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Ethics of a skirt: surface and depth in a Jewish ethnography¹

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Abstract

In recent years, questions of morality and ethics have become an explicit focus of attention within the social sciences and humanities. Within this burgeoning interdisciplinary field, debates have crystallised between scholars of ‘the good’ and proponents of ‘ordinary ethics’. The stakes here include apparently incommensurable conceptions of moral action, language and subjectivity as well as underlying tensions over disciplinary genealogies. In this chapter, I draw on ethnographic research into Jewish life in Hackney in order to engage these debates from an as yet unexplored perspective. I begin by considering the tensions and consequences of my naming ‘the good’ and ‘ethics’ as a research object and ask how these terms resonate within orthodox Jewish contexts that are also gendered in distinctive ways. I consider what is at stake as I, a somehow ‘assimilated’ Jewish woman, searched for a transcendent ‘Jewish ethics’, and discuss how an ordinary ethics gradually emerged as I learned to stay with the unsettling interplay between surface and depth in my fieldwork. My broader aim is to show how Jewish ethnography as one under-acknowledged ‘other’ within the social sciences can speak back to some implicitly Christian, colonial and masculine grammars structuring this field.

Turn it over and over, for all is in it
Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers): 5:22 (cited in Zornberg 2009: 238).

Searching for the good: dressing-up orthodox

On a cold January morning, wearing a borrowed long skirt, high-necked woollen jumper and dark grey hat, I walked from my home in a gentrified, multicultural area of Hackney, North London to a strictly orthodox Jewish (Haredi) children’s centre in the nearby Jewish neighbourhood of Stamford Hill. I had been invited there by Gila, an Israeli Haredi woman involved with an orthodox Jewish maternity network, in order to attend a mother and baby drop-in session with my son. Proud of her professional standing, Gila was surprisingly keen to act as my ‘gatekeeper’. It was following her

¹ This is the accepted, pre-copy-edited version of a chapter to be published in Robbins, J., Strhan, S. and Henig, D. *The Social Life of Ethics: Philosophy, Social Theory and Ethnography* (under contract with Bloomsbury Press).

detailed instructions that I dressed in a long skirt and covered my frizzy hair, which contrasts so obviously with the sleek sheitels (wigs) worn by married Haredi women in accordance with the laws and customs of tzniuth.² In these early days of fieldwork, the seemingly mundane question of what to wear had been an intense source of anxiety for me. My reluctant participation in what I took to be a patriarchal dress code felt like a necessary though uncomfortable pretence, an instrumental means of gaining entry to insular orthodox settings. There, I hoped to access my 'real' object of study of the Jewish ethics of neighbouring, 'Jewish ethical teachings', which I took to be grounded in religious texts.³ As I pushed my son in his buggy along the familiar streets, sensing my uncanny similarity to the, in my eyes, passive and oppressed Haredi mothers that I passed, I found myself strangely dissociated from my orthodox feminine body. This unease intensified when, upon meeting Gila at the reception, she looked me over and commented approvingly, 'oh I didn't recognise you; you did it [the Haredi look] so well'.

Whilst Gila had helped me to make inroads into Haredi settings, our encounters thus far had felt both uncomfortable and, somehow, superficial. At our first meeting, I had barely sat down at her dining room table when she asked "Are you Jewish?" I nodded. 'Both your mother and your father?' I nodded again. 'You look Jewish'. I shifted uncomfortably, aware that some part of me was pleased to belong in her terms. It seemed my Jewish parentage was, for now, sufficient for Gila within what felt like her racialized conception of Jewish identity.⁴ Settling back in her seat at the head of the table, she described her professional relations, as a Jewish-Israeli 'foreigner' in Stamford Hill, with the threatening non-Jewish others she encountered, 'coloured people', 'women who prefer women'. I flinched at her language, bringing to mind my friends from a nearby Liberal synagogue who continually experienced the violence of such racialized and homophobic terms. Then, after talking at length about 'her' community's need to police its social and psychic boundaries, she began to angrily recount the story of an ongoing war between herself and her Muslim next-door neighbours. For twenty-seven years they had maintained a tense relationship, which fluctuated with events in the Middle East. One year ago Gila's family had decided to rebuild a garage in their garden; suddenly the neighbours had turned 'nasty', harassing Gila's family, sending the police to her house and making antisemitic comments to her children. She continued, 'so how do I know that the people I'm working with – you understand? [How can I trust that they won't also 'turn'?] This is about *the* Muslims - it's

