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"Are They Like Their Grandmothers?" A Paradox of Literacy in the Life of Ultraorthodox Jewish Women

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An attempt to withhold social change through education is described in anthropological fieldwork with ultraorthodox Jewish women, members of a Hassidic sect in Israel. After attending at least 12 years of formal schooling, they continue to study as adults in their limited free time. The meaning and social usage of their literacy are controlled by the men of the community. This article examines whether educated women can behave ignorantly and be treated as ignorant. A model of the social meaning of literacy is presented. LITERACY, GENDER, JEWISH ORTHODOXY, REPRODUCTION OF CULTURE

> Our school education will be considered a success when the girls reach the level of their grandmothers who never attended school.
>
> —Rabbi Wolff (headmaster and founder of a large orthodox Jewish girls' school)
>
> If you teach a woman to read so she may know her place, she may learn that she deserves yours.
>
> —C. Kaestle, 1985

In his comprehensive article on the history of literacy, "The History of Literacy and the History of Readers," Kaestle (1985) claims that no single theory is large enough and precise enough to answer the "grand questions" of literacy: (1) Does literacy operate as an emancipatory or a conservative power? (2) What are the relations between literacy and modernity, industrialization, urbanization, religion, schooling, gender, ethnicity, political ideology, and the like? (3) Can research demonstrate causality between literacy and these phenomena?

Although Kaestle does not see one way of coping with these "grand questions," he suggests approaches to the "immense exciting research agenda" that they propose. He calls for a shift in focus from the history of literacy to the history of the readers, from a quantitative study of crude literacy to a qualitative study of its meaning, and for a detailed decoding of the contextual value of literacy that he calls its "cultural price tag." Literacy, he states, means "the ability to decode and comprehend written language at a rudimentary level, that is, the ability to look at written words corresponding to ordinary oral discourse, to say them, and to understand them" (Kaestle 1985:13).

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The present work analyzes literacy in a broader sense than Kaestle intended, using some of his suggestions. It is based on anthropological fieldwork carried out among ultraorthodox Jewish women from the Gur Hassidic sect[1] in Israel. A brief description of the two main approaches to the understanding of literacy is followed by an analysis of the social meaning of literacy for men in contemporary Jewish orthodoxy. The history of orthodox women as readers and a description of their opportunities to gain knowledge are followed by an ethnography describing a public event in which the women experience literacy. This experience is seen as part of a manifest effort to teach women their place as obedient to men and religiously ignorant. The literacy experience illustrates what women actually learn and how their ignorant state can be maintained despite their certain religious literacy. A new model of the sociological meaning of literacy is offered.

1. Jewish Literacy

The Autonomous Model; The Ideological Model

Street (1984) describes a dichotomy in the definitions of literacy that results in two models: the autonomous and the ideological. The autonomous model defines literacy as a set of capabilities achieved by study, a resource for personal and social change that is not dependent on the social context. Literacy is a cognitive competency that can be used independently of the individual or social condition in which it is employed. The changes caused by gaining literacy or becoming literate are foreseeable. They allow the literate to deal with the abstract, to think objectively, and to distinguish between logic and mystique (Greenfield 1972; Hildyard and Olson 1978). On the social level, literate societies change from simple to complex organizations, develop higher technology, and become more democratic (Goody 1968, 1986; UNESCO 1975).

The ideological model interprets literacy within the context in which it is taught, used, handed over, or withheld. Literacy is regarded as part of the social order and its hegemony, rather than as a separate device for dealing with or changing it (Bourdieu 1967; Graff 1979, 1981; Henry 1972, 1976; Meyer 1977; Meyer et al. 1979). Literacy receives its actual meaning through the social institutions involved; these lend literacy a political and ideological significance that cannot be overlooked. The acts of reading and writing in particular, or the access to knowledge in general, are not mere technical skills, but should be explained and understood in light of this actual meaning. The ideological model acknowledges several literacies generated by their different meanings, rather than one absolute literacy as a parameter of skills (Street 1984). The existence of many literacies weakens the rigidity of the hegemonic approach toward the role of education. Some supporters of the ideological model choose to emphasize this fact, claiming

that the access to knowledge and literate skills is molded by multiple elements within society, not all of them socially coordinated. Thus, control over these resources is made more complicated and raises the possibility for social change (Freire 1985).

Conducting an anthropological study offers the opportunity to follow the routine of learning, the contents of knowledge, and the impact of study on the social order and the way it is perceived by the learners. The ideological model, accepted as the preferred one for this research, requires clarification of the local meaning of literacy and its "cultural price tag."

Jewish Literacy = Men's Literacy

The history of Jewish orthodox men as readers is ancient. In the Bible, men were commanded to study. The traditional interpretation of this command ("And you shall study it day and night") was always understood to be addressed to men, although not forbidden to women. We know that some women did study, and feminist research on the history of Jews and Judaism discloses evidence of women's literacy (Weissman 1976, 1986).

