Talking about the Jewish Wedding Ritual: 
Issues of Gender, Power, and Social Control 

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INTRODUCTION

This essay focuses on the ways in which a small yet growing number of Modern Orthodox women in Israel endeavored to challenge, resist, or adapt the Orthodox wedding ritual and, in so doing, transform it so that it would serve as an expression of their own identity, values, and ideals.1 The Jewish women I have interviewed identified themselves as both Orthodox, or at least committed to Orthodox balakhab [Jewish law], and as feminists, or at least as being conscious of feminist principles.2 Some of these women found themselves confronted with a tension between these two aspects of their identities, as the values embraced by feminism and Orthodoxy are often at odds.

Orthodoxy, generally speaking, implies an obligation to traditional halakhic practice as developed by the Talmudic rabbis and their followers. Given that these rabbis believed their halakhic system was based upon divine oral law passed from generation to generation alongside the divinely revealed Torah, or written law, Orthodoxy promotes its own authenticity by viewing individuals as bound to submit to divine authority and, therefore, rabbinic law.3 Thus, Orthodox ideology perceives balakhab as “transhistorical,” lifting its believers beyond everyday life, and as “ahistorical,” meaning it does not pertain to history and therefore resides beyond a specific time and space. Feminist theory, on the other hand, challenges the notion of a nonrelative truth, “implied by the bedrock status accorded to an exclusively male tradition of rabbinic interpretation.”4 The Orthodox view internalizes a gender hierarchy, seeing women as subordinate, a view that is “linked to the fact that men have greater obligations in the study of Torah and in performance of mitzvot [religious commandments].”5 In contrast, feminism de-emphasizes gender differences, attributing them to social constructions rather than viewing them as divine, objective, and fixed.6 Therefore, “feminism can be seen as undermining the deepest foundations upon which rabbinic Judaism—as an authoritarian system—depends for its survival.”7

The Orthodox movement has, therefore, regarded feminism with suspicion, perceiving its endeavor for equality as foreign to Jewish thought
and, thus, as something to be rejected. Moreover, it seems that this “rejection has become a key precept of Modern Orthodoxy’s sense of self.”

Orthodox feminism evolved as an answer to this tension, beginning in the United States in the 1980s and spreading to Israel soon afterward. In some ways it struck a deeper root in Israel because Israeli women, as native speakers of Hebrew, had more access to sacred texts.

As demonstrated in the interviews, these feminist women who have chosen to remain in the Orthodox fold describe their religious identities and their feminist identities as equally integral to their personal identities. They do, however, differ in their characterization of the relationship between their two identities. Some feel marked tension, whereas others found these two outlooks more easily compatible and even mutually enriching. Regardless of the degree to which they felt tension, all of the women in my study devote conscious thought and effort toward accommodating their Orthodoxy with their feminism. Therefore, they are necessarily committed to reengaging and challenging their tradition rather than rejecting it as a whole.

I investigated the process by which these women attempt this accommodation in a specific context: the wedding ritual. As I explain later, this ritual is a point of contention for many feminist women. Using the wedding ritual as a case study enabled me to demonstrate how women negotiate between the boundaries of halakhah and the maintenance of feminist values in relation to themselves and vis-à-vis their society. In order to further understand the women’s social context, I also interviewed some of their relatives (the mothers, fathers, and husbands) and some of the rabbis who performed the weddings. I collected the data for this study through in-depth narrative interviews.

The women I studied comprise a fairly homogeneous group. All were in their midtwenties to midthirties at the start of their marriage. For women in the Orthodox society, this age is significant. Women are expected to wed at the beginning of their twenties, preferably soon after they finish their army service or sherut leumi [special civil service for religious women]. All these women lived in Jerusalem while single, specifically in the neighborhoods of Rehavia, Katamon, and Baka. All of these women’s marriages took place within the past decade and all of them are well educated. As the women expressed in their interviews, the years they lived as single women in these specific neighborhoods had an impact on their identity and religious perspective. Living in this specific context enabled them to be exposed, through synagogues, friends, political movements, and so on, to feminist ideas and acts that they had not encountered beforehand. Therefore, they had had
some years to grapple and redefine their religious outlook and identity prior to their marriages.

Since these women identified themselves in their interviews as religious, they felt constrained (to varying degrees) to abide by Jewish law and, thus, they evinced a desire to have an Orthodox wedding. They did not feel that they could take the path of some non-Orthodox women who opt for civil secular ceremonies that are not acknowledged by the Orthodox Rabbinate, the only body authorized to perform Jewish marriages in Israel. Thus all marriage ceremonies in Israel must confirm to Orthodox halakhah.

The Jewish wedding ritual is a significant cultural icon. The performance of the wedding ritual by its participants is a “mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience.” Thus, it promotes and reflects the community’s ideals, boundaries, and values. This function of the ritual explains why many Orthodox leaders and rabbis are hostile and unsympathetic toward any attempts made by women to challenge and change any aspects of their wedding ritual. It seems that “Even the slightest symbolic change in ritual creates a dissonance with primeval memories, associations, and traditional patterns of worship that have nurtured the spiritual self-image of Jewish women for centuries.”

These defined, rigid boundaries and a social setting that is suspicious of changes combine to make these women’s attempts at transformation of the wedding ritual much more difficult than for those who do not see themselves as bound to Orthodox halakhah. The latter group, in contrast, is able to freely choose the elements they like and “trot out and juggle around” other elements that seem archaic and irrelevant to their lives. For these people, “designing the ceremony seems no different than designing the reception.”

THE ACT OF KIDDUSHIN AND GENDER POWER RELATIONS

The transformative aims of the women’s discourses and the discourses of those in their social environment can be understood only in the context of the traditional wedding ritual as it is performed in Israel (and throughout the Orthodox Jewish world) today.

