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## Unhyphenated Jewish religious feminism

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### SYNOPSIS

After 9/11 and with the re-awakening of a feminist criticism of religion, particularly of Muslim women who insist on wearing the veil as an act of piety, Mahmood (2005) offered a new way to conceive the pious female subject “in a context where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject’s potentiality.”

Following her, but in contrast to her Foucaultian analysis of subjectivization, we use Deleuze and Guattari’s work in *A Thousand Plateaus* to propose a reading which views thoughts and actions as events of double articulation; neither unidirectional nor bidirectional but a product of lines of flight and a rupture of the hegemonic power through movement toward the margins. In order to do so, this case study discusses how Orthodox Jewish women are creating unhyphenated religious feminism without falling into the binaries of religion and feminism that assume conflicting rationalities. We interviewed 44 women who openly declared themselves feminists and religiously orthodox, all of them members of the feminist religious organization *Kolech* (“your voice” in English).

Feminist scholars who previously engaged with Deleuze and Guattari’s theory wrestled with concepts of identity and difference. By contrast, we attempt to show how the concept of flights to the margins in daily decisions and actions articulates a religious feminist female subjectivity as multiplicity in spaces where the authority of both is redefined. The women we interviewed positioned themselves on the seams of religion and feminism by experimenting with temporary actions that changed according to the conditions and possibilities of their lives. The women of *Kolech* teach us that a feminist critique of religion, and more generally of liberal democracy, is possible from the margins where subjects can exercise their desires and ideas more freely.

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### Introduction

How can feminism respond to women who wish to practice religion and follow religious orthodoxy as part of their desire for spiritual life of devotion? This question is particularly important after 9/11 when the many attacks on Muslim women who insisted on wearing the veil became an issue of fierce public and political debate even for feminists. Some saw the veil as a sign of women’s oppression; others warned against such a misunderstanding of religion and opposed the ideological split between secular feminist autonomy and freedom, on

the one hand, and religious fundamentalism and oppression, on the other (Badran, 2005; Mahmood, 2006; Scott, 2009, 2010). While we do not develop these debates in the current study, we do, however, address the question of feminist religious subjectivity in a way that circumvents the debate of integration or mediation. We therefore studied women who belong to *Kolech*,<sup>1</sup> a self-declared Jewish feminist religious organization, with an aim to understanding their religious subjectivity as a way of life. Through this specific case study, we are looking to problematize the concept of religious feminist subjectivity that converses with questions of authority (religious and feminist), faith, freedom, and identity. We ask what it means to work from the margins and in what ways the women of *Kolech* have practiced religious feminist subjectivity from the

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margins to create social change. We ask not how the women of *Kolech* reconcile between religion and feminism (although that question does lurk in the background) but rather how these women, who see themselves as feminists, fulfill their quest for spirituality and intimacy with God. Most specifically, our inquiry is about the politics of religious intimacy and piety for modern feminist lives.

We suggest a new theoretical reframing of the desire for religious intimacy and a fresh understanding of religious feminist subjectivity without hyphenating between these two systems of consciousness and power. By eliminating the hyphen we do not mean to say that these two paths – religion and feminism – become one whole identity. Rather, leaning on [Deleuze and Guattari's \(1987\)](#) concept of “becoming-minority,” we look at religion and feminism as two different plains from which lived events and experiences, ideas, and thoughts are viewed and interplayed, constituting “directions in motion” rather than “becoming.” That is to say that feminist religiosity is always continuous without a culmination point or an external end ([Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 22](#)). Our study of Orthodox Jewish feminists (in contrast to Reform or Conservative feminists who are more lenient with tradition) is a specific case study. It can, however, strengthen a theoretical articulation of devotion – both feminist and religious – in order to change the ways in which we understand the politics of faith and an acentered identity. Underscoring the premises of language, emotions, desires and sensibilities, we have underlined in particular women's shifts to the margins of feminism and religion and the connections they established “between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders” ([Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 23](#)). We can use this case to speak about the feminist subject of religion and faith almost in terms of “guerrilla logic,” namely, without a central identity and without one solution being similar to the other.