Heilman describes the Jewish male's act of learning as a ritual (1976, 1983). The act of study per se creates a correspondence between the content (the traditional curriculum) and the social reality. Although this argument might seem tautologous—how can study create compatibility between the social reality and itself?—Heilman clarifies it by referring to the profound difference between the traditional Jewish way of studying *(learnen)* and the intellectual act of learning. Learnen means accurately performing a complex pattern of studying not necessarily leading to the acquisition of any specific knowledge. Learnen as a ritual of studying assures that the participants reproduce their social reality. The discussions, doubts, questions, and answers transfer the men spiritually to the time of the Talmud (the collection of ancient Rabbinic writings constituting the basis of religious authority for traditional Judaism). Each man alone and all men together duplicate ancient polemics and revalidate them. Learnen stems from the people's belief, creates something to believe in, and expresses belief. It is therefore a highly significant cultural performance. In their life among Gentiles or nonorthodox Jews, the orthodox encounter severe problems of reality interpretations. Learnen plays a major mediating role between the contradictions that this situation evokes. Instead of widening the gap between orthodoxy and modernity, the traditional way of studying affords a theoretical and a practical way of living with both: the current reality is interpreted through the teaching of the Talmud, which serves as a commentary on current situations and problems. Boyarin endows the act of study with a similar social meaning: "The task of Jewish study is to create community among Jews through time via language" (1990:415).

This description of Jewish literacy as a traditional mode of coping with new social realities is of major importance. In a way, both Heilman and Boyarin are addressing Kaestle's grand question about the relationship between literacy and modernity and the adoption of literacy as a defender against social change. Their analysis of learnen as ritual stresses two interesting points: (1) the significance of compatibility or correspondence between the curriculum and the social reality of the learners as a dialectic bond and (2) the status of the learners. Heilman points out that the redefinition of the social strata through the ritual of learnen operates in men's favor. Not every male learner can make religious decisions or act as a knowledgeable man, but within orthodoxy only men study the Talmud and have the opportunity to use Jewish literacy as a life commentary, and only they can become religiously powerful.

2. Orthodox Women As Readers

Unlike their male counterparts, Jewish women have a very short history as readers. Orthodoxy permitted education for women because of external pressures on the Jewish communities in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century (Weissman 1976). The expansion of compulsory education and the acceptance of Jews as citizens in some central European states forced the Jewish communities to consider educational alternatives to the state schools offered by the local governments.

The two populations under the greatest cultural threat were the young and adolescent girls. Boys enjoyed a well-established Jewish educational system, so that, even if they went to public school to gain secular knowledge, their afternoons could be spent at a Jewish *heder*, a traditional classroom for young boys. Girls and women, who were excluded from such major religious rituals as learning, were easily attracted to the new cultural opportunities outside the traditional circle. Within a short time after the fall of the ghetto walls, middle- and upper-middle class girls spoke better German, Polish, or Russian than they did Yiddish.

The orthodox community in Europe, unlike others, such as the Zionist community, excluded women and girls from the educational system until it became aware of the great cultural gap between males and females. In 1917 the first Jewish orthodox school for girls was established in Krakow, Poland. The range of educational facilities open to orthodox women expanded greatly, and by the eve of World War II, a chain of schools called Beit Yaakov had spread across Europe, America, and Palestine, enrolling some 38,000 students. The significance of this education for girls changed, and changes to this day, in accordance with the orthodox community's confidence in its ability to survive culturally. When the community feels threatened by exposure to other options on the cultural market presented by Gentiles, Zionists,

national orthodoxy, and so on, it responds by expanding the educational opportunities for women to such areas as nursing, typing, and science—courses meant to compete with the attraction of rival options. When the community feels secure, it narrows the curriculum.

This sociocultural phenomenon coincides with findings of studies about women's education in general. Bryant (1979) claims that the admission of women to universities in England at the turn of the century was not a threat to the social strata, but, rather, a cultural reconstruction of their previous positions. Status that previously had been gained by property and heredity had to be reinforced with higher education due to the growing flexibility of the cultural market. Kaestle (1983) related the expansion of schooling in America to the settlers' fears of different cultural and religious influences on their children. As the mothers of the next generation of male voters, women were given the opportunity to study in the early days of the Republic.

Schwagner points out the paradox of this mandate for women's education. The concern of the young Republic to educate the male citizens helped women gain access to sources of knowledge and, later, to the right to elect and to be elected. In a way, literacy as a means of social control did not meet the original expectations (Schwagner 1987). The same intentions of control were behind the opening of education to women in Jewish orthodoxy.

3. Educated and Ignorant

The women I studied belong to the Gur sect of Hassidim.[2] During the more than two years I observed them closely, study proved to be the most frequent activity of their limited leisure time. These women, who had graduated from the sect's high school after 12 years of formal schooling, and perhaps gone on to train as teachers, continued studying as adults. Fitting one or two evening *shiurim* (lessons) a week into their busy schedules as wives and mothers, they could be seen hurrying out of their houses after rushing small children through dinner and leaving orders for older ones. They may or may not have seen their husbands as they returned from evening prayers.

