

**Taylor-Guthartz, Lindsey. Challenges and Conformity: The Religious Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women. London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in association with Liverpool University Press, 2021**

Jim Bunton

Volume 20, Number 1, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1113781ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/wij.v20i1.43948>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Women in Judaism, Inc.

ISSN

1209-9392 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Bunton, J. (2023). Review of [Taylor-Guthartz, Lindsey. Challenges and Conformity: The Religious Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women. London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in association with Liverpool University Press, 2021]. *Women in Judaism*, 20(1), 1–4.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/wij.v20i1.43948>

**Taylor-Guthartz, Lindsey. *Challenges and Conformity: The Religious Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women*. London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in association with Liverpool University Press, 2021.**

Reviewed by Jim Bunton, Des Moines Area Community College, Ankeny, IA, USA

Keywords: modern orthodox Jewish women, British Jewish women, Saba Mahmood

Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz's book *Challenges and Conformity: The Religious Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women* elucidates British Orthodox Jewish women. This study gives a voice to women, who are often hidden or perceived as being indistinguishable from one another. Taylor-Guthartz reveals an intricate and multifaceted community. "Given this complex, shifting reality, I have not attempted to construct a rigid and all-encompassing system of precisely defined categories" (64). Although diverse, these women are committed to Judaism while using creativity to create a space within male-dominated structures and demonstrating agency and adaptability despite numerous obstacles while at the same time maintaining loyalty to their vision of being nurturers and protectors of family and community.

More research is needed on British Jewish women. Britain has the fifth-largest Jewish community. However, very little has been written about this community, and less about women. For example, Geoffrey Alderman's *Modern British Jewry* (1992) only devotes three pages to women. In addition, the only other studies were commissioned by Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: *Women in the Jewish Community* (The Preston Report), 1994, and *Connection, Continuity, and Community* (the Women's Review). These reports gathered information across the denominational spectrum by utilizing task forces on education, synagogues, religious matters, social issues, and the family. It documented women's viewpoints on these issues and made recommendations. Taylor-Guthartz's work is significant as she reveals women's lives not to address problems but to understand how women utilize agency to fashion possibilities and create space. This book interacts with other works that have sought to demonstrate the agency of religious women.

She builds on and critiques the work of Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2004). Mahmood's study criticized feminist's failure to come to terms with the views and opinions of religious women except as subjects that need reform (Salam)<sup>i</sup>.

Her book demonstrates how Muslim women in Egypt utilized agency by stepping outside the traditional roles of religious women to become educators and leaders, promoting a return to piety within the larger Islamic community. According to Taylor-Guthartz, Mahmood's work, if applied to a Jewish context, would only apply to the Haredi community. Taylor-Guthartz models a more nuanced approach to studying religious women. She does this by utilizing self-identified categories. Recognizing traditionalist, Modern Orthodox, and Haredi creates an opportunity to examine the complexity of Jewish women; this study also considers that most British Jewish women identify with Orthodox (even though their level of observation may vary). This approach is one of the most important contributions of Taylor-Guthartz's work.

In addition, she draws on the work of Susan Sered and Chave Weissler on the use and innovation of rituals in women's lives. These studies analyzed how women have used rituals to create space for worship, which is often referred to as superstition. *Challenges and Conformity*, through interviews and surveys, gives a vantage point for studying how ritual is used by women as reflected by their perspective within the Jewish community and how this changes as women move from, for example, Modern Orthodox to Haredi.

The framework of the interplay between men's power and women's agency is provided by Catherine Bell's concept of the "nexus of power relationships." Taylor-Guthartz describes Bell's work as a sort of dance, "a complex pattern of male constraints and permission with female innovation, acquiescence, negotiation, adaptation, and occasionally subversion rather than outright resistance" (258). The nuanced approach of Taylor-Guthartz allows the differences in Modern Orthodox, who are more accepting of the ideas of Western liberalism and are more apt to challenge rabbinic authority directly (i.e., partnership *minyanim*), to Haredi women who create space through the use of novel, and independent rituals with the express goals of healings, finding partners, etc. Thus, the rabbinic recognized areas of women's responsibility.

The author uses various research methods, including observation, interviews, and surveys. Using a pseudonym is her method of encouraging her interviewees to speak freely. She also includes interviews with rabbis. She states that her study is not a rigorous quantitative analysis. Still, her surveys contribute to understanding how women use rituals to create religious space amidst a male-dominated religious structure. By analyzing the responses of traditionalist, Modern

Orthodox, and Haredi, we can better understand the utilization of agency. For example, surveys allow differences in the use of rituals to be noted. Haredi women's use of rituals is focused on piety; traditional women assume the rituals of their parents. In addition, they are most likely to learn these rituals through mimetic observation. And finally, Modern Orthodox women typically are more doubtful of the power of rituals, deriving from a better education in textual studies.

This book is an excellent resource for Jewish Studies scholars. It encourages further study of the lives of religious women, so scholars of gender and religion would benefit from interacting with this research. The book is accessible to lay persons and students, as the author defined Jewish terms and ideas so that it could be assigned in a class for undergraduate and graduate students. It raises questions that invite further investigation.

In short, this study's strength is that it builds on Mahmood's work by studying the lives of religious women with a nuanced approach. It initiates a long overdue conversation, not trying to reform but rather to understand religious women. It gives a better understanding of gender and women in particular, freeing us from the tyranny of the idea that there is only one way to be a feminist. Hopefully, this book will encourage other studies of religious women in majority and minority religions.

---

<sup>i</sup> Salam, Maya. “Sabe Mahmood, 57, Dies: Traced Intersection of Feminism and Islam.” New York Times, 28 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/28/us/saba-mahmood-dead.html>. Accessed: 12 May 2024.