² Tzniuth, or modesty, has various meanings that are broadly focused on constraining the body. While tzniuth applies both to women and men, the differential ways in which it is encoded and practiced relate, as Fader (2009) describes, to beliefs about gendered difference and appropriate relations, including, most notoriously, the responsibility for women to protect men from the potential for arousal. Insofar as tzniuth is encoded in laws of feminine clothing, it encompasses detailed specifications and customs regarding the length of skirts, sleeves, high necklines, and the covering of hair after marriage.

³ This study of Jewish ethical relations to the neighbour is part of a larger project on 'Ethical Monotheism'. This was initially framed as an investigation into monotheistic value systems, including with regard to major textual sources that influence the religions' approach to social and ethical concerns, as taught in the UK. I would like to thank Dangoor Education for the grant that funded this project.

⁴ Within orthodox Judaism, Jewish descent is matrilineal. The question of Jewish identity is thus answered, with reference to Jewish law (Halacha), in absolute terms. During my fieldwork, I encountered a number of people who were the children of Jewish fathers and had suffered the painful exclusion of being told that they were not 'halachically' (i.e. authentically) Jewish (see Kasstan 2016 for one such narrative).

not about – as I say I’m not worried about the English neighbours or anybody. You understand I know that they are not going to do these type of things.’

I listened quietly as Gila wielded the trope of the psychologically volatile, vengeful Muslim, ‘too close for comfort’, alongside her totalising rendering of Jewish community. Then, when with relief, I finally turned the recorder off, I found myself once again subject to her categorical judgement as if my ambiguous position must be resolved before we parted. ‘Is your husband Jewish?’ she asked looking at me directly. I shook my head, avoiding eye contact, aware that, from her perspective, out-marriage transgressed Jewish law and also threatened Jewish continuity within an already hostile secular world. Without pausing, she countered, ‘And what do your parents think of that?’ Weakly, I answered ‘They don’t mind’. ‘I see. Good for them.’

Writing my fieldnotes on the bus carrying me back from Stamford Hill to more comfortable terrain, I found myself strangely detached from the material that I had gathered, aware that such a ‘relevant’ story about feuding Jewish and Muslim neighbours met the remit of my project but putting off indefinitely the task of transcribing this interview. To what extent should I take Gila’s enactment of particularist and patriarchal Jewish laws, and her hostile representations of her Muslim neighbours, as a case of (a culturally relative) ‘Jewish ethics’ in my study? What would be the consequences of treating this material at surface value?

The violence of the good: the law of the skirt

This question, arising in my early fieldwork encounters with Gila, of how to locate the ethical and moral as an empirical object, has in recent years become a topical issue in sociology as well as anthropology (Introduction, this volume; Alexander 2003; Lynch 2012). Within this burgeoning interdisciplinary field, debates have crystallised, broadly speaking, between scholars of ‘the good’, ‘values’ and ‘the sacred’, and proponents of ‘ordinary ethics’. While, these approaches encompass a range of philosophical influences, one significant theoretical move traversing the ‘anthropology of the good’ (Robbins 2013) and the cultural sociology of the sacred (Alexander 2003; Lynch 2012) has drawn on a Durkheimian framework in order to study what people think of, and symbolically represent as ‘the good’ in their social relations. Such framings share a picture of moral life as ultimately shaped by a domain of coherent sacred values that are set apart from, and structure or regulate everyday life. They also converge in claiming to renew the critical and comparative leverage of social scientific accounts of morality, by offering a neutral account of how the good, and the bad, are culturally mediated (Alexander 2003; Robbins 2016). At the same time, ethnographers influenced by ordinary language philosophy, have offered a different vision of what it means to study the ethical. Here, ethics has been located in the entailments of the relation to the other in everyday life, particularly under precarious conditions, and so as inherently connected to contingencies of desire, violence and vulnerability (Das 2007; 2010). While, it has been noted that orientations to the Good and ordinary ethics are not mutually exclusive, it has become apparent that these debates do not only pivot around different conceptions of the ethical / moral but are implicated with questions around the Christian, colonial and masculine genealogies of related categories, including the sacred, religion, ritual and law.⁵ Furthermore, while epistemological and methodological tensions have remained relatively implicit in these conversations, it is clear that these genealogical critiques cannot be divorced from contested visions of what it means to enquire