The women who avail themselves today of these "literacy events" live in a community that feels relatively secure and strong after many years of confronting cultural threats. The Gur Hassidim are part of the ultraorthodox sector in Israel that totals some 4% to 5% of the population. This sector suffered staggering cultural blows during the last 200 years. The Enlightenment enabled Jews to become citizens of different societies and cultures; the Holocaust destroyed the traditional communities and subverted the idea of a possible Jewish diaspora; and Zionism offered new opportunities for Jewish life. The minority of Jews who remained orthodox had to contend with these facts of history and offer a relevant perception and prescription for living. In their struggle to survive as a distinct sect within orthodoxy, and in their bat-

tle with the nonorthodox Jewish cultural world, the ultraorthodox realigned their attitudes, including those regarding women's education (Friedman 1982, 1986).

The present values offer a counterculture to modernity while supporting strict, separatist, sexist, and puritanical values. The idealized woman today is one who stays at home, takes care of her ever-growing family, and enables her husband to remain in the Yeshiva for as long as he wishes. The poverty this invariably brings is seen as a form of worship. Her competence and unavoidable knowledge are regarded as defects.

How can one understand this paradoxical situation? How can the educational process for women be intensified while its importance is denied? The following ethnography explores the use of an educational experience as a conservative tool, as a vehicle for teaching women to be as ignorant as their grandmothers. The ethnography and its interpretation derive from the ideological model and present literacy as culturally constructed. On the other hand, the description that follows and its analysis offer a certain critique and remolding of the ideological model. The discourse, which is a synthesis of a few actual lessons,[3] demonstrates both the profundity of the paradox and the women's negotiation with it.

A Lesson on the Psalms

Shoshana is 42 years old, a senior teacher in the Beit Yaakov Girls School, and the daughter-in-law of the Gur Rebbe (the spiritual leader of the Hassidic sect). She comes to the Hassidic neighborhood from the town of Bnei Brak, a major orthodox center near Tel Aviv, every other week to give the women a lesson in Psalms (Tehilim). She begins:

Shoshana: A lot has been said about women's education. Just the other day we read a serious discussion about it in *Hamarve* [a magazine read throughout the ultraorthodox community]. The conclusion was that it is a positive thing as long as it doesn't interfere with men's studying and the household routine. The question is what to learn. Should we learn *dinim* [Jewish law], or other things. Here, for example, I have chosen to teach Tehilim. Why? Some people scorn and mock it, saying it's for simple people. We are all familiar with the term *tehilimzoiger* [a simpleton who is paid to recite Psalms on certain occasions], and we tend to depricate him. One day, a *gevir* [a wealthy man in the Jewish community] held a big celebration to which he invited many people. After the meal an esteemed scholar discussed Torah with some of the guests. The poor tehilimzoiger put a word in and was chased out by the host. The scholar made the host repeat the celebration, this time with the poor man as guest of honor. The tehilimzoiger, he said, though simple and ignorant, speaks from the heart.

We are like that. We learn Tehilim in order to express our devotion. We enter the orchard of study and knowledge and we gather bits and pieces, as much as we are able to, but only what we can understand and mean at the same time. So, after such a heavy introduction, let us start with the first sentence.

"Blessed is the man who walked not in the counsel of the ungodly nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful."

Who are the scornful? Those who are smug, even if they believe in God, and make no sins, they are not interested in Tora u mizvot [the holy body of knowledge and its commands]. They deal with the needs of the here and now, the needs of the body. And what does this have to do with us today? We too waste time, for example we read *Hamodia* [an ultraorthodox newspaper] on Saturday; even *Hamodia* is a waste of time. Some people have turned Hol Hamoed [the days between the two holy days of Passover and Tabernacles when orthodox Jews refrain from working but, unlike Sabbath and Holidays, are allowed to travel] into fun days. They go to amusement parks and waste their time. Each of you knows where the *moshav leitzim* [seat of the scornful] is in your community—where women sit and gossip. Don't go there. You wonder what you should talk about when you take the children out in the afternoon, well that's not difficult. You can talk about the problems of raising children, share recipes, discuss the health of the children. There are plenty of things to talk about as mothers and wives without gossiping.

Hanna: What about divrey Torah [Torah subjects]? Can't we talk about them?

Shoshana: Silence! Why suggest something that no one will do? You're sitting outdoors, the kids are all over you, that one has to go to the toilet, and you talk Torah?

Hanna: If we think Torah, we can talk about it like any other subject.

Ita: Talking about material things is also Torah. It's preparation for Torah. If you accept your role as a woman and you really mean it, then there are plenty of subjects to talk about: how not to waste food, how to control your temper with the children, how to keep your husband's mind free for studying. Thank God, there's so much to talk about.

Shoshana: It reminds me of a story about a woman who had a hard day at home. When her husband came home late that evening he said to her: "I envy you because your every action is a *mitzva* [a good deed]." She stared at her wet hands in the sink and said: "Each plate I wash is a mitzva?" and her voice was low and dejected. "Yes" he replied, and the answer gave her a lot of strength to go on.