### Previous Attempts to Connect Religion and Feminism

Nowadays there is vast literature on the interchange between religion (Christian, Muslim, and Jewish) and feminism. Feminists from different standpoints have been and still are engaged in a philosophical and theological critique of religious tradition, challenging the patriarchal reading of religious texts and the exclusion of women from certain rituals and services. Against the early feminist critique of religion and the conception of religion and feminism as mutually exclusive forms of belief, numerous attempts have been made since the 1980s to negotiate the terms (reinterpretation of texts, separating identities, or, in contrast, mediating dominant and minor identities).<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the present study is not the place to engage in a cross-generational debate between early and more current standpoints despite the need for such an endeavor ([Fuchs, 2003](#)).

This literature, however, mainly reflects attempts to bridge, reconstruct, transform, or repair the gap between religion and feminism or to reclaim, renew, and create holy texts in order to fit women's aspirations for equal participation in services, as well as to change the injustices wrought by male authorship of the holy texts (see, for example, [Adler, 1998](#); [Avishai, 2008](#)). The present feminist critiques of secularism ([Badran, 2005](#); [Mahmood, 2005, 2013](#); [Scott, 2009](#)) argues that women's observance of traditional practices, such as wearing the veil

which many feminists see as succumbing to women's otherness, should be reframed and rearticulated and not in terms of liberal equality. They claim that a religious subjectivity of devotion and faith requires a different theoretical understanding outside the binary dichotomies between secularism and religion, liberalism and fundamentalism, modernity and tradition, or feminist autonomy and religion submission. They see the need for a feminist theoretical understanding of women's piety rather than a new theology to bridge the gulf between religious fundamentalism and liberal feminism.

In *The Politics of Piety* [Mahmood \(2005\)](#) suggested that some Muslim women are wearing the veil not because it allows them more freedom of movement in public or more autonomy in daily life, but because of their strong desire for spiritual life and intimacy with God. Mahmood turned attention away from a focus on the politics of identity and to an understanding of the desire for piety and the need for religious devotion in women's lives. Based on her work with women who joined the piety movement in Egypt, [Mahmood \(2005\)](#) rejected the terms of the debate between subordination and resistance, offering instead a performative outlook on religious practices (including “the desire for submission to authority,” p. 15) that constructs the Muslim woman subject and the ways she lives and inhabits social and religious norms within structures of power. Mahmood thus raised an important question:

How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where distinction between the subject's own desires and socially prescribed performance cannot easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject's potentiality? ([Mahmood, 2005, p. 31](#)).

While Mahmood used Foucault's theory of subjectivization as her framework, we use Deleuze and Guattari's concept of “becoming minority” to analyze Orthodox Jewish feminists' use of language to describe their flight to the margins of religion and feminism from where they reconnect their libidinal desire for piety with events, rituals, family, and community.

At the same time, our theoretical path cannot be separated from the history of Jewish feminist scholarship, long engaged in questions of theology that explored the ways to connect and integrate Orthodox Judaism and liberal feminism, pondering questions of oppression and equality and the need for women to remain connected to their religious community ([Greenberg, 1981](#); [Hartman, 2007](#); [Heschel, 1983](#)). The need to “rethink Jewish ideas and experiences from one feminist perspective” ([Plaskow, 1990, p. ix](#)) reflects the conflict and ambivalence that some Orthodox Jewish feminists have experienced. Likewise, [Plaskow's \(1990, p. xi\)](#) sentiment that “I am not a Jew in the synagogue and a feminist in the world. I am a Jewish feminist and a feminist Jew in every moment of my life” is clearly not just about a quest for equal rights but a call to rethink the meaning of Jewish theology.

In Israel some religious women have sought to reinstate certain customs from which women were originally exempted but which are permitted by the *Halakha* (Jewish law) ([Vigoda, 2001](#)). Studies of Orthodox Jewish women have mainly explored the ways women embrace practices, rituals, and commitments, such as the *mitzvah* (commandment) of *tzitzit* (a four-cornered fringed garment), praying wrapped in a *tallit*

(Bernstein, 2001; Friedman, 2009), the prayer and naming celebration on the birth of a daughter (Hochstein-Goralin, 2001), reciting the *Kaddish* (the mourner's prayer) (Levin, 2004), or delivering a eulogy during or after a funeral (Lovitz, 2007).