⁵ See, for example, the comment pieces by Clarke, Das and Lambek in response to Robbins (2016).

into the ethical. Thus, for Veena Das, questioning the seemingly neutral framing of ‘the Good’ as a realm of ‘higher ideals’ is also bound up with her sense of ethnography as an ethical mode of enquiry that dwells with marginalised others, and attends to their struggles to secure, maintain and endure a precarious everyday (Das 2015).⁶ Contrary to claims that such approaches appeal to universalistic notions of humanistic empathy (Robbins 2013), Das suggests that ethnographers may enact a form of indifference, even violence, by claiming an abstracted view from a distance, and frames the act of empathising with the other’s experience as an achievement rather than a given.⁷ From this perspective, rather than operationalising a given theoretical framework, the ethnographer should undertake the risky and demanding work of placing ourselves within an immanent, emerging story, and descending into our relationships with our fieldwork interlocutors. This requires that she, ‘perform considerable work on herself to acknowledge both her separateness from her respondents and her sense of “being-with” or in the midst of a world, which, if not entirely new, has now been disclosed as having aspects that she did not anticipate’ (2015: 373).⁸

In this chapter, I begin from the seemingly superficial act of putting on a skirt in order to contribute to this framing of ordinary ethics from the perspective of my Jewish ethnography. Specifically, I refigure Das’ ethical gesture of descent and dwelling in the ordinary as a iterative movement between surface and depth, which I claim has ‘indigenous’ Jewish resonance. Learning from the Jewish women who guided my fieldwork, I will explore how this embodied method of enquiry can reveal unexpected meanings and transcendent relations to others within the everyday instantiation of Jewish laws governing feminine clothing. Drawing implicitly on psychoanalytic and Hassidic understandings, I will develop the claim that this oscillating movement can bring ethnographers into contact with enigmatic depths of ourselves and others that exceed symbolic representations (Frosh 2008; Zornberg 2016).⁹ This will ground my engagement with a key question underpinning the debate around *where* the good is in the world. *How* can I, as a Jewish ethnographer, myself shaped by dominant Christian, colonial and masculine grammars, risk thinking anew in developing knowledge of ethical life? (Puett 2014).

⁶ Alongside, well-established critical engagement with the Protestant genealogies of post-Enlightenment social theory from scholars of Islam, I draw in this paper on a parallel set of interventions emerging from the field of Jewish ethnography (Boyarin 1996; Fader 2009). My approach takes up Boyarin’s (1991) framing of Jewish ethnography as both redressing the relative marginalization of Jews as historically ambiguous subjects of ethnographic study, and as bringing Jewish thought and traditions into critical dialogue with social theories and epistemologies, that have been within a dominant Christian culture.

⁷ See Puett (2014) for a related discussion of how such universalistic, ‘neutral’ theoretical models can work at a metalevel to distance the anthropologist from disturbing and tragic registers of lived ethical experience.

⁸ While Das’ claim here resonates with James Laidlow’s (2014) account of the exercise of the ethnographic imagination as an ethical mode of reflective self-formation, my approach is more attuned with her keen emphasis on the relational ground, the mutual vulnerability of both teacher and student, within such scenes of ethnographic learning.

⁹ Here, I am taking up Stephen Frosh’s (2008) question regarding the potential of forms of communication that ‘exceed’ the symbolic, to facilitate meaningful, non-violent contact between neighbours. My approach diverges, however, from the more hyperbolic emphasis on encountering ‘the real’ within life and death events, by attending instead to the texture of words and gestures within everyday contexts.