To sum up this first sentence, we see that the moral of the lesson is not to be easily led by bad influences. Not to be influenced. Even if you say to yourself that you live in a good neighborhood and the people around you are all good Jews, there is always something you should stay away from: a weak girlfriend, a badly chosen friend of your child. We must use our judgment and have a strong backbone so we won't bend. Sometimes we need the strength to swim against the current, because what seems to be the mainstream is not always the right stream.

We'll end each of our lessons with dinim. Today's law will deal with Sabbath and I've asked Tzipi to prepare it for us.

Tzipi, 21 years old, has been married for one year and is pregnant. Having been a good student in the teachers seminar, highly valued by her teachers and married to a promising scholar, she was appointed a

teacher in the Beit Yaakov Girls School until she had a baby. She holds a shabby notebook into which she glances every now and then.

> *Tzipi:* Today, I'll talk about the labor of picking or selecting food during Sabbath. You all know that there are seven labors, from which we derive all the activities forbidden to us on the Sabbath. I am passing on to you things I learned at Beit Yaakov, from notes I took in Rebby Leitman's course on Jewish laws. I know some of you do things differently at home, and in Hassidism what you see at home is what counts, so I'm not telling you what to do, I'm only telling you what I learned and what's written here in my notebook.
>
> Being forbidden to work on the Sabbath, including the acts of picking and selecting, when we eat we may not select food. We are allowed to take what we want now with our hands and not with a utensil, and eat it right away. If, for example, there is a bowl with apples and oranges, and you wish to eat an apple, you take one with your hand and eat it. The apple is then considered food and the oranges are garbage, and thus you've picked out the food and left the garbage, and this is allowed.

The women began to react: "What do you mean by garbage? What if afterwards you want to eat an orange, how can you then eat garbage? Why do you use the terms food and garbage?"

> *Tzipi:* I don't mean garbage as garbage, it's just to differentiate between the two. If you need the apple, then the orange is garbage, and later if you need the orange than the apple is garbage. It's just "as if," "as if" the food you don't want is garbage, so you can select.
>
> *Mindi:* Then why do you have to call it garbage? That's not an appropriate term for food you may eat later.
>
> *Esty* (a Baalat Teshuva, a reborn Jew): Can't you see, it's a game of semantics, just a trick so you can pick on a Saturday. The food doesn't turn into garbage once you've called it garbage, it only allows you to take it. Nothing happens to the food.
>
> *Brachi:* I still don't understand why it has to be called that, and why we need this trick?
>
> *Tzipi:* What do you want from me? I only tell you what I wrote here in my notebook, what I've seen at home. And you, you want me to think, and I can't think, I don't want to think.

4. The Cultural Price Tag of Ultraorthodox Women's Literacy

The lesson is cut short at the point where Tzipi refuses to think. She labels Brachi's question irrelevant and unfair. Brachi has asked a metaquestion, a question about learning, about reasoning, about the meaning of the law. She is not asking about the procedures, about the efficacy of the judgment. She is questioning the system. Tzipi retreats to the position of the socially ignorant woman, the woman who knows she is not allowed to know and says that she can't know and won't know. But once she has been given the opportunity to think, can she suppress her eagerness to understand? Can she keep her intelligence

in check? How can she and the other women present their education and knowledge under a mask of ignorance?

Some of the answers to these questions reside in the ideology and practice embedded in the educational system for women that is analyzed briefly below.

a. Pragmatism

Each of the women's gatherings I attended dealt with everyday behavior. *Shiurim,* the most popular forum for getting together, always contained the transition from abstract content to pragmatic interpretations. The topics of the women's lessons were never totally abstract. They usually dealt with laws and judgments and their application to daily life. Not once did a teacher conduct a theoretical discussion about the reasons behind those laws or their meanings. Such discourse emerged only indirectly from the participants.

Education for pragmatism stresses women's most important role as "doer": material, earthbound, efficient. Women are not meant to contemplate the theoretical aspects of what they have to do; they are to think only of the practical aspects. Education for pragmatism teaches them to love *tachles* (practical knowledge), to treat it as their kind of knowledge, and to reject *tochen* (theoretical knowledge) as dangerous terrain littered with no entry signs.

b. Balebatishkeit

Also important, although not reflected in the lesson chosen here, is the display of the women's *balebatishkeit* (the culture of housekeeping). Because they deal with practical knowledge, their competence as scholars lies in the home. They imitate men's discussions and debates and run a polemic session just as men do, but with such topics as buying at the local store versus going to the trouble of traveling downtown to buy cheaper, keeping flour and sugar in the refrigerator so worms won't get at them, and so on. In this kind of lesson, the older and more experienced women are confident enough to speak, whereas the younger brides sit quietly.

Balebatishkeit as a form of knowledge delineates women's intellectual capabilities and their role as housewife. Taking pride in one's own balebatishkeit, displaying it in public, demonstrating the efforts invested in it, all strengthen the ties between the various roles designated for women in the ultraorthodox community. They go along with the scenario and act the good *balabostes* (housewives), but the play is constructed out of scholastic material. They act like a *hevruta*—the small group of male learners who form the basic study cell in the traditional act of learnen—but their concerns are the dilemmas of balebatishkeit.

c. Orientation in, and Parody of, Men's Knowledge

The women are familiar with the men's study techniques. Late at night when the women are in the kitchen preparing the next day's meals, their husbands sit in the living room with their hevruta. The flats are tiny. Sometimes, if they know the members well, the women may even serve coffee. They know the rules of the game.