The uneasy relations between feminism and religion have evidently evoked many personal and collective questions and responses. The question we ask, however, is how to accommodate between religious orthodox dictates and women's needs and desires for piety; how to theorize the connections between orthodox religion, feminist commitments, and women's daily lives of piety while avoiding the simplistic categorization that views religion as oppressive to women and feminism as liberating (Butler, 2013; Mahmood, 2005; Scott, 2009)? We want to re-evaluate the question of the feminist subject of religion by looking anew at Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome; to study the convergences of feminism and religion in the external world without reducing one identity into the other or creating one identity from the two. Feminist religiosity is a name, a semiotic unification. Omitting the hyphen is not to say that religion and feminism become One but rather a multiplicity.

Some feminist scholars have already turned to Deleuze and Guattari to challenge the philosophical and social ideas of *difference* and *becoming*. In particular, their concept of "becoming-woman" as a necessary step to "becoming-minority" has met with a variety of responses, not all approving (see Braidotti, 2002; Buchanan & Colebrook, 2000; Goulimari, 1999; Grosz, 1995; Lorraine, 1999). It is not surprising that many feminist scholars have opposed Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming woman" (which emphasizes non-identity), as it was propounded just as women were beginning to form their subject positions (Colebrook 2003, p.4) and the politics of identity. Feminist ideas of progress, emancipation, liberation, agency, and equality were meant to bring women to the center of power, and the idea of tackling power from the margins was critically received. But, today, when capital and government have impoverished the meaning of people's sovereignty (Brown, 2010; Sassen, 1996) it is perhaps the right moment to go back to Deleuze and Guattari and their ideas of non-identity and of "becoming minority."

## Method

Forty-four women participated in the study during the years 2007–2008. The interviewees were between the ages of 30–73; most are heterosexual, married women who hold academic degrees and were born in Israel.<sup>3</sup> Of the Israeli-born, the majority are of European origin (Ashkenazi), with only a minority from Arab countries (Mizrahi). Women in *Kolech* are aware of this disparity, discuss it in their conferences, and work towards raising the membership of Mizrahi women (Horev, 2001). *Kolech* remains, however, a predominantly Ashkenazi organization.

Each interview was divided into two parts: the first focused on questions pertaining to a variety of events, people, dilemmas, experiences, struggles, values, and perceptions related to their religious and feminist identification; the second focused on feminist and religious practices and the interconnections. In particular, we asked about their implementation of religious practices, such as reciting the Friday evening *Kiddush*,

breaking the Sabbath loaf, wearing *tefillin* (phylacteries), wearing a *tallit* (prayer shawl), covering the face when lightening the Sabbath candles, reciting the *Kaddish*, and participating in prayer groups. In this second part the women were asked to talk about whether, when, why, and how they perform each of these practices, and if not, why not. Each interview lasted from 1.5 to 2 h. The interviews generally took place in the home of the interviewee, occasionally at her place of work. After obtaining the interviewee's consent, each interview was recorded and transcribed in full. All names used here are pseudonyms to respect the women's anonymity, although some of the interviewees, who are activists and public figures, did not object to the use of their names. In our analyses we relied on critical words, modes of expression, key points, dominant moves, and distancing themes.

It is important to note that *Kolech* is not the only group of women who refuse to accept the binary opposition between feminism and religion. However, they were the first and most well-known Orthodox group to demand equality for religious women. Being Orthodox, they accept the *Halakha* in its entirety, exalt it as the word of God, and accept, by choice, Orthodox restrictions. They nonetheless want to study the Torah and the Talmud in *chavruta* (study pairs) like their male counterparts in the traditional *Bet Midrash* (study house) (El-Or, 1998). The following quotes and analysis are drawn from only a few of the interviewees. Although each woman spoke in her own singular voice, each was also a collective agent. We therefore chose the most exemplifying cases to pursue our theoretical discussion.