The typical Orthodox ritual comprises a series of steps. Although the blessings and structure of the wedding are uniform in any Orthodox community, there are a variety of customs that change from community to community. The ritual I am describing henceforth is typical of the Modern Orthodox Ashkenazi [European Jewish] community in Israel, and it differs in a few aspects from the typical wedding of the Modern Orthodox community in the United States.
First, before the wedding ceremony itself, the groom signs the *ketubah*, a contract delineating his financial and sexual obligations toward his wife. Then he is led, with loud singing and dancing, to his bride, who is awaiting him in her “queen”-like chair. Upon reaching her, he covers her face with a veil. He turns and walks to the *huppah* [marriage canopy], still accompanied by the wedding guests, and awaits the bride there. The bride, similarly, proceeds to the *huppah* accompanied by more guests. Once again, this escort is done with loud singing and dancing. In most cases the guests will remain standing throughout the *huppah*. This is different than the Jewish American wedding, in which a formal procession takes place with the guests sitting quietly, viewing the entrance of each participant.

Upon reaching the *huppah*, the bride circles the groom seven times accompanied by her mother and mother-in-law to be. She then stands besides her groom, and they both face the crowd. The rabbi stands near the couple, facing the guests as well. This staging is also unlike the typical Jewish American wedding, in which the couple stands with their backs to the crowd, while the rabbi faces them and the guests.

These dissimilarities in performance and staging represent the different values of the communities in Israel and in the United States. These values relate to the degree of formality that the congregation attributes to the wedding ritual, the focus of attention of the community (e.g., the rabbi or the couple), and the influence that cultural surroundings have on the community. For example, the formal procession in the Jewish American wedding reflects a procession “which is part of every Jewish and Christian wedding in the United States” and has no halakhic significance.²¹

Only now does the formal two-part ritual begin. The first part is the *kiddushin* [acquisition] ceremony, in which, following recitation of the betrothal blessing and the blessing over wine, the man fulfills the active role of betrothing the woman by addressing to her the Hebrew words *harei at mekudeshet li* [you are hereby consecrated unto me] while giving her a ring. After this, the *ketubah* is read aloud, separating the two parts of the ritual. Now the second part, the *nisu’in* [marriage], begins, and the *sheva berakhot*, the traditional seven wedding blessings, are read by a man or several men. At the end of the ritual the groom shatters a glass by stamping on it. Finally the bride and groom walk together to a private room and stay there for a short while until they come out and join the rest of the crowd.

The *kiddushin* act is based on the ruling of the Mishnah.²² The Mishnah states: “A woman is acquired [in marriage] in three ways and acquires her freedom in two. She is acquired by money, by deed, or by intercourse . . . and she acquires her freedom by *get* [divorce bill given to her by her husband] or
by her husband’s death” (Mishnah, Tractate Kiddushin, 1:1). The ritual just described includes all three modes of acquisition. The ring given to the bride symbolizes her acquisition by money, the ketubah symbolizes her acquisition by deed, and standing under the huppah and the couple’s entrance into a private room after the huppah symbolize her acquisition by intercourse. Many rabbis and religious leaders have argued that the acquisition established through this act does not mean ownership of the man over his wife. Rabbi Maurice Lamm, a prominent contemporary Orthodox rabbi, echoes this argument. He claims that the kiddushin act is not an act of acquisition but rather implies exclusivity: “When a man ‘takes’ a wife, he chooses one woman and, with her consent, makes her his life-long partner. She has no other husband.”

What is markedly absent, however, from this analysis is that the bride does not perform a mutual act of kiddushin. It is exactly this point that has produced numerous feminist critiques leveled against the traditional wedding ritual, specifically targeting the kiddushin as an act of acquisition and, therefore, of oppression.

The Jewish legal scholar Judith Wegner points out that the framers of the Mishnah view marriage first and foremost as the transfer of ownership of a woman’s sexuality from her father to her husband. Wegner continues and states that in the mishnaic catalogue of various types of chattel and the legal procedures for acquiring them, wives head the list. Wegner suggests that the Mishnah’s framers listed the different types of property along with the wife to indicate both a formal and a substantive analogy between the acquisition of the woman’s sexuality and the acquisition of chattel. Thus, the traditional text’s view of the woman’s sexuality (but not necessarily of the woman herself) as chattel is further expressed in the unilateral nature of the espousal ceremony, whereby the man recites a formula to the woman, who does not make any verbal reply. Even if she were to speak, her words would have no effect, since she is not legally capable of acquiring her groom’s sexuality in the way that he is capable of acquiring hers. In other words, it is specifically forbidden by halakhab for the woman to “acquire” her husband in a mutual act of acquisition. Moreover, some rabbis rule that not only do her words lack the power to acquire the husband, but they also cancel the man’s act of acquisition and, therefore, she must be silent in response to this ritual act.

There are some harsh implications to this legal arrangement—the transformation of the woman’s sexuality to a possession of her husband’s—especially since it is still valid in the rabbinical courts in Israel as well as in the rest of the Orthodox Jewish world. Most significantly, a Jewish woman wed by the laws of the Torah can be divorced only by her husband’s act of giving her a traditional get [bill of divorce]. Should her husband stubbornly refuse
or otherwise be unable to release her in this way, she will remain a measurevet get or an agunah, unable to remarry.\textsuperscript{27} In this matter, Jewish law discriminates openly and explicitly between men and women.\textsuperscript{28} A measurevet get or agunah who chooses to live with another man pays a heavy price. Her children by that man are considered mamzerim [bastards], and under religious law neither they nor their offspring are allowed to marry Jews. Because all marriages between Jews in Israel are governed by Orthodox religious law, such children and their descendants are unable to marry in the State of Israel. In contrast, a married man can have children by another woman without legal sanction.\textsuperscript{29}

The inequitableness of the wedding ritual is not just pronounced in its legal structure. Performatively speaking, throughout the whole ritual, the bride is symbolically invisible both in her physical appearance—her face being covered most of the ceremony with a veil (while her husband is standing beside her uncovered)—and vocally—her voice is not heard at any point during the ritual. These components mark the “Jewishness” of this ritual in regard to gender relations. They reflect the rabbis’ “point of view of the man in relation to the woman whom he is ‘marrying’ while she is ‘being married.’ Similarly, in the subsequent act of giving the ring and reciting . . . the man is the initiator of the marriage link.”\textsuperscript{30} This socially constructs the male as the publicly visible, active subject and the female as the “invisible,” passive object.