The lesson described here shows how women negotiate with men's logic, how they maneuver with the Talmudic knowledge as they understand it. They reject the juggling of food and garbage. Outwardly they may appear stupid and unable to grasp the sophisticated stratagem that only the reborn Jewish woman seems to understand so quickly. But, in fact, their discourse shows that they have grasped both the knowledge and the logical maneuvers involved in its manipulation. Referring to the lesson about the prohibition from selecting food on the Sabbath, the women ask, "What if afterwards you want to eat an orange, how then can you eat garbage?" And Tzipi says, "If you need the apple, then the orange is garbage, and later if you need the orange then the apple is garbage." We have here both the display of knowledge and a parody of it.

Jewish knowledge is usually presented by men as logical and self-evident. The women, through their behavior, show that they know just how cunning and manipulative it actually is, and how remote its use is from their perception of life. The orthodox community believes in differences between the sexes. In fact, their whole way of life depends upon that tenet. Jewish traditional texts provide evidence of a serious dispute between those who see these differences as inherent and organic and those who claim they derive from the everyday experience of each sex.[4] All sides, however, including the women observed in this study, recognize and accept the differences de facto. The above incident implies that the women are aware of the social construction of the value of men's knowledge, that they can see the shaky logic governing their lives. They point it out, cannot dismiss it, and therefore label it men's knowledge, part of the man's world. They then retreat into their world, which they describe as better, more simple, meaningful, and therefore practical—practical not in the sense of primitive or earthbound, but truthful and genuine.

d. Redefinition of Social Status

During women's lessons the social strata of the community are unveiled. The ultraorthodox never hide their appreciation of *yekhus* (ancestry and family lineage) and their admiration for financial success. However, the contemporary community, which is deeply concerned with maintaining the society of men-scholars (Friedman 1982, 1986), rewards them and their families with social assets unrelated to their financial situation or family yekhus. During women's lessons the wives of the scholars talk and debate, whereas the wives of the working men *(balebatim)* remain silent. Marriages are arranged so that the bright male students get the brightest women. During the lessons, the combination of personal and social attributes attained by marrying a scholar are reaffirmed. The women say, "My husband told me. . . . I saw him doing so . . . . In his Yeshiva they always do so . . . ." Her reliance upon him reaffirms the social order, endows her with cultural capital (as a scholar's wife she is usually poor), and allows her to display a unique and self-assuring kind of literacy.

Hanna, who challenges the belief that the study of Torah is off-limits for women, is considered very wise and pious, the wife of a brilliant scholar and perhaps the poorest person in the room. Ita, who attempts to elaborate on Hanna's remark and give it a conservative flavor and traditional implications, is a young teacher at the girls' seminar, as is Tzipi. Thus, the limited discourse about the boundaries of knowledge and its meaning is held among those who are socially connected to the intellectual layer of the community. The other women sit quietly, joining in only on matters related to balebatishkeit.

e. Students' Reactions—The Active Passiveness

The typical format of a women's lesson is frontal. The teacher talks and the women listen. A discussion is never planned, particularly when the teacher is a highly respected figure in the community, such as the Rebbe's daughter-in-law. Women sometimes negotiate the material being taught and try to carry on a discussion. A close look reveals that these discussions are regarded as accidents or undesirable eruptions. The woman in charge tries to suppress them quickly, often ineffectively. The discussion is cut short because the teacher portrays the women as incapable of dealing with the question, not because the question is irrelevant. This sort of intellectual activity allows the women to raise doubts and display their active minds while remaining within the confines of obedience and passivity, as did Hanna and Ita.

f. Teacher's Status and Teacher's Self-Reliance

The women who deliver the lessons are teachers at the Beit Yaakov Girls School. They are invited by the women of the community who claim that the neighborhood is intellectually arid or that modesty is lax. Teachers can also be local, enlisted by their girlfriends because they project an image of smart and pious women, the wives of promising scholars. All women teachers are highly regarded as wise, extremely orthodox, and knowledgeable, but none ever presents her teachings as self-reliant. Each and every teacher begins her lesson by saying "I read in the women's law book . . . . I saw my father doing this . . . . My husband told me . . . . I was taught in school . . . . The Rebbe once said . . . ." They will never say "It seems to me . . . . To the best of my knowledge . . . . The way I understand this sentence . . . ." Men rely on previous knowledge. Women rely on peo-

ple, and in so doing, present themselves as incapable of thinking, interpreting, analyzing, and reaching conclusions. Together with this presentation of someone else's knowledge, they demonstrate their familiarity with the material, their competence, and their irreversible access to books and knowledge.

g. Can Education for Ignorance Bring Social Change? Dealing with a Paradox

Women's education in the ultraorthodox community, as it emerges from the ethnographic data and from the contemporary Jewish history of the society of learned men, is a paradox. The women are taught to be ignorant, to strive for ignorance. Analyses of the ethnography and of newspaper articles (El-Or 1990) suggest that women's literacy operates on two levels: (1) literacy for knowledge, through which women learn about the world in which they live, and (2) literacy for ignorance, through which women learn how they are to behave in this world.

