolerance of others as a principle. Hasidic Jews also strive to control their image as it is portrayed in secular presses and popular entertainment; a frequent response to an unflattering portrait is to protest using a lexicon based on North American ideals of protest and civil rights regarding ethnic minority communities. When a film crew came to shoot scenes for the film *A Price above Rubies*, which is about a Hasidic woman who leaves her community and takes up with a Latino boyfriend, Hasidim physically stopped the shoot, using a peaceful sit-in to disrupt the filming and making it impossible to continue.⁴⁴ I spoke with assemblyman Dov Hikind (an observant Jew himself), who had issued a public statement boycotting the film. He suggested that although Hasidim are the same as any other group, they are not accorded the same rights as other ethnic minorities. "You know being politically correct," he told me, "applies to minorities, to the gay community, it does not apply to the Hasidic community . . . it's very unfortunate." In this conflict, Hasidim actively and through their spokespersons, attempted to dismiss what they thought was an unfair portrayal of their lives.⁴⁵

Hasidic attempts to maintain a protected enclave community while selectively participating in the political, economic, and cultural life of New York City can create conflicts with others who live in Boro Park, including neighbors, customers, and sometimes even friends. Some neighborhood activists and non-Hasidic residents of Boro Park suggested to me that Hasidim do not share an “American” vision of community, in which shared space and common interest override ethnic difference. The president of the local community board, Mrs. Canelli, told me that rather than build “community” in Boro Park, Hasidim want to protect themselves from the communities that already exist:

I think they always do that [i.e., take over a community], so that they could put an invisible fence around the area and nobody would come in . . . they want to do like the ghetto, you know, this is an invisible one. This is what they tried to attain and they did.”

Mrs. Canelli criticized Hasidic community building practices that were premised on the exclusion of those who are different. When I told Rifky Katz about complaints I had heard from non-Jewish community members regarding neighborhood politics, she smiled and shrugged, saying, “That’s *goles*.” She elaborated that Jews have always lived among yet kept apart from those who are different from them. Life in New York, she told me, is just one more phase of a journey. Many Hasidic women told me, nevertheless, that it is their responsibility to provide a model of a moral community to Gentiles and to other Jews. Hence they do not like to see divisiveness among Jews publicly aired, or defections or deviant behaviors, which exist in any community. Hasidic women I worked with told me that by building up *klal yisrael* ‘the Jewish nation’ rather than any “American” form of community, they do their part to live according to God’s commandments.

BOOK OVERVIEW

In this book I look across the Hasidic female life cycle, from infancy to girls on the threshold of marriage, to understand how Hasidic women teach girls to discipline their desires and their bodies as they redeem Jewish meaning from North American secular and Gentile life.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on nonliberal Hasidic notions of the self. Through discursive practices such as praising and questioning, Hasidic women try to teach their daughters the desire to “fit in” (a local English term), to fear being like Gentiles, and to shape their curiosity in distinctly nonliberal ways. Hasidic women elaborate beliefs about the person and the nature of children and childhood that are specific

to Hasidic Judaism. At the same time they draw on North American popular psychological models of child development and education. A distinctive nonliberal goal for Hasidic socialization is the cultivation of individual autonomy so that girls can fulfill their communitarian responsibilities to their families, other Jews, and God. Girls who fail to fit in, who ask the wrong kinds of questions or are defiant (*khitspedik*), are silenced, shamed, teased, and eventually may have to leave the community.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the dynamic ways that Hasidic women and girls use bilingualism (Yiddish and English) to mediate both the secular world and differences between Orthodox Jewish women. For Hasidic Jews, no matter which language is used or how mixed Yiddish and English become, the mode of communication is always Jewish. I describe two emerging gendered varieties of Jewish languages, Hasidic Yiddish and Hasidic English. Hasidic men speak predominantly Hasidic Yiddish, whereas Hasidic women speak Hasidic English, transforming English into a Jewish language. However, girls sometimes express ambivalence about not wanting to sound too “modern” or “too Hasidic.” These two chapters show the complicated work that language is doing among Hasidic Jews today: separating Jews from Gentiles, Hasidic men from Hasidic women, and creating hierarchies of piety among observant Jewish women and girls.

Chapters 6 and 7 shift the focus from language itself to talk about the bodies and minds of Hasidic girls in the practices of modesty (*tsnies*). Women and girls’ ways of speaking (regardless of which language), clothing, reading, and comportment are shaped by a belief that public embodied signs produce and provide evidence of Jewish women’s interior souls. I analyze the ways that Hasidic women socialize girls to imagine their embodied difference from a range of others and to encourage the desire to be like Jewish “princesses.” As girls mature and prepare for marriage, they are taught how to talk about new forms of intimacy in modest ways. Hasidic women and girls do not deny the value of secular materiality, knowledge or goals for individual fulfillment. Rather, they claim that they enjoy the “true” pleasures of consumption, beauty, sexuality, and romantic love because they have the strength to elevate them through the religious disciplines of Hasidic modesty.

In the coda I suggest the contributions this specific study of Hasidic women and children makes to wider conversations in anthropology about alternative modernities. I also discuss the challenges an ethnography of nonliberal Hasidic women poses to the possibilities of an ethical practice of anthropology.

The world today has become increasingly polarized by religion, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. Anthropology, with its potential for offering critical yet humanizing close studies of everyday life, has a political responsibility to complicate the analytical categories of the religious and the secular. Discursive and embodied practice between nonliberal religious women and girls unexpectedly bridges what too often these days seem to be unbreachable chasms between modernity and tradition, the secular and the religious, cosmopolitanism and enclavism. My approach has broad implications for documenting the historical and cultural processes by which communities lay claim to authoritative versions of modernity, legitimized by religion or secularism. Robert Orsi has commented on the importance of studying “the despised religious idioms,” not in order to impose a normative grid but to make us challenge our own ways of understanding (2005). My goal is to do just that—to provoke new ways of thinking about nonliberal religion through the everyday words and lives of Hasidic women and children.