This article focuses on the discourse of the brides and those in their surrounding social environment about their wedding ritual and, specifically, about the act of kiddushin.

THE COMPETING DISCOURSES

The term “discourse” is used to explain a variety of practices (e.g., conversation, performative acts, art, media, literature) that produce a social reality and understanding of any given social phenomenon. The verbal expression of my interviewees about their weddings, therefore, reflects the ways they understand, interpret, and express themselves in relation to this ritual. Thus, in this article I have limited the term “discourse” to spoken language alone. This perception of discourse follows Teun van Dijk’s definition, which reads, “The emphasis on the interactional and practical nature of discourse is naturally associated with a focus on language use as spoken interaction.”\textsuperscript{31}

The discourse analysis I have undertaken below can be viewed as an ethnography of speaking, as “It studies the speech acts, events, and situations—everyday and informal as well as formal and RITUAL—that constitute the social, cultural and especially verbal life of particular societies.”\textsuperscript{32} In this sense, discourse can be “considered the focus of the language-culture-
Talking about the Jewish Wedding Ritual: Issues of Gender, Power, and Social Control

society-individual relationship, the place in which culture is conceived and transmitted, created, and re-created.”

In other words, it “is constitutive in both conventional and creative ways: it contributes to reproducing society (social identities, social relationships, systems of knowledge and beliefs) as it is, yet also contributes to transforming society.” Therefore, understanding language is important because it creates social meaning and is fundamental to the construction of the social essence.

In this article I wish to show how spoken language has the power to maintain the continuity of tradition, on the one hand, and to transform tradition, on the other hand. I include a summary of the discourses of the different groups, yet I have stressed the discourse of the brides and the rabbis because I see them as the most influential in this context.

THE BRIDE’S DISCOURSE

When the interviewed brides were asked about their understanding of the wedding ritual and, specifically, about the act of *kiddushin*, they invoked the religious language of Jewish *halakhab* [religious law] and text, thus expressing and reflecting on their religious knowledge. In her interview, Shira, for example, a lawyer in her professional life, opposed the religious act of *kiddushin*, yet she expressed this resistance by using language that refers to her knowledge of religious law and text:

“The rituals assume that from the moment that the man gives the ring to the woman and says to her whatever he says to her, then what he really does by this act is he stakes an exclusive claim on her sexuality. Now this whole concept is not acceptable. It is a feeling that if he betrays me so it is bad! But if I betray him it is horrible! This concept is amazing. In all the matters that relate to my sexuality I am consecrated to one man, but he, on the other hand, can fool around and even if he is a pimp, they [the religious court] don’t obligate him to give a *get*.”

Shira clearly communicated her own interpretive understanding of the legal meaning of the *kiddushin* act. Although she did not cite Talmud or Mishnah, it is clear that her understanding stems from knowledge of Jewish legal texts—a knowledge that is continually conveyed throughout her interview. Her profession as a lawyer has also informed her discourse, as she continuously referred to civil legal terms in addition to Jewish ones. Other brides also made the connection between the act of *kiddushin* and the acquisition of a woman’s sexuality, couching it in religious halakhic and textual terms. For example, Miri, who studies Torah in the *beit midrash* [religious house of study] at Hebrew University, asked: “What does the *kiddushin* mean? From
a halakhic point of view it is an act of acquisition.” Shelomit, a Talmudic scholar and teacher, stated: “I couldn’t ignore the rule of the Mishnah, which states that the ‘woman is acquired in three ways.’” By using the discourse of religious knowledge, these brides entered into a realm that, until recently, belonged only to men.

Some of the brides went beyond merely using the halakhic language and reappropriated it for their own uses. For example, Rivki demonstrated a nonliteral understanding: “It was clear to me that halakhically the kiddushin are not an actual acquisition and it is only symbolic.” Like Shira, Anat also used specific terms related to religious laws but gave them her own nuance:

The whole meaning of the ritual wasn’t easy for me. That is, the fact that he consecrates me. So I gave my own interpretation. Kiddushin [to consecrate] means also to single someone out [leyached]. That means that he singles me out from the rest of the women in the world and I also single him out from the rest of the men in the world. But at the same time it was clear to me that although I single him out, I still am not consecrating him to me.

Some of the brides, throughout their interviews, expressed their initial belief that the use of this knowledge would put them on equal footing with the rabbis. That is to say, they thought they would be perceived as partners in the halakhic discussion about the boundaries of the wedding ritual, yet this was not the case. Their different stories demonstrated that, for some of the rabbis, the brides’ ability to justify changes based on religious knowledge did not make a difference. These women, knowledgeable or not, were not viewed as equal partners in discussions on halakhic matters, precisely because of their gender. Thus, instead of focusing on their actual legal argument, the focus often shifted to their motivation for changing the ritual. This attitude toward women’s knowledge and their desire to change tradition is not only in regard to the wedding ritual. Rather, this stance toward women’s attempts to increase their participation in any ritual or “roles in public life have been overall adamantly resisted. . . . It is neither women’s knowledge that is questioned nor the halakhic validity of what they propose. Rather, it is their motivation—that is, their use of knowledge—that is scrutinized, suspected, and impugned.”

THE FAMILY

Overall, the grooms expressed indifference to and little concern for the wedding ritual and, specifically, for the act of kiddushin. Although they articulated their excitement regarding the beginning of a new life together, they did not focus on the wedding or on the ritual itself.

Some spouses articulated their increasing awareness of the problematic
elements that the ritual entails only after their wives raised the issues with them. Even those who came to this conversation with more knowledge and consciousness about the issues emphasized the gap between their feelings toward the ritual compared to the feelings of their future wives.