## Findings

The women in *Kolech* refused to use a language that divides between religious subordination and feminism autonomy. They did not see one order as subsidiary to the other. It took us time to understand the different, non-hierarchical positioning and the meaning behind their movement between choices. What in their speech suggests connectivity between religion and feminism but evokes neither a combined identity nor separation? How, we asked ourselves, do the women actively practice convergence and divergence? What does it mean for a woman to perform the Friday evening Kiddush together with her husband? After all, reciting the Kiddush with one's husband "violates" both religious practice and feminist attitudes; it is neither "purely" religious nor "purely" feminist. Yet for some women in our sample, this solution defined a way of fulfilling their desire within the folds of religious feminism. For them it was a double articulation of form and content on the seam between religiousness and feminism. We came to see that this form of feminist religiosity or religious feminism constructs a new line of action defined by distances; a creation of something new rather than a simple mediation. It is a different way of thinking and acting within and without subordination, taking fragments of each tradition (both religious and feminist) and bypassing what is taken for granted in each tradition by escaping to the margins of a custom that is neither part of hegemonic religion nor entirely part of the liberal conception of feminism. There is religion and there is feminism, but there is no "castration" between them, to use Deleuze and Guattari's language.

Take Rachel, one of the interviewees, who said that to her *tefillin* is a man's "tool." Their leathery smell reminds her of a male sexual smell, and she is thus incapable of putting them on even had she wanted to. She refused to allow either the feminist or religious hegemony to dominate her. She knew that as a feminist she should demand the right to lay *tefillin* (as indeed do some of her friends), and she did not reject this practice because of the religious prohibition but because of the *tefillin*'s "sexual smell" and the nausea she felt when the leather touched her skin. It is not the psychology (or rather psychoanalysis) of the rejection that interests us here but rather her personal step in deciding not to lay *tefillin* while not opposed to the practice or to other women practicing the custom. Liberal feminists might dismiss her feminism. However, she calls herself a feminist and participates in a feminist organization. Her articulation is personal and signifies a flight from the dominant territory of religion and feminism. Rachel shows us that religion is not a point of departure for her decisions, even if it may appear to be so, because Rachel gives a new sense to her choice. The link between religion and feminism is not dictated by any particular doctrine but by her nose, her skin, and her instinctive feelings. We observe a double articulation here: her way rejects neither feminism nor religion. There is no undermining of feminism here (as might perhaps be argued) but the creation of a new link to sexuality which facilitates a line of escape from both taken-for-granted feminism and hegemonic religion. It is therefore more correct to speak here of deterritorialization and reterritorialization than of any adjustment between religion and feminism or the religious subordination of the feminist element. When she refuses to wear the *tefillin*, her objection is already a multiplicity of voices.

Similarly, Michal found it problematic to bathe in the *mikvah* (ritual bath). She confessed it almost made her give up religion, although she recognized that she was unable to renounce her faith or the existence of God in her life. From this crisis she was looking to find new ways of being a feminist and being religious and bypassing rabbinical orthodoxy as the only channel to ritual bathing. From the moment she understood that bathing in the sea or in a bathtub was an equivalent to the *halakhic* requirement: "I turned into a more religious and more believing woman." Her distaste for the *mikvah* dictated a path of escape not from religion or feminism but from the traditional channels of religion and toward a new articulation of religious feminist desire. Once again, intimate feelings created a bypass and forged a new path: Michal left religion and returned to it along new roads that accorded with her feminism which is not the secular feminism that rejects the *mikvah* as an oppressive and archaic custom related to menstruation. The movement between feminism and religion, distancing and getting closer, is thus dynamic and multifaceted. Michal moved between various religious and feminist paths and interpretations, looking for and creating the outlets that suited her desire.

Consider Pnina's remarks:

I take these things [religious practices] seriously. That is, there is nothing in my life that I expect someone else to do instead of me. I take responsibility for my life, for my choices... And with the mitzvot, I also don't want anyone to do them instead of me all the time. It was said of the High Priest, 'and he shall make atonement for himself, and for his house.' His house means his wife. He prayed on behalf of his

wife too. Nobody prays on my behalf. That doesn't have the least attraction for me. In my eyes, he prays on his own behalf and that doesn't help me.

