

POWER/KNOWLEDGE/GENDER: THE ORANGES
AND GRAPEFRUIT DEBATE

by

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It was a large basement of an apartment house in north Tel Aviv, which was used as a meeting place for *Emuna*—the Zionist orthodox women's organization. When I entered the room, leaving outside a sunny February morning, it was already crowded with some 60 women who had come for their weekly lesson. Most of them were elderly. A few were wearing wigs, some had kerchiefs, but the majority did not cover their heads. We were about to discuss my book, *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and Their World*, and I was nervous. It was easier to present the book to a nonorthodox audience—people eager to hear the stories behind the long sleeves and under the wigs of ultraorthodox women. Some were disappointed when I related my refusal to look into very private, intimate matters, but they found comfort in other aspects sufficiently "exotic" to the unfamiliar ears of non-orthodox Jewish Israelis. During the discussions that followed these presentations, I usually found that their ears and hearts were never entirely alien to the subject. Many people in the audience came from an orthodox background and were seeking to warm themselves near the rhythm and aroma of their "old world," contemplating again its relevance to their current lives. There were parents of *ba'alot teshuva* (nonreligious Jews who become observant) who were brought to the subject by their children's choice, bouncing between anger, sorrow and guilt, and seeking to understand. Others met ultraorthodox men and women every day as doctors, social workers, civil

servants or business people, and wanted to learn more about them. Most participants had good knowledge of Jewish history and Bible from their public school education. Nevertheless, talking to a non-orthodox audience meant conversing with people who conduct their lives outside the laws of halakha that govern orthodox life.

That morning in the dim basement I was to present my work to orthodox women whose subject position was quite different, and I was curious to hear their reactions, especially to the "oranges and grapefruit debate."

This debate arose during a session on *Laws of the Sabbath* at a women's study group in the Gur Hasidic community I studied. At this meeting, Tsipi, a 21-year-old teacher at *Beit Yaakov* (a school for Orthodox girls), and the woman in charge of the study group, spoke about tasks forbidden on the Sabbath. She decided to focus on "sorting," explaining the prohibition and offering some solutions to potential problems, as her teacher, a Rabbi, had taught her at the seminary for teachers she had attended.¹

Tsipi said: "The act of sorting is to separate food from refuse. If I want to take oranges out of a bowl and there are grapefruits there too, the oranges are the food and the grapefruit are the refuse. You are permitted to take the oranges out of the bowl if you meet three conditions: the object is food, the task is done by hand, and the task is performed immediately. That means you take out what you want to eat with your hand and not with an implement, and you eat it now and not later" (p. 123).

Tsipi's short presentation of both the problem and its solution raised an outcry in the room. The women were very upset by the use of the word "refuse." It sounded like waste, like garbage, and they were curious to know what happens if later one wants to eat the grapefruit which previously had been declared refuse.

Tsipi replied: "If you want the grapefruit, then it's food and whatever is left in the bowl is the refuse" (p. 124).

This operational definition calmed the room, but Rachel said: "I don't understand, how can it be food one time and refuse the next? Why call it refuse?" (p. 124).

From that moment on a dialogue developed between those who tried to explain the "real meaning" of the term refuse, and those who refused to understand it. Hanna offered a parallel with the terms "primary" and "secondary." Malka, the *ba'alat teshuva*, tried to explain that calling

¹Tamar El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and Their World* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 1994), pp. 122-128.

something "refuse" does not turn it into real garbage, but only defines it "as if" it is waste in one case and "as if" not in another. Most of the women, however, were not comfortable with the terms and attacked them with a variety of examples from their everyday lives. The lesson ended with neither understanding nor acceptance.

Malka couldn't grasp the women's difficulty; she appeared amused but impatient, and her solution sounded as if she was mocking the difficulty the others were having catching the point. I saw it as characteristic of the education of ultraorthodox women, which encourages earthbound thinking and rejects analytical or abstract thought. Malka and I, although on different "sides" (she is orthodox and I am non-orthodox) had no problem with Tsipi's terminology because of our common former education (remember, Malka came to orthodoxy as an adult after going through the secular school system). The rest of the women, I thought at first, simply could not make the abstraction.

This is a "thin description" of a lesson which, I would like to show, was in fact an intersection loaded with thematic traffic. In order to present the "oranges and grapefruit debate" as such, I will turn it into a rather "thick description," adding, to the voices of the women in this particular class, my voice, and the voices of other women in other audiences. In other words, I will pack this session with voices from previous oral presentations of the session.²

When the organizer of the Emuna club meetings took time out to make a few announcements, including the birth of a granddaughter to one of the members, I took the opportunity to look at the women's faces, wondering whether they would laugh when I read "the debate." Nonorthodox people always laugh, and when they do I have mixed reactions: I feel I do my subjects a disservice by giving the impression they are stupid or ignorant, and yet I entertain my listeners who are eager to criticize the women. The laughter, I learned, stemmed from the debaters' preoccupation with the details, with their literal decoding of the law, and with the specificity of the examples they raised.