The grooms supplied few explanations to account for their stance and, specifically, their indifference or low interest in the wedding ritual and the *kiddushin* act. For example, one expressed that as a man the feminist issues engendered by *kiddushin* did not concern him as much; another groom emphasized his equal and mutual relationship with his spouse, which innately contradicts the idea of acquisition. Another expressed confidence that in a case of a divorce, he would never use his advantage as a man within the religious system.

Although the language these grooms invoked was of total or partial indifference toward the wedding ritual, they did not generate an insensitive discourse. Rather, they expressed empathy to the distress their spouses felt because of the wedding ritual. They tried, in the name of their love and duality, to reach some compromises that would soothe their spouses’ anxiety and soften the patriarchal elements of the ritual.

The mothers who were interviewed for this research generated a complex discourse. This discourse reflected, on the one hand, their partial identification with their daughter’s unhappiness with certain aspects of the wedding ritual, and, on the other hand, their identification with Jewish tradition. Compared to their daughters, these mothers pronounced a more conservative approach regarding tradition and ritual. In this regard, they viewed themselves as the guardians of the tradition—those who need to place borders around the tradition to protect Judaism from radical or even moderate changes.

Part of the mothers’ discourse described how they first learned about feminism from their daughters and how, as a result, they began to identify and feel empathetic to the difficulties their daughters found with the tradition and, particularly, the wedding ritual. The mothers’ language revealed a perception of themselves as integrally connected to their daughters, and thus they experienced things as a continuation of their daughters’ experiences.

Although the mothers identified this connection to their daughters, they also emphasized the gap that exists between their viewpoints and those of their daughters. While they admitted that some changes in the wedding ritual are necessary, they also stressed that these changes need to be done gradually and with rabbinic approval.

Overall, the mothers expressed the need for continuity and the importance of the community. Stressing gradual change through an ongoing relationship with the establishment, these mothers feared radical changes,
which they saw as leading to a break from the community and to a distortion of the familiar face of tradition. It seems like the mothers viewed themselves as socialization agents and, thus, as the guardians of the tradition, including the wedding ritual. By supporting the wedding ritual as it is celebrated today, they were able to retroactively confirm the choices they made about their own wedding ritual and to communicate the idea that they and their daughters are part of a chain. Moreover, this emphasis on the chain of tradition influenced the tone of their discourse as well. While the daughters’ discourse was populated with religious terms that expressed their knowledge, the mothers used the language of emotions to describe their relation to the tradition. It seems like the emotional attachment that these mothers felt toward the tradition was one of the causes of their unwillingness to fully support the changes that their daughters envisioned.

Regarding the question of changing the wedding ritual and, specifically, the act of *kiddushin*, the fathers, much like the grooms, were indifferent to this act and to the wedding ritual in general. Instead, they emphasized the importance of the relationship of the couple. Yet, there is a distinction between their discourses and that of the grooms. The difference relates to the fact that the fathers’ discourse focuses on three main social and institutional structures: the maintenance of the legal and/or social and/or religious systems. Avi and Shmuel accordingly demonstrate this position:

I would say to my daughter do what ever you want to do in another place, but [here] do a ritual that would be accepted. That you will be married according to what is accepted through the rabbinate institution in Israel. . . . I am not saying that I wouldn’t want to change what is accepted in Israel, but first of all one needs to do what is acceptable, so no one will question if the marriage is according to the halakhic law and the Israeli law. . . . There is the ritual, there is the legal issue, and there is the relationship between the husband and the wife and that’s what is important, OK. And I think that the relationship between the husband and the wife is not affected by the fact that the ritual is not mutual.

From a pragmatic point of view I would not suggest to any one of my daughters to get married in a Conservative wedding because, unfortunately, it is not acceptable by the rabbinate in Israel . . . there is no civil marriage in Israel and Jewish religious marriage is defined as only Orthodox, and I am not in favor that my daughters will fight for principles. There is no use for it. . . . Let’s assume they would solve the legal problem regarding the Conservative wedding, so I would have no problem that they would be married that way, or even in a Reform wedding, but not in the Israel of today, or [at least] not with my friends.
Each of the fathers stressed his motivation to keep the ritual, more or less, as it is, but their motivation was based on different considerations. Both Avi and Shmuel highlighted the importance of performing the ritual according to the laws of Israel. Shmuel’s position is especially interesting. Although he is principally in favor of separating religion and state, he emphasizes that until this happens his daughters should remain in the traditional structure for political reasons. He accentuated the social implications in addition to the legal structure. He relates what he said to his daughters: “Why don’t you do your wars on other people? Instead you embarrass the parents who put all the money for the wedding and invite all the friends, and at the end all the [feminist] principles blow everything up.”

It is worth noting that in the statements, and throughout their entire interviews, Avi and Shmuel, as well as the other fathers, frequently used some form of the word “acceptable,” indicating their internalized concern for established institutions. To sum up, the fathers spoke about the importance of maintaining the different structures from a practical and utilitarian point of view.

THE RABBIS’ DISCOURSE
It is possible to divide the rabbis’ discourse into two parts. One part concentrates on the language of religious law and terms, similar to the discourse of the brides. Another part of their discourse, which was much more significant in terms of its length, was their use of mythical and transcendental language to talk about the wedding ritual. Rabbi Zvi displayed such language:

“I see a lot of wisdom in the fact that a man marries a woman. I see something mythical about it. . . . I still think that a certain definition of masculinity is that the man can marry [lase’et] a woman, meaning in the simplest way that he can carry her [nosee], and I think a woman wishes to be carried [nise’et]. I think that there is something beautiful in the image of Boaz and Ruth; in these mythical biblical images: that a man goes to a well and can pick up the stones [when he meets his beloved]. Yes, all these mythical pictures are powerful pictures in my mind. They are stronger than the postmodernist language, which we live by: that besides some physical differences everything is completely equal.