Both literacies are "ideal types." The ultraorthodox women who accept their inferior status a priori use their presentation as ignorant women in certain situations as an existential solution to the conflicting pressures in their lives. By so doing they accept the low price tag placed on their literacy. Paradoxically, they perform the role of ignorants as only educated women can, and thus, from time to time, turn the tag over. This double standard permits them to preserve their social and emotional ties to the community, to look around, to view their surroundings, and even to observe their own world from outside. These two strata of literacy create the social and personal conditions that allow women to accept their subordination in an open cultural market at the end of the 20th century.

Understanding the double layer of literacy, which both perpetuates the paradox and offers ways of coping with it (by temporarily decoding it), might reveal the mechanism by which the cultural price tag is hung on women's literacy. Such an analysis, based on the social reality described here, could lead to a redefinition of literacy as a culturally constructed phenomenon.

5. Back to the "Grand Questions"—Literacy Through Context

This research, based on anthropological methods and aimed at the history of the learners, offers a different approach to the meaning of literacy. Although it relies on the ideological model, it describes literacy by observing it in action, and thereby reframes it. The remodeling is based on two significant elements in the ideological model. The first is the relation between the curriculum[5] and the social reality in which it is being taught. It claims that if literacy is expected to create any social change, and if the act of studying is supposed to bring about an emancipatory process, the two (curriculum and social reality) should correspond. In other words, a curriculum based on a certain language

and codes, symbols and intentions that are unclear, irrelevant, or contradictory to the social reality of the students, will fail. In fact, it might (as will be noted) be counterproductive for the students. The second element deals with social status. The ideological model distinguishes between *strong* and *weak*[6] groups of learners and stresses the social and political interests conveyed through literacy and studying.

Two different political trends are found within the ideological framework. The hegemony analysis claims that literacy cannot achieve any social change because it compounds the interests of the controlling strong groups (Bernstein 1971; Bourdieu 1967; Dreeben 1968; Graff 1979). The praxis analysis, on the other hand, does sustain a slight chance of change through the adaptation of the correlations between social reality and the curriculum (Apple 1990; Dumont and Wax 1976; Freire and Macedo 1987; Giroux 1983; Halper 1978; Ogbu 1978; Shokeid 1983; Spindler 1963).

The following matrix (see Table 1) is constructed on the parameters of (1) the correspondence between curriculum and social reality (yes–no) and (2) social status (strong–weak). In rearranging the ideological model, this matrix may shed new light on the social meaning of literacy. Each of the four cells is presented through data taken from previous studies. The Hassidic women from Gur fit into cell 4.

Cell 1. This group shows a rare connection between a strong circle of learners and a lack of correspondence between the social reality and the curriculum. Nevertheless, such a situation has been noted in several studies (El-Or 1984; Hazan 1990). In previous research I've described a group of nouveau riche schoolchildren in central Israel where both children and their families regard their public school as somehow irrelevant to their present and future social reality. The official egalitarian attitude and the emphasis on knowledge as a tool for mobility—all part of the Israeli educational ideology—are inconsistent with the way these families perceive their social situation. They see school as a temporary must, one that poorly equips the children with applicable knowledge. They see the teachers as people to be pitied and scorned due to their inferior status.

Hazan taught anthropology to a group of upper-middle class pensioners from Cambridge University who had formed a study group to

Table 1:
Literacy in Context

Coherence Between the Curriculum and Reality	Social Status of the Learners	
	Weak	Strong
No	2	1
Yes	4	3

fill their time after retiring from prestigious positions in British society. Hazan reports their rather surprising reaction to the study material: they were skeptical, cynical, and nonconformistic. The picture portrayed by social science contradicted both their real-life experiences and their new interpretation of it vis-à-vis their imminent death. In this position, owing nothing and going nowhere, they represent the essence of old age. They turned the curriculum of anthropology, which tries to find a meaning in life, into something ridiculous and irrelevant, thereby lessening the pain of departure from the inexplicable world.

When the contents being studied and the social reality of the learners do not correspond, and when the students belong to a strong social group, the act of studying yields the following results: the learners react actively to the material offered, doubt its validity, and challenge its targets. The above groups did it either by turning their backs on the system (the nouveau riche children) or by intellectually mocking it (the elderly people from Cambridge). Thus, the learners falling into this cell of the matrix have the social power to stand up to the reality emerging from the curriculum, to resent it, and to reform it or evade it, without risk. In so doing they may even strengthen their social status.

Cell 2. This group contains the most common combination of low status and noncorrespondence between the curriculum and the social reality of the students. Most of the studies in anthropology and sociology of education were carried out in such populations. The reports describe students of all ages, ethnicities, and nations who, upon entering the educational system, are forced to confront a reality far removed from anything seen outside the classroom (Apple 1990; Backs 1972; Grambs and Banks 1972; Henry 1972, 1976; Hunter 1954; McLaren 1989; Rosenfeld 1976).