Bearing the responsibility of the religious laws is intrinsic to Pnina's personal spiritual existence and therefore, as she emphasized, it cannot be carried out by a third party. Is it only her feminism that drives Pnina? To think that would be doing a disservice to her religious faith. She accepts the commandments with great sincerity and does not want to leave her religion; she sees herself as religious and thus is trying to forge a connection similar to what Crockett (2013, p. 79) called an asymmetrical or disjointed synthesis. But it is not really a synthesis. Like the women in the piety movement in Egypt (Mahmood, 2005) Pnina insists on personal ways of worshipping God directly and her criteria is what attracts her (or not). She has detached herself from the Rabbis' interpretations but not from religion; she will not accept someone else praying on her behalf but has not abandoned prayer. Pnina is accessing the written sources directly, relying on prominent jurists in the Talmud to understand what is or is not permitted according to the Halakha. She is less and less needful of the Rabbi's opinion and can easily find the answers to various questions herself. She has developed an ambivalent attitude toward the Rabbis (but not towards religion) and scrutinizes them carefully: Are their rulings based on a direct approach to the sources or rather on meta-halakhic explanations (sociology and morality)? She persists in her Torah study and prayer. Some women who share Pnina's approach lay *tefillin*, wear a *yarmulke*, or live in an egalitarian relationship and share with their husbands the recitation of Sabbath and holiday prayers, the Friday evening Kiddush, and the breaking of the loaf. Such practices often draw criticism and opposition for overstretching the limits of Orthodoxy. However, by virtue of their religious strictness, studiousness, and commitment to the burdens of religion, some of these women have won the esteem of certain members of their communities. Some might say that Pnina's attitudes are closer to secular feminism. Again, we disagree: any such presentation overlooks the complex lines that Pnina draws from the periphery and the center interrelating feminism and religion.

Yonit demonstrates a similar case. She comes from a non-religious family in Philadelphia and sees being a religious feminist as a process of searching for and building her own path of faith. She asked herself questions such as: Why do women not regularly attend prayers? How would she be perceived by others if she chose to attend prayers on the Sabbath Eve? Would her desire to pray be perceived as subversion of the community's customs? When invited by women's groups to join their women's prayers, she declines, preferring to be an integral part of the community and feeling no need for another women-only framework of activity. On *Tishah b'Av* (Ninth of Av, a Jewish day of mourning) she wanted to go with her husband to the synagogue for prayers but the women's gallery was not open. Was she to pray behind the closed door? She decided not to and returned home without praying. Paradoxically, her refusal to compromise by praying behind the door or with a separate group of women seems to take her back to the traditional religious place; going home without praying is, however, her way to connect feminism and religion through a double articulation which, for her, reterritorializes religious



feminism. When Mahmood interviewed Muslim women in the piety movement, she similarly mapped the often contradictory choices in their life. Regarding the story of a woman called Abir, she wrote:

Abir's complicated evaluations and decisions were aimed toward goals whose sense is not captured by terms such as *obedience versus rebellion*, *compliance versus resistance*, or *submission versus subversion* [original emphasis]. These terms belong more to a feminist discourse than to the discourse of piety precisely because these terms have relevance for certain actions but not others. Abir's defiance of social and patriarchal norms is, therefore, best explored through an analysis of the ends toward which it was aimed, and the terms of being, affectivity, and responsibility that constituted the grammar of her actions. (Mahmood, 2005, p. 180).

The interviews with Pnina and Yonit show that for them becoming a woman, mother, wife, feminist, and religious person are practices that are in the folds of religion and feminism, built in between the cracks of both. Sometimes a woman breaks her ties with the religious community in order to be religious, at other times she returns to the community; sometimes she forms new ties with other religious women, and at other times she rejects those ties. These various acts show connections which are neither homogeneous nor consistent and which move in multiplicities of time, space, events, and relations (Grosz, 1995).