After describing his ideas about gender relations through the play on the Hebrew word lase’et, which means both to marry and to carry, Rabbi Zvi continued to delineate how this mythical idea is embodied in the act of kiddushin:

From this concept [the mythical view of male and female] I think comes the idea of kiddushin, of this ability to carry. And you wrap this
idea in the language of *kiddushin*, when in the ancient Jewish language, *kiddushin* were done through acquisition. The acquisition is not the center. The acquisition is the objectification through which this whole idea [of manhood and femininity] came into the world.

Rabbi Zvi recognized the element of acquisition, the essence of the *kiddushin*, yet he wished to interpret it in a different way. In an effort to use language to construct reality, he viewed the *kiddushin* as embodying a deep, universal, romantic, and mythological truth that relates to the basic relationship that is created between a man and a woman—the man who carries and the woman who wishes to be carried. It is precisely this notion that is reflected in the fact that only the man can consecrate [*lekadesh*] the woman, while the woman can only be consecrated. Zvi therefore transformed the meaning of the *kiddushin* act from one that has legal and halakhic meanings and consequences to one that expresses a romantic and mythical relationship. Ironically, his discourse, which seeks to negate postmodern language, is a modern and Western discourse. It is a language that emphasizes romantic love, which is in itself a modern concept associated with marital relationships.

The other rabbis also used terms that were beyond the halakhic meaning of the *kiddushin* act. For example, Rabbi Shlomo compared the bride to the Shekinah through the use of metaphorical language, thereby replacing the physical dimension of the bride with metaphysical and spiritual dimensions. The other rabbis I interviewed expressed a similar perspective that the act of *kiddushin* reflects the true reality of gender relations as it ought to be in this world. It is a dynamic of carrying versus being carried, activeness versus passiveness, and centrality versus marginality. Yet the relationship between the couple stems not from the man’s public activeness but precisely from the centrality of the woman, from her sexual strength, from her silence, and from the fact that the wedding ritual is nonreciprocal. Therefore, the act of *kiddushin* is tied not only to a cosmological truth but also to a deep psychological and sociological need.

The rabbis’ discourse also reveals a delineation of the halakhic boundaries of the wedding ritual and, therefore, also expresses what can be changed. The rabbis clarified why they drew the limits where they did, citing their emotional connection to the tradition, the halakhic limitations, the social pressure they are under, and the strict rules of the Rabbinate that they must follow.

To conclude, the rabbis’ discourse is uniquely marked by their use of metaphorical language. Although this language originates in their authority, they are also aware of restrictions to this power based on social, political, halakhic, and emotional considerations.
SOCIAL LOCATION AND HIERARCHICAL AXES

It is my contention that there is a direct correlation between the social location of each group and their discourse as described above. As a result of my work on this issue, I have identified three hierarchical axes that are instrumental in establishing the social location of each of the five interviewed groups in this context. These axes are (1) gender, (2) religious knowledge, and (3) authority. These axes were not chosen randomly; rather, they represent two significant cultural concepts: power and control; that is to say, they are based on who has more power and control throughout the negotiations regarding the ritual. These concepts are embodied in each of the hierarchal axes and enabled me to determine if the interviewed group is dominant or subordinate on each axis.

THE GENDER AXIS

In Judaism, men are considered more powerful than women and, thus, have more control over them. As I have demonstrated above, this is also the case in the wedding ritual, in which men are perceived as more powerful than women in terms of their status. Therefore, from the outset gender plays an important role in establishing power and control within the marital relationship. Thus, men are dominant on the axis of gender in the religious context.

THE KNOWLEDGE AXIS

The Jewish world has always perceived the study and the acquiring of religious knowledge as one of its highest and worthiest goals. In spite of this ideal, there have always been marginal groups who could not participate in such an endeavor due to social status or lack of means. As a result of their subordinate social status, women constitute one of these groups. The widespread assumption was that women would naturally misunderstand religious texts or would use their knowledge in the wrong way. Therefore, women were not encouraged and were even forbidden from studying Jewish texts and, as a result, largely remained ignorant in many halakhic matters. Tamar El-Or sums up the phenomenon of religious literacy in the Jewish religious society and claims that “religious-halachic knowledge forms the primary power centre in the organization of the daily life of religious Jewish individuals and communities. It is the material from which the imperative conceptual, moral, political, and ideological fabric is woven. This knowledge lies in the hands of ‘knowing’ me.”

In the ultra-Orthodox and even in the modern religious society, men are still considered to be more knowledgeable and, therefore, to be more powerful than women. Since they are the “knowing ones,” they have the tools to
interpret and to develop religious laws and, thus, they have more control than women in the religious system.

THE AUTHORITY AXIS

It is possible to divide the concept of authority into two categories: (1) the authority within the family—that of parents over their children; and (2) the authority within society—that of the rabbis and, specifically, the rabbinic institution that governs all the members who participate in the ritual. Within the family, the parents are perceived as more authoritative than their children for obvious reasons. The brides and the grooms described in their interviews their need to negotiate with their parents about the changes they wished to make to their ritual. Many times the negotiation concluded with the children relinquishing their desires to appease the demands of their parents. The brides and grooms explained their submission to their parents’ desires by saying that they wished to respect their parents, to avoid conflict, and to maintain the relationship. This dynamic testifies to the fact that the parents were more powerful and had more control over their children than vice versa.

Viewing the concept of authority from a broader social perspective, the rabbis and, moreover, the Rabbinate are perceived as more authoritative than the rest of the participants in the wedding ritual, since they are the ones who dictate the borders of the traditional wedding. However, this authority is not without its own hierarchy. On the one hand, the interviewed rabbis referred to their limited ability to change certain aspects of the wedding ritual, since they were worried that the Rabbinate might take away their authority to perform marriages in the State of Israel. On the other hand, it was individual rabbis who forbade the brides’ and grooms’ requested changes, as the brides and grooms have described in their interviews. Since the wedding ritual is acknowledged in Israel only by the Rabbinate and since ultimately the rabbis have to be willing to perform the ceremony, the brides and grooms were forced to accept the rabbis’ decisions (unless, of course, they choose to marry outside of Israel or in a ritual that the state does not acknowledge). The rabbis, therefore, acted as delegates of the Rabbinate. Therefore, in this context, the rabbis are more powerful and have more control than the rest of the interviewed groups, but the Israeli rabbinic institute has the ultimate power and control.