Now viewed from a Durkheimian perspective, Gila's emphasis on what Robbins terms 'corporate unity' (2016: 776), the symbolic value of the integrity and survival of Jewish community, would be a straightforward example of the ultimate good. Following this theoretical logic, Gila's Muslim neighbours clearly functioned as a profane or impure other, the object of feelings of hatred and disgust which are the necessary corollary of symbolic solidarity (Lynch 2012). In addition, Gila's demand for my conformity to laws around modest dress showed how 'the good', in this case a moral ideal of Jewish femininity, differentiated between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' Jews and so defended the moral community against ambiguity. Talking, for example, with Rachel, a member of the observant Adeni (Yemeni) Jewish community in Stamford Hill, she had highlighted how clothing marked out ambiguous Jewish others, including non-European Mizrahi Jews such as herself, or assimilated Jews such as myself. Angrily she told me how her Haredi neighbours had stopped speaking to her after they had seen her wearing trousers, explaining, 'I'm not Jewish to them, they just look down on me'. Rachel's response reveals how, as Ayala Fader (2009) has argued, material signs of modesty constituted a semiotic language, marking difference and religious authenticity.¹⁰ For scholars of the good, such an approach has a powerful appeal, showing the higher values 'really' at stake in relation to a seemingly mundane action of wearing a skirt. In particular it seems to address the charge of banality levelled against ordinary ethicists, who, it is claimed, merely reproduce the 'truism' that ethics is located in the everyday (Zigon 2014). Focusing on what Gila explicitly represented as the good, however troubling, would, in this framing, provide a tangible focus for my study of neighbourly ethics.

In the course of our initial exchanges, Gila certainly seemed to embody a familiar image of a law-bound, defended Jewish orthodoxy. Talking with Rachel, I had become intensely aware that Gila's exclusive claim for Jewish identity was an act of annihilation against those who resisted her gender norms and so were constituted as not really Jewish. These tensions were somehow at stake in my emerging relationship with Gila. They were carried in my conflicting desires, to conform to and to resist her values, as I dressed in the skirt that elicited her approval. I imagined somehow that in drawing closer to this other 'Haredi woman', I was at risk of being either incorporated into this totalising community, or expelled from it. This raised complex ethical questions about 'the good' that were somehow un-nameable within a neutral framework that treats violence as a culturally relative category. In other words, while within the terms of a neutral theory of sacred values, I could reproduce what Gila represented as 'good', it was not possible to name or to understand the splitting of 'the good' and 'the bad', belonging and exclusion, as an ethically violent relation.

But there was also a second sense in which it seemed to me that limiting my focus to studying sacred values would be troublingly superficial. In recent years, the rapidly growing Haredi community in Stamford Hill have been the focus of both sociological and media attention. For example, in her widely cited study of attitudes towards 'the ethos of mixing' within the London borough of Hackney, Susanne Wessendorf (2014) portrayed the Haredi community in Stamford Hill as (alongside 'Hipsters') uniquely problematic, identifying their refusal to participate in exchanges beyond their own social milieu as evidence of their (pathological) insularity. Furthermore, the figure of the oppressed orthodox woman has been mobilised to support public denunciations of the Haredi

¹⁰ Fader frames her convincing account of Hasidic feminine modesty in Foucauldian terms, as a technology of the self oriented towards teleological norms. While, attending to modesty as a moral discipline is clearly pertinent, my approach contributes to emerging enquiries into the relationship of law and ethics (see also Clarke 2015) by suggesting what may be missed by a totalizing rendering: in this instance, the presence of that aspect of Hasidic philosophy, which is oriented to the unknown.

community for controvening universal ‘modern’ British values of gender equality.¹¹ Within this political context, imposing a Durkheimian analysis of the Haredi community would therefore confirm everything that is already known about Jewish particularism. Here, it would be no surprise that orthodox Jews shape a moral community constituted around the friend-enemy matrix, prioritising patriarchal law over ethics, in which love takes the form of loyalty to ‘their (or our) own’. To put this in the vocabulary of political theology, this is the Judaism oriented by the symbolic law that keeps the ethical / monstrous Other at bay and denies the possibility of a human connection that is made possible by universal secular-Christian modernity (Frosh 2008).¹² Now, as Ayala Fader (2009) has explored, there is clearly some truth in the claim that Haredi Jews mobilise counter-cultural forms of religious femininity in order to ‘hyperbolize’ Jewish difference.¹³ Nonetheless, wider public discourses of orthodox Jewish distinctiveness also function as powerful modes of othering, which keep ‘the Haredim’ at a comfortable distance. And so I felt that following the path laid out by scholars of the good would be superficial in ways that have ethical implications. For in a sense Gila *had* allowed me to sustain an ambiguous position thus far in our encounters. It was I who was left somehow resistant to deepening our relationship, not seeking, for example, to learn more about the meaning of what I experienced as an oppressive patriarchal law of the skirt. And yet without allowing myself to move deeper into the community, surely I could only perpetuate the prejudice of what was already known?