Lewis (1979) carried out an anthropological study in a public school in a large village in central Israel where children of two social strata learned together. One group included the children of the founders of the village, people who had come, for the most part, to Israel from Europe before World War II and the establishment of the Israeli State. The second group included the children of Asian and North African Jews who arrived during the massive immigration of the 1950s. Lewis points out the contradictions between the sets of meanings, study tradition, and perception of social life held by the two groups. The so-called egalitarian public education fitted the Western way of decoding material, a form the Asian children failed to understand. The children were asked to sit quietly in class for four hours, to speak only when given permission, to prepare homework in their overcrowded homes, and to seek assistance from their elders. Lewis claims that, although the intellectual expectations were not beyond the Asian children's abilities, the framework of the school and the latent curriculum were

alienating. Most of these children did badly[7] and attributed their failure to a personal deficiency, as Freire and Macedo predict:

> This large number of people who do not read and write and who were expelled from school do not represent a failure of the schooling class; their expulsion reveals the triumph of schooling class. . . . Curriculum in the broadest sense involves the programmatic contents of the school system, but also the scheduling, discipline, and day to day tasks required from students in schools. In curriculum, then, there is a quality that is hidden and that gradually incites rebelliousness on the part of the children and adolescents. Their defiance corresponds to the aggressive elements in the curriculum that work against the students' interests. [Freire and Macedo 1987:121]

In this kind of situation, the students' perception of their social reality is broken. It is seen as illegitimate, inferior, violent, and backward. The students are passive about studying and accumulate pain and aggressive feelings about the system. The system interprets this potential threat as a failure of the students themselves, and therfore doubly handicaps them.

Cell 3. The combination of a strong social status and a firm correspondence between the curriculum and the social reality is as common as the previous combination in cell 2. Both form a binary opposition wherein each side explains the other. The educational curriculum in the schools, the knowledge transmitted through the media, the information of mainstream newspapers and magazines, the messages of literature and art, and canonic music all fit the social reality of the upper-middle class. The political and ideological elements embedded in them serve their social interests. Even when the students negotiate those messages, even if they oppose them or try to change them, the struggle is based on the same components of the issues in debate. Dynamics of this kind reassure and reconfirm the framework and enable it to withstand inner change, or, in fact, to coopt it (Bourdieu 1967). Students of this group are active. They negotiate and challenge the curriculum. In so doing, however, they assimilate the values of their literacy, the literacy of the upper classes. As they are processed through the public education system, they manage to keep their cultural superiority along with a sense of equality.

> It [curriculum] gives the superficial appearance that education serves everyone, thus assuring that it continues to function in the interest of the dominant class. [Freire and Macedo 1987:122]

Orthodox men's literacy, as presented by Heilman (1983), fits well into this category. Heilman describes men's studies as rituals, rituals that are contents, techniques, and targets all at the same time. They are an existential compound of being a Jew, executed through intellectual demeanor.

Cell 4. Groups in this cell display a rare combination of weak social position and firm connections between curriculum and reality. The ultraorthodox Jewish women presented in this study are an interesting example of this type. They accept their inferior status a priori, and the material presented to them via schooling and study bears a high correspondence to the reality they accept and believe. What they see at home, experience on the neighborhood streets, and read in their leisure books and magazines is matched by, and reinforced with, what they learn in school. Women in many other societies also fit this category of an oppressed group, which, through lack of awareness, finds coherence between the reality and the curriculum that describes it (Belenky et al. 1986; Gilligan 1982; Perry 1970).

Teaching women to accept their inferior position through literacy is not the preferred method of societies. Stromquist shows that 80% of the world's illiterates are women (Stromquist 1990). In Kaestle's words, the control of accessibility comes first. When this kind of control loses either its ideological legitimacy or its practical possibilities (or both), it is replaced by control over content and a reduction in the "cultural price tag" placed on women's knowledge.

When the women in this study, or in any other similar group, are compared to weak subordinated groups of cell 3, one sees that the chances of withdrawal from, rebellion against, or even alienation from, the educational process are slim due to the high correspondence between the curriculum and the social reality of the learners. The literacy they negate withholds several compensations that they learn to accept and justify within the framework of their religious ideology. The balance, perpetuation, and outcomes of such a situation depend on two elements: (1) the inner attributes of knowing and being literate and (2) exposure of the inner system to other systems of thought and alternative ideologies on the cultural market. The dynamic relations between these two endow literacy with its actual social value.

6. Conclusions—Staying There or Moving Out

Two very different directions can be taken at this junction: (1) some new theoretical understanding of literacy—women's literacy, the cultural meaning of knowing, and so on—can be discussed; or (2) an attempt can be made to visualize the future of the observed woman in view of her literacy and its context. Although these directions are interdependent, most academic research strives, first, to refine the discipline's insights about the subject at hand.