BETWEEN DISCOURSE, SOCIAL LOCATION, AND POWER

The mapping of each group onto each one of these hierarchical axes can explain the unique discourse that stemmed from each group.

The brides were subordinate on the gender and authority axes but
dominant on the knowledge axis. The brides in this study were unique in their ability to attain religious knowledge. These brides are part of the literary revolution taking place in the modern religious society, which has been described by Tamar El-Or.\footnote{44}

The brides’ knowledge, in turn, enabled them to access the religious law and, therefore, question the ideas, notions, motives, and limits of these laws. This eventually encouraged them to enter negotiations with their groom, parents, and rabbis regarding their wedding ritual. The brides felt not only that they owned the religious knowledge (at least to some extent) but also that they could use this knowledge as a source of empowerment to try to make changes. However, this ability was limited when they met the others who were involved in these negotiations, especially in their encounters with the rabbis, who acted as mediators between the brides, halakhah, and the larger Rabbinate.

The locations of the brides on the three hierarchical axes can explain why their discourse emphasized law and religious language. This is a discourse that strengthens their dominant position and, therefore, empowers them. This knowledge enabled them to first interpret the different ritual acts, then negotiate for their desired changes, and finally act, to some extent, to effect change, ultimately reclaiming and reconstructing their wedding ritual.\footnote{45}

The grooms were dominant on the axes of religious knowledge and gender and subordinate on the axis of authority. Their dominance on the axis of religious knowledge results not only from being men in the Jewish religious system but also from their education in yeshivot [religious schools that specialize in the study of Jewish text].

One could expect that since the grooms are dominant on the knowledge axis they would produce a similar discourse to that of the brides, using the language of knowledge in Jewish text and law. Although some of them did refer to the Jewish law, it was not the main concern of their conversations. This can be explained by the fact that, for these men, being dominant on the knowledge axis is taken for granted. Being born into this privilege, they have no need to use their knowledge in order to feel more empowered.

Rather, the discourse of the grooms can be characterized by the separation between the halakhic realm and the personal realm. They mostly demonstrated indifference toward or lack of consciousness about the wedding ritual and the act of kiddushin. This discourse can be explained by the grooms’ dominance on the axis of gender. Their ability to be indifferent toward the act of kiddushin, with its legal implications, can be best understood by the fact that they do not feel threatened by this act. In case of divorce, they are situated on better legal grounds than their spouses. Therefore, they can afford
to separate the *halakhah* construct—a hierarchical ritual—from their feelings toward their marriage and their future wives. Hence, their discourse stresses the personal realm. They invoke the language of love, romance, and their shared life together as more significant to them than the wedding ritual and the wedding day.

The mothers were dominant on the authority axis as parents, yet they were subordinate on the gender and religious knowledge axes. Their dominance on the authority axis explains why their discourse concentrated on the need to maintain the traditional borders of the wedding ritual and, in general, maintain the Jewish tradition. This discourse emphasizes the way these mothers perceived themselves as socialization agents responsible for maintaining cultural and religious order within the family. The mothers most likely viewed themselves as guardians of Jewish life because they had internalized a long-existing social message that has perpetuated this perception. The historian Paula Hyman describes the origins of this message: “When life in the modern Western world led most assimilating Jewish men to abandon traditional Jewish culture and limit their religious expression to periodic appearances at synagogue and the performance of some communal service, their wives absorbed the dominant societal expectations of women as the guardian of religion.”

This process accounts for the mothers’ domination in the realm of their home, where they have become the guardians and the agents of Jewish tradition. In relation to the men and even to their daughters, the mothers were subordinate on the religious knowledge axis. They did not engage in extensive study of Jewish text. The subordination on this axis can explain the lack of language involving Jewish text and law and the proliferation of emotional language involving Jewish tradition.

Finally, the mothers’ subordination on the axis of gender can also explain their identification with and empathy for, at least to some degree, the aspirations and the frustrations of their daughters in reference to the religious system.

The fathers are dominant in all three axes: gender, religious knowledge, and authority. Their dominance on the gender axis explains their general lack of empathy for and identification with their daughters’ desires to change the wedding ritual. Moreover, this location can also explain their indifference to the wedding ritual or, at least, their choice to downplay the meaning of acquisition embodied in the act of *kiddushin*. Instead, like the grooms, they emphasized the importance of couplehood and maintaining a loving relationship.

The fathers and grooms were also similar regarding the lack of
references to law and text in their language. Like the grooms, their status as knowledgeable is a given in their social system.

Despite their similarities with the grooms, the fathers also shared a dominant position on the authority axis with the mothers. However, their dominance on this axis has an additional dimension that is absent from the mothers’ authority. The fathers’ authority not only is maintained within the small family unit but also exists in the larger context of their society. The power they have as men results from the religious authority that both society and religious law bestow upon them. Therefore, their identification with the different institutional systems (e.g., social, religious, political) is stronger than that of the mothers and, hence, is articulated in their discourse. Therefore, the fathers’ discourse emphasized the importance of remaining within the different institutional frameworks and the need for social and legal approval of the wedding ritual. In other words, their discourse preserves their status in the religious and social system.

The rabbis are dominant on all three axes, and as a result they produced a mythical and metahalakhic discourse. Although the rabbis seem to be located on the three hierarchical axes at positions similar to the fathers, their actual status is higher on the authority axis because their authority to make religious decisions is absolute, as I have explained above.

Since the rabbis’ discourse derives from their absolute dominance on the authority axis (compared to the other participants), it is not accidental that their discourse is ideologically based. Many times ideology is produced by the social elite precisely in order to justify and maintain the social order without using physical force. Moreover, it is also not surprising to discover that gender ideology—an ideology of “difference that elaborates and legitimates the attribution of a range of traits, roles, and statuses to men or women”47—is intertwined with the discourse about the wedding ritual. In this context ideology is a powerful tool used to convince the unconvinced about the importance of maintaining the religious Jewish ritual.