Lastly, there were women among the interviewees who presented their thoughts and actions with a wink. These women clearly have a deep understanding of the religious society in which they live. They are versed in Talmud and engaged in teaching other women Torah and Talmud. Their dress is modest and their observance of the *mitzvot* punctilious, but they are, at the same time, quietly “initiating” some feminist moves, avoiding their interpretation by the community as rebellion. They are career women, successful housekeepers, mothers, and community women. The way they conduct themselves may seem impossible, but both their religiosity and feminism are playful. At the start of her interview, for example, Esther (a Rabbi's wife) told us: “Until men are partners in my tasks [laughing], I will not do theirs.” She is not interested, she explained, in a unilateral conversion of women's roles. She does not reject women's assumption of masculine roles but neither does she affirm it. Her mode of action is cynical. However, Esther has bypassed the question of equality by turning it on its head: she demands equality before she will agree to assume any additional religious responsibility. She chooses confrontational tactics and enlists her husband's assistance. She highlights the arbitrariness of the discrimination against women in the synagogue and at prayer times and demands equality with men in daily life outside of religious territory. When asked how she balances her feminist ideas with her religious beliefs, she replied:

My tendency in many areas... is to see things differently and start... for example, for thirty-odd years I've been giving *Gemara* lessons. It began when there were women who wanted to study *Gemara*. I didn't advertise anywhere. I just said if there were three women who wanted to study, they had themselves a teacher, and bring your women friends.

And my calculation was that if there were ten women, then if the rabbi's wife gives a lesson in *Gemara*, it is no longer forbidden [laughing].

Esther is swimming against the tide by teaching women Torah in her home. She doesn't see it necessarily as “feminism”; no man was willing to teach them, and since she knows *Gemara*, she simply saw it as her responsibility to teach other women who wanted to learn. Aware of her standing as the Rabbi's wife, she decided not to advertise the lessons but opened her door to other women for whom study is part of their faith. In other words, Esther reached out to other women but according to the constellation of options she has managed to form. She took action both outside religion and within it and outside feminism and within it; each time using the options open to her that would cause the least opposition.

In sum, our analysis followed the choices made by Orthodox religious feminists in their daily lives through connections and convergences (Crockett, 2013). It is not a process of undoing but a movement of shifting practices, desires, and imaginaries (Butler, 2013). We learned that the connections between events like the Sabbath, holidays, recitation of Torah in synagogue, weddings, etc. were constantly moving direction on various topics, each time awarding priority and importance to a different body of choices, passing between territories and locations, getting closer to hegemonic religion and then detaching from it. The women we cited presented multiple links rather than collapsing religion and feminism into one. Their choices of action (movements in the external world) and locations (home, work, school, the synagogue), stand, we argue, for feminist religiosity without a hyphen, not as a unified subjectivity but as a multiplicity that is “a woman” (who is also already a crowd). It is a name, a semiotic marking, subsuming an aggregate. As Deleuze and Guattari wrote: “The proper name ... containing its already domesticated multiplicity within itself and linking it to a being or object posited as unique” (1987, p. 27).

We suggest that opting for a theory of inner life (as they enter into the external world) diverts the gaze from practices of mediation, averaging between religion and feminism, or, finding a way in-between. It underlies the directions (not the positions) that feminist religious women take as they draw lines of flight from the center. Interestingly, feminism and religion were never spoken about as one but always as derivatives of a part — perhaps like people who look at the skin but see only pores, holes, little scars, and spots (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 27).

### A Feminist Take on Deleuze and Guattari

Feminism and religion are regulatory systems, yet we cannot do without the norm (Butler, 1990). Submission to certain forms of (external) authority, wrote Mahmood (2005, p. 31), is “a condition for achieving the subject's potentiality.” Theorizing the Orthodox Jewish feminist subject of religion, we listened to each woman separately, but “feminist religiosity” is not a Western individualized liberal (or neo-liberal) term to imply that a woman “accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care” (Rottenberg, 2014). Feminist religiosity is a collective agency (Islamic, Christian, or Jewish, to name the three major religions). It portrays the activities of

single women moving from the periphery to the center and from the center to the margins; of women who cannot constantly be part of the community but who cannot be without the community. What kind of connections and divisions do they create between their particular choices and their desire to be part of tradition? How do they talk about the intensity of their feelings, desires, loathings, choices, and actions and about the different distances from the norm that allow them to live their lives seemingly as whole? What forms of libidinal choices and multiplicities track the title “religious feminist”? These questions are for all women who observe religion and self-define themselves as feminists in tandem. In other words, how does religious feminism become integral politics “in the architecture of the self” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 31) and yet remain continuously a direction in motion? Judaism (and likewise Islam) submits women's worship of God to a separate sphere (both at home and in public) and to special rules and behaviors. Religious women who wish to deepen the meaning of their faith find that these prohibitions limit their religious experiences which are multiplicities. Deleuze and Guattari's idea of breaks to the margins is particularly helpful for understanding these movements (intensities and distances) at a time when, on the one hand, religious politics is growing and, on the other, neoliberal feminism is becoming dominant (Rottenberg, 2014). By breaks to the margins we do not mean that women become less important; rather that from the margins they can break away from the authority of the norm and redefine their potential and thus their freedom.