I evoked a different kind of laughter years ago when I sent this section of my ethnography to a colleague studying in the United States. He wrote in the margins of my pages: "That sounds like a new sketch of the *Gashashim* [a popular Israeli comedy trio]." The women's words became a game, a play acted *ad absurdum*.

²On "thin and thick description" see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

The reading group I had set up to critique my thesis—four ultraorthodox women from the Gur sect, but not from the community I studied—also smiled at this section. Miriam, a senior teacher at *Beit Yaakov*, said: “Well, this is funny. Sure, I can see why people laugh, it could sound stupid. I’m not saying it didn’t happen or that you’re describing it incorrectly, but I’m sure we’re laughing for different reasons. You’re wondering whether they couldn’t get it, but I know they did. I smile because I hear something familiar, understood, like meeting an old girlfriend. I smile because I know what was actually going on in their minds and hearts. You see it from your academic standpoint, I see it from our lives.”

In the *Emuna* audience, some smiled, some laughed. Dora summed up their reactions: “It would never happen with us. We learn the reason, we are allowed to ask, to contemplate, to study the section you just read. It’s a prime example of the Haredi [ultraorthodox] world. I know because I was raised that way, but I did not raise my children like that. My daughter is a very orthodox woman, but she’s also a mathematician, and she studies Torah with her husband. Still, it’s nice to hear that there is such naiveté amongst these women nowadays.”

The superior laughter of the non-orthodox audience, the “imic,” insider’s, smile of the ultraorthodox, the psychological interpretation of my colleague, and the empathic critique of the religious-Zionist women returned me to my original reading of the debate. At first, I did not think it was funny, and was quite surprised to hear laughter from audiences. To me the debate was a sign of the women’s inability to make abstractions, evidence of a possible “women’s way of thinking.” Second thoughts taught me that the women were indeed exercising their way of thinking, but at the same time trying to taste something new (El-Or, p. 127). My reaction to the reaction of the audiences, and my feeling of insult when they laughed at ‘my women,’ pushed me towards a thicker view of the debate.

In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault claims that knowledge/power relations are never personal or subjective: that upper-middle-class men’s knowledge allows the illusion of personal beholding, an illusion constituted through class and gender.³ The Gur women’s dialogue with the *halakhic* way of thinking, while studying on their own without a Rabbinic teacher, shows their confrontation with the basic constituents of this knowledge. Their recoil from the “easy solution” to sorting on the Sabbath by calling

³Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980). See also Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986).

something refuse is not an indication of barriers in their thinking, but a sign of their resistance to, and even rejection of, that way of thinking.

When women negotiate men’s literacy they have roughly three possibilities: they can accept and internalize; they can reread, deconstruct and read again; and, they can resist and reject. Ultra-orthodox women accept and internalize men’s knowledge a priori as THE KNOWLEDGE, but they do so without the benefit of exacting readings and study. Today, when they have more and more exposure to the texts unmediated by Rabbis, they might exercise other options. Rereading, deconstructing, and reading again Jewish texts is widely practiced among Jewish feminists. The ultra-orthodox women lack the social legitimacy and intellectual preparation to do this. Thus, they are alienated by Tsipi’s explanation of oranges, grapefruits, and the *Laws of the Sabbath*. The discussion that ensued presents the halakhic way of thinking as a manipulation, as a juggling of “truths.” In rejecting Tsipi’s explanation the women reject its very nature and its foundations. By doing so they call into question the validity and reliability of halakhic knowledge *per se* as they know it. Their urge to ground the abstraction, to bring it down to earth with everyday examples, does not stem from stupidity or ignorance. It is, rather, a protest—a collective expression of loyalty to “straight talk.” This inability to engage in rereading, deconstructing and reading again leads them to subtle resistance.

For a short time that day, the women I studied entered the passing traffic to mingle with different knowledges, unusual terminologies and syntax, novel logics, and the like. The intersection was free of policemen and they were able to direct the traffic themselves. During that brief episode, one could trace an effort to rearrange relationships of knowledge/power/gender: to check hierarchies, test validities, and determine the relevance for them of the canonical Jewish way of thinking. This disorganized, and perhaps unselfconscious, resistance created a chaotic situation, and chaos—especially when it’s not your own—can provoke nervousness, anxiety, and laughter.