In the specific case of Jewish marriages, rabbinic ideology finds its expression in a mythical discourse. This mythical discourse perpetuates an ideology centered on gender power and relations, giving credence to broader considerations than the halakhic construction of the wedding ritual. Using a transcendental-spiritual-mythical language to discuss wedding rituals stabilizes and reinforces the power of the religious authority and maintains the status quo of gender roles. The rabbis’ discourse distinguishes clearly between men and women and constructs gender roles not as culturally derived but as natural. Although part of this discourse makes women the center of the ritual, it does not really subvert the established gender roles and power. Rather, it
strengthens them because the final result is the justification and maintenance of the *kiddushin* as a nonreciprocal act with all its legal implications. This perception leaves almost no room for fluidity and mobility in gender roles. Thus, the power of the rabbis’ discourse strengthens social stereotypes regarding masculinity and femininity and presents them as an inherent truth. The usage of mythical images and transcendental language (e.g., Jacob and Rachel, Ruth and Boaz, the Shechina) makes the narratives of the rabbis more significant because “Myth deals with imagery, that is, with symbolic language, and it is grounded in the existential archetypes of the narrating society.”48 When the couple speaks with their rabbi and hears this language, it evinces many layers of meaning for them. It touches a deep core regarding nationality, history, and belief, reminding them of the connection between the present and the past. Hence, it has a significant influence.

The mythical and transcendental language used by the rabbis is not unique to them. Susan Sered states that many cultures use “biological and transcendental language in order to construct two essential different genders: male and female. Thus the ‘natural’ and the ‘supernatural’ language serve ‘as powerful tools for idealizing and enforcing difference and hierarchy.’”49

In talking about the ways the *kiddushin* reflects an ultimate truth about the psychological needs and essence of male and female, the rabbis create two different types of beings—the man who needs to be the carrier and, hence, the one who consecrates, and the woman who needs to be carried and, hence, to be consecrated. These explanations illuminate why the rabbis so naturally shifted from the halakhic language to the mythical and transcendental language (i.e., referring to the bride as Shekhina).

The ideology that the rabbis so naturally create becomes an interpretive tool for them, which, ironically, strives to diminish the hierarchical and oppressive elements in the wedding ritual and, thus, ease the distress of the brides about these elements. Their language then tries to reconcile between the halakhic stance and the modern feminist stance. However, there is a need to acknowledge the power of the rabbis’ discourse, which has the ability to maintain the social order and the masculine power perpetuated by the act of *kiddushin*. By ascribing to this ritual act a cosmic truth, they legitimate and sanctify it. Hence, they leave almost no room for criticizing and changing the legal construction of the wedding.

**CONCLUSION**

The different discourses convey the tension that exists between the participants’ subordination to the authorities and their search for autonomy and self-
expression. In the course of this article, I demonstrated that the different groups of interviewees are situated differently on three hierarchical axes and, therefore, the discourses they produced are also positioned differently within the social pyramid. As Rosalind Coward and John Ellis argue, understanding language as a symbolic system, one cannot comprehend the revolutionary potential individual subjects have despite their location in the social construct. Coward and Ellis argue that discourse has the power to make social change, even if this change might be minor because they are limited by other social forces. The power of the brides’ discourse lies in its criticism of the powers of the halakhah, the religious institution, and society to determine the wedding ritual. It has the power to create a refreshing and new way of thinking about the traditional Jewish wedding. Moreover, their discourse demythologized the act of the kiddushin and, consequently, the hegemonic ideology. In this sense, the brides’ discourse can be defined as feminist discourse, which, similarly to gender or feminist performance, can be seen as “imbricated in identity politics.” It allows women to “rewrite themselves and the cultural texts that have defined them.”

More than just the power to reinterpret the different ritual acts, this discourse motivated the brides (with their grooms) to create some significant changes, specifically visual changes, within the wedding ritual. However, the brides’ discourse did not have the strength to create fundamental changes in the construction of the kiddushin act and, therefore, could not change significantly the legal status of women and the imbalance of power that results from the construction of this act.

The rabbis’ discourse and its tendency to mythologize the kiddushin, on the other hand, had the power to actually shape the limits and boundaries of the wedding ritual. As the rabbis employ their own unique discourse, their identification of kiddushin as an act of acquisition no longer reflects only the demands of halakhah but rather creates a gender ideology. In other words, the rabbis were able “to constitute the given by stating it, to create appearances and belief, to confirm or transform the vision of the world and thereby action in the world, and therefore the world itself.”

Since the rabbis’ discourse receives its legitimacy from different institutions (religious, social, political) and from the people themselves, its power to “constitute the given” is more effective than the other discourses, which do not enjoy this legitimacy. In this sense, “the power of the elite . . . is a dominant force.” At times, this discourse even silences other discourses and any of their efforts to resist and to change the social order. In this way, one ideological discourse becomes sacred while the other discourses become marginal.
The brides (along with their husbands) who wished to create change in the religious system found themselves in an ironic situation. The women who chose to press for change while recognizing limits were, consciously or not, contributing to the perception of this monopoly of halakhic power, and, in turn, the rabbis’ power.

Just as Bar-Itzhak demonstrates how the stories that mythologize and demythologize the society of the kibbutz reflect the tension between preservation and contemporary complexities in that society, the same occurs in the case of the wedding ritual. The existence of two linguistic movements, mythologization—expressed by the rabbis’ discourse—and demythologization—expressed by the brides’ discourse—reflects a social tension. On the one hand lies the desire to defend and maintain the tradition, with its ancient roots as it is; on the other hand exists the desire to display the tradition, with all its imperfections and complexities.

As for the discourses of the grooms, mothers, and fathers, they have the ability to either support or divert the power of the brides’ discourse. If these groups choose to offer support, the brides have more leverage to stretch the boundaries of the wedding ritual. Brides who had the support of those around them were able to create more significant changes than the brides who had no social support for their wishes. That is, these discourses can create an additional pressure on the rabbis and the Rabbinate.