Our study shows the ways in which religious feminism is a subjectivity of multiplicities; maneuvers of emotions (positive and negative), tastes, smells, and body reactions connected to inclinations and beliefs. The women of *Kolech* did not move along familiar classifications of how to be religious or feminist. They practiced worship and followed the commandments from different places and locations as they moved between the folds of constrictions and restrictions. They wanted *to be* part of a religious community, *to be* mothers who set a religious example to their children, and *to be* equal to their husbands both within the context of the family and the community in order to feel closer to God and to feel competent in their religious practices, especially on special occasions such as holidays, celebrations, Friday evenings, etc. The use of the verb *to be* was in fact a conjunction of “and... and ...and” and never a static point. These women have created an entire tapestry of practices on the seam of feminism and religion.

Yonit's desire to pray on *Tishah b'Av* was understood by those around her as a feminist act of protest. To her, however, praying was first and foremost the fulfillment of a religious desire. Similarly, Michal changed the way she bathed in the *mikvah* and thus heeded her feelings of disgust without renouncing the ritual itself. How can we theoretically comprehend what Michal, Yonit, Tamar, Pnina, Rachel, and all the 44 women we interviewed were saying? What can their lines of flight from liberal feminism and religious orthodoxy contribute to feminist politics?

In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari wrote: “What distinguishes the map from tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward experimentation in contact with the real,” (p. 12) that is, in contact with desire. They continued: “The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, and susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed,

adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation.” Like Deleuze and Guattari, we saw the women we interviewed experimenting with religious freedom; they were connected to their needs and desires to live effective lives and to change their community of men and women, and therefore acted in the spaces that are open to action. They have attained multiple entryways to the practice of religion and feminism. Even those born into ultra-orthodox families did not consider religion as a monad consistency but as a map of holes (and also scars) where their devotion and fulfillment can be intensified by reading the scriptures rather than by turning to rabbinical authority. In their contact with daily life, they experimented with de-territorializing and re-territorializing their actions in ways that formed breaks and folds within both feminism and religion. Their steps were not ready-made and did not fall smoothly within the ordinary lines of authority. When Rachel decided not to submit to the feminist demand to lay *tefillin* because she could not bear the “sexual masculine smell” of the leather, she was not necessarily going back to tradition. We claim that Rachel acted outside tradition by placing the *tefillin* on her skin. She then experienced the leather and its smell as sexually repelling and gave it up. Her moves toward religious faith and practice cannot be simply traced by following her steps within a bifurcated system of either conforming or rebelling against the rule forbidding women to lay *tefillin*. Her decision to abstain from such a rebellious act was followed by a redefinition of her embodied feelings. As Deleuze and Guattari would suggest, we should look into the quality of her new relations with the *tefillin*: “[O]ne will often be forced to take dead ends, to work with signifying powers and subjective affections, to find a foothold in formations that are Oedipal or paranoid or even worse [in Rachel's case sexual smell], rigidified territories that open the way for other transformational operations” (1987, p. 14). Rachel worked her way from a dead end (her repulsion to the smell of the *tefillin*) to a new foothold by refraining from putting *tefillin* next to her skin but not detaching it from her religious imaginaries. When Michal goes to the ocean or takes a bath instead of going to the *mikvah*, she is neither rejecting the ritual nor fulfilling it as required but creating new roots for action which “brings into play very different regimes of signs” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 21). The important issue is that religious women who define themselves as feminists constitute their female subjectivity through the lines of desire that are fitted (but not completely) into one system, yet, these lines enter another multiplicity, and “constantly construct and dismantle themselves in the course of their communications, as they cross over into each other, at beyond, or before a certain threshold” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 33).