Naturally, most of my conclusions will relate to the theoretical level, although not in the macro, as portrayed by Kaestle. Feminist theory, together with postmodernism, attributes a great deal of (if not sole) significance to local experience, with its own history, cultural context, and indigenous interpretations (Nicholson 1990). My conclusions will attempt to relate the local experience to the theoretical model presented previously.[8]

The ideological model grants literacy very limited power to effect social change. Most of the official and unofficial channels of information communication and education are managed by those who are not interested in social change. In democratic societies where the overt ideology does include possibilities for social rearrangements of power and influence, a sophisticated curriculum is needed to guard the social boundaries. Nondemocratic and closed societies can afford a curriculum that keeps the weak unaware of their situation or that teaches them to accept their situation. But ultraorthodoxy presents a unique case: it strives to maintain its social strata within a modern open cultural market.

The recent history of the overt ideology of ultraorthodoxy shows growing conservatism, piety, and cloister—all well presented in the curriculum. However, the data presented in this study show that the subtle cultural reality is quite dynamic. The women who a priori accept their subordination within the community use their literacy as a form of awareness. By being aware, they appear to participate in the construction of the social strata or to select their position in it. They present themselves and are viewed by others as very strong, cooperative, and actually indispensable partners of the new ultraorthodox circles.

To meet challenges or to excel as the ideal orthodox women, they use "literacy for ignorance"—an awareness that enables them to raise 8, 9, 11, 15 children in 70 square meters of living space, to care for them physically, to see that they get a good education, to worry about their marriage arrangements, and to have a part-time job outside the house. This form of awareness is in constant dialogue with the second form, "literacy for knowledge," which elevates them (not too often, but always available) from their everyday routine. "Literacy for knowledge" gives the women the intellectual tools to analyze other literacies, to test and evaluate them. By so doing, they grade themselves and compare the value of those literacies with that placed on their own. This elevation endows the woman with the existential power to carry on once she is back on the ground. However, those moments of stepping out, of seeing from without, of reflecting, doubting, and challenging, are possible only because of their literacy and competence; hence, a modern phenomenon. Literacy improves a woman's position in comparison to that of the previous preliterate generation and grants both her and literacy some social power for future change.

Kaestle points out that the benefits of literacy for members of the oppressed groups are more apparent individually than collectively and should be examined in the long run and not in the short run. After 70 years of women's education among the ultraorthodox, each woman is intelligently aware of the group's position as socially ignorant. Are they or are they not a success according to Rabbi Wolff's expectations, who wished to reproduce the previous generation through literacy?

Studying as such has no emancipatory powers. Literacy as a social phenomenon might arm the learners with a certain awareness if it corresponds with their social reality. Change for the oppressed group might occur if some liberating space is made, either deliberately or unintentionally, or taken by the group itself.

It seems, then, that these women are rather different from their grandmothers. They manage to display some of the traditional behaviors of their illiterate female ancestors while being molded and made aware by their modern literacy.

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Notes

Acknowledgment: I wish to thank Don Handelman and Aron Ben-Auot for their illuminating and helpful comments.

1. Hassidism is a Jewish theological movement that evolved in Europe 250 years ago. It emphasizes the values of spiritualism, prayer, and faith. Gur, the sect of Hassidism studied in this work, is the name of a town near Warsaw where the first leader of the sect, the Rebbe, resided. In Israel, Gur is one of the two largest Hassidic sects; it controls the largest orthodox political party and its newspaper.

2. The fieldwork was conducted between 1985 and 1988. Living within walking distance of the Hassidic neighborhood, I visited my host family two to four times a week. Intense relations with them resulted in my becoming acquainted with other women in the community, and in my enrolling in the lessons and taking part in various public events (El-Or 1992).

3. The lengthy ethnographic data were shortened by eliminating overlapping material given in two lessons on the same topic by the same teacher within one month.

4. The same dilemma stands at the core of contemporary feminist theory. The basic difference, of course, is that this discourse strives to change the political and social reality by explaining it (Di Stefano 1990; MacCormack 1980; Strathern 1980; West and Zimmerman 1991).

5. *Curriculum:* the ordinary use of the term in the context of schooling is not suitable in this case study. These adult women build their curriculum within the confines laid down by the male society. However, in each series of lessons, the topic is known and stated—the overt curriculum—while the actual lesson is a lively dialogue that ranges between acceptance and rejection of those limits—the latent curriculum.

6. Obviously, the terms *strong* and *weak* are not scientific. They were chosen to avoid class definitions and at the same time describe the access of groups to social and cultural assets.

7. Lewis describes one first-grade teacher, a native of that same village and of Asian descent, who broke the holy decree of "sit down and keep quiet." She allowed the children in her class to move around the room and talk to one another, and she did not assign homework. At the end of the year this class reached the national average standard on test scores.

8. When I showed the women my interpreted ethnography a year after completing the fieldwork, they were uneasy. One summed up their reactions:

> I must admit you really know us. You describe us so well, and touch on serious as well as funny points. The trouble is with your explanations and interpretations. From your point of view they make sense—you might even be right—but not from our point of view, and I'll tell you why. You have no *yerat shamaeim* [fear of God, used as a measure of piety].

They are right—at least not the kind they know about. Thus, the conclusions of my work are only anthropological.

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