This article has revealed that women are not simply passive objects within given patriarchal constructs. Rather, they can choose to be active subjects who work within those same constructs in order to activate change by creating an alternative discourse followed by action (which I did not discuss in this article). The brides in my research, being dominant on the axis of religious knowledge, demonstrated their ability to be social and cultural agents of change. The article, therefore, highlights the specific resource of religious knowledge that can act as a significant tool to create a unique and powerful discourse. Discourse is the first critical step necessary for women to initiate change in a religious system; it is the articulation of the problematic elements in a system and the protest against these elements that must take place before actual change can occur. Thus, the power of discourse is not an abstract power but rather has concrete influence on reality.

Finally, I wish to refer to the words of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who wrote, “seeing heaven in a grain of sand is not a trick only poets can accomplish.” In this article, I intended to follow the Geertzian course of seeking out in these grains of sand the heaven of a much broader phenomenon. Although I focus here on one religious ritual, I believe that these women’s discourse represents a larger phenomenon. These women illustrated
the struggle faced by citizens of a modern, increasingly transnational world to remain at home with their religious traditions and to reconcile their modern identities with premodern ritual practice. Thus, while this article compares different discourses regarding the wedding ritual, it is more broadly about the ways men and especially women deal with the tension between tradition and modernity.

NOTES

1 A different version of this article will be published in *Revisioning Ritual: Jewish Traditions in Transition* (The Jewish Cultural Studies Series; ed. Simon J. Bronner; Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, forthcoming, 2011).
2 The fear of being identified as feminist and, thus, the hesitancy to define oneself as feminist has been discussed elsewhere. For example, see Harriet Lerner Goldhor, *The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1985).
5 Ibid., 16.
7 Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah*, 24.
8 To learn more about the development of Modern Orthodoxy as it has stemmed from Orthodoxy, see Mirsky, “Modernizing Orthodoxies”; to learn more about the tension between Orthodoxy and modern women, see Manning, *God Gave Us the Right*; Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, eds., *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).
9 Mirsky, “Modernizing Orthodoxies,” 45.
10 I was looking for women who defined themselves as religious and feminist and for whom the wedding ritual was a point of contention. These women had similar characteristics, and thus the group came out as a fairly homogenous group.
11 These neighborhoods are the venue of several liberal Jewish study centers and of various types of social, religious, and spiritual activities. Their populations include a sufficient concentration of immigrants from English-speaking countries.
12 Most of these women had a graduate degree and some had a PhD degree or were in the process of getting one. In addition, most of them spent a significant amount of time, after high school, going to women’s yeshivot [house of religious studies], where they learned materials that men learn in their yeshivot, such as Talmud. This fact is significant since different research projects demonstrate how women’s education has an impact on the personal processes they go through and on their identities.
In this article, halakhah refers to Jewish law as interpreted by Orthodox rabbis, which is the halakhah that the women I studied had to challenge in order to formulate the type of wedding rituals they desired. Accordingly, all the rabbis I interviewed were Orthodox.


Ross, Expanding the Palace of Torah, xiv.


I have chosen to focus on the Ashkenazi ritual because most of the brides I interviewed were Ashkenazi and were wed according to Ashkenazi customs.

To learn more about American Orthodox wedding customs, see Rela Geffen, Celebration & Renewal: Rites of Passage in Judaism (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993); and Ochs, Inventing Jewish Ritual.


The Mishnah is considered to be the first written recording of the oral laws, which, according to tradition, were given to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai.

Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage (San Francisco: Jonathan David, 1980), 151.


There is a certain age at which the woman does not need her father’s consent, but even then, through this act she transfers her sexual rights to her husband’s ownership. In the wedding ritual this transformation is not expressed in any performative way.


An agunah is a woman whose husband has disappeared or is otherwise unable to give his wife a get [bill of divorce]. A mesurevet get is a woman whose husband abuses the power given to him by halakhah and refuses to grant her a get. For more information on agunot and mesurevet get, see http://www.agunot.org.

During the tenth and eleventh centuries, Rabbi Tam (Gersom ben Yehudah) issued a ruling in Ashkenaz Europe. According to this rule, when a man initiates the divorce, the woman needs to agree to accept his get. This rule was supposed to balance the power relations between men and women in cases of divorce. Nevertheless, the gap between men and women in this context is still significant, since in case of her refusal
he can get permission to divorce her as long as he gets 100 rabbis to agree. Moreover, the implications for their children from another spouse, while they are still married, are different, as I have explained above.


33 Ibid.


35 Bauman, “Performance,” 43.


37 Boaz and Ruth are biblical characters from the Scroll of Ruth.

38 This is a reference to the story of Jacob, who is able to remove a heavy stone from a well by himself when he sees Rachel, his future wife, for the first time (Gen 29:10).

39 The Shekinah is held by many to represent the feminine attributes of the presence of God (*shekhinah* is a feminine word in Hebrew), based especially on readings of the Talmud and later on the mystical philosophy in Judaism called Kabbalah.

40 Susan Sered, Romi Kaplan, and Samuel Cooper compare different groups’ discourses in the context of different social hierarchical axes and in the context of different religious rituals. It is interesting to compare their findings with my findings. See Susan S. Sered, Romi Kaplan, and Samuel Cooper, “Talking about Miqveh Parties or Discourses of Gender, Hierarchy and Social Control,” in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* (ed. Rahell Wasserfall; Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 139-65.

41 See, for example, Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law* (New York: Schocken, 1984).

42 Amos Funkenstein and Adin Steinsaltz, eds., *The Sociology of Ignorance* (Tel Aviv: Misrad Habitachon, 1988, in Hebrew), 75-76.


44 Ibid.

45 To see more about the changes they did accomplish, see Koren, “The Bride’s Voice.”


49 Sered, “Religiously Doing Gender.”
52 Ibid.
55 For discussion of changes made through action, see Koren, “The Bride’s Voice.”