To sum up again, we argue that feminist critique should not turn a blind eye to forms of female subjectivity that do not conform with the norm of gender equality on the conditions of secular values. Because the forms of submission and subjection have become so intricate and complex and the sovereign subject so controlled, feminist critique should perhaps reconsider what Butler (2004, p. 206) identified as the second sense of the norm: “intelligible” life. The women of *Kolech*, we argue, struggle to live an intelligible life, namely, a fulfilled religious life as full subjects. But the unification of the term “intelligible life” is a juxtaposition; aggregates of meaningful steps on the “skin” of life. The break from certain forms of worship are re-

territorialized and reenacted in different ways with different intensities and at different distances from the norm at any given moment. These choices change and redefine the inner life and the sense of becoming a religious woman. Women move from the home to work to the synagogue and from activities in the community to relations with their children and spouses along paths that have made their lives valuable and possible and not necessarily by principles of right and wrong measured by their closeness to tradition. They connect to and break away from tradition but remain members of their religious communities. They find a way to fulfill their desire for direct religious devoutness without the dependency and mediation of Rabbis, husbands, or rabbinical judges. But, at the same time, they are able to associate with a specific Rabbi or pray with their husband at home without seeing it as a contradiction or a betrayal of their feminist ideas. They live real choices; at times uprooting the rules, at other times bending them, and at yet other times following them. Omitting the hyphen between feminism and religion alludes precisely to these movements in time, their speed and intensity.

What do the women of *Kolech* teach us about a feminist critique of religion? Does theorizing “the gap” as an aggregate that opens itself to diverse possibilities of new formations rather than theorizing ways to close and heal the gap make a meaningful difference to feminist criticism? For example, when we judge the wearing of the veil from a bipolar line of resistance and submission, we are looking at a very narrow (pigeon)hole. When, however, we look at the veil as an act of many paths, it leaves many marks: it strengthens the woman's feelings of freedom and proximity to God; it sends one message to her community of women and another to her community of men; it teaches her children the norm but her daughters the joy of piety. Similarly, when an Orthodox Jewish woman chooses the path of feminism but refuses to wear *tefillin*, she becomes a woman of multiplicities and not a hypocrite. She walks through life on an indirect path (sometime circular); she loves to wear *tefillin* but the smell appalls her and belongs to a different machine (not hers). When internal life taking forms in the external world is seen as multiplicity, feminist critique becomes more complex, perhaps even chaotic, but it also becomes a more powerful tool for social change; at any moment the circle of critique can open up and let a woman (who is already a crowd) change our vision and understanding of the world.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “*Kolech*, founded in 1998, is the first Orthodox Jewish feminist organization in Israel. *Kolech* aims to increase public awareness and bring change in Israeli society. It seeks to disseminate the values of gender equality and mutual respect, to encourage equal opportunity for women in the public arena, including the advancement of women's rights in religious *halachic* spheres. *Kolech* encourages greater equality for women in matters of personal status, such as marriage and divorce, and is in the forefront of an uncompromising battle against all forms of gender violence.” <http://www.kolech.org.il>

<sup>2</sup> For lack of space, we cannot review all this important scholarship that has influenced our study: For Christian feminism see, Dillon, 1999; Chong, 2006; Ali, 2005; Ammerman, 1987; Ecklund, 2003; Manning, 1999; Yadgar, 2006; Griffith, 1997; Collins, 1990; Ozorak, 1996; Scott, 1991; Peshkin, 1986; Dufour, 2000; Gallagher & Smith, 1999. For Muslim feminism see, Ali, 2005; Moghadam, 2002; Barlas, 2002; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Memissi, 1991; Ahmed, 1992; Badran, 2005. For American and Israeli Jewish feminism see, Yadgar, 2006; Bernstein,

2001; Sagi and Schwartz, 2003; Davidman, 1991; Gordin, 2005; Plaskow, 1990; Hartman, 2007; Heschel, 1983; Adler, 1998; Kehat, 2010; Shamir, Shtera, & Elias, 1997; Kaufman, 1991; Longman, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Since most of the women we interviewed were married to men, we did not ask about the place of sexuality in *Kolech*. At the same time the organization is open to all Orthodox Jewish feminist women. There is, as far as we know, no guidelines precluding LGBTQ persons from participating in the organization

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