Threats to the ordinary: ambiguous others

A few weeks later, Gila and I were standing once again on the street outside her office. I was still searching for that elusive object named ‘ethics’, and so, with an air of desperation, I asked Gila directly: how would she advise me to learn about this? Gila smiled,

‘Well that isn’t something you can learn ‘in one go’, we learn it all through our lives, from a very young age. A young child eating meals learns that these are the blessings [to say over particular foods], these are the things that you should and shouldn’t do.’

I replied, exposing my vulnerability, confessing my own deracinated relation to what Fader (2009) describes as the embodied language of orthodox Judaism, ‘what about for people like me who did not grow up learning this?’ As usual Gila’s answer was unequivocal,

‘Well the Lubavitch will do something or you can try the shul [synagogue] in Wenton Row. But you must be careful: don’t go to any of this “new” - what do they call themselves – “reform” Judaism. You know a lot of them aren’t really Jewish and it isn’t really Judaism.’

¹¹ Examples include conflicts over posters calling for gender segregation on the street during a Torah procession; an alleged ban on Belz (Haredi) women driving; tensions between Christian and Jewish members of a newly established interfaith council over the issue of men shaking women’s hands.

¹² As Boyarin and Boyarin (1993) argue, the notion of the overcoming of Jewish law is integral to secular Christianity’s teleological narrative of the emergence of a universal ethics that transcends difference.

¹³ Though Fader’s analysis also complicates a simplistic account of Haredi insularity, as she highlights how this religious stringency coexists with participation and fluency in secular modern culture.

I kept quiet, struck again by the violence of Gila's distinctions and now holding a shameful secret: my weekly visits, in my jeans and trainers, to the study group of a local liberal synagogue. In that self-proclaimed feminist space I had learnt that there was a tradition within Liberal Judaism, that emerged out of a historical engagement with Christianity and Enlightenment rationalism, of articulating an ethical 'core' of values that could be differentiated from law. This apparent disregard for law was one source of the orthodox perception that liberal and reform Judaism had somehow been Christianised, and was as such a deep fault-line between these communities. Apparently oblivious to my shifty expression, Gila leaned in and began to probe my identity again, 'what is your maiden name – is it Sheldon?' I nodded silently, withholding the narrative that this family name Sheldon had been anglicised by my Czech and Austrian grandparents, part of a history of racialization, and assimilation, that contributed to my own rupture from Jewish tradition. Gila continued: 'And what was your mother's name?' I replied, 'Katz' Gila's eyes lit up 'oh Katz! That's the name of the highest priests you know...'¹⁴ Again I stayed quiet, concealing how this hidden name carried another aspect of my family's break with Judaism: my mother's visceral rejection of the culture of gender inequality that she had experienced in the orthodox synagogue that she attended as a girl.

It was in March, shortly before the festival, Purim, when I took Gila's advice, put my borrowed skirt back on and paid my first visit to Wenton Row. A local independent modern orthodox synagogue, I had been told that it attracted European, Iranian and Indian Jews of widely varying levels of observance, and that the rabbi held classes on Shabbos (Saturdays) including studying a text known as 'Ethics of the Fathers'. And so it was that I found myself sitting quietly on a bench with a friendly member of the shul, Sonia, in the upstairs women's gallery of this atmospheric former chapel.¹⁵ We had arrived early and the chazzan (prayer leader) was leading the prayers while the few other men present joined in, in stops and starts. Listening to the quiet murmur, as Sonia leaned over the balcony to check if there was a minyan (the ten men needed for the service to proceed), I was struck by the precarious situation of this small community and moved by the attempt to sustain practices that were unfamiliar to me, and yet somehow resonant. More people had arrived by the time the rabbi moved to the front of the shul and began to speak about the special meaning of this day, 'Shabbat Zachor', which is dedicated to remembering: 'at this time we remember the story of Amalek, the nation who attacked the Israelites for no reason.' Drawing an analogy with the Nazis and ISIS, he continued,

'And while our instinct might be to seek an explanation for *why* they are attacking us, we should not be tempted down this path. For if we try to find solutions, we might think that maybe, if we are less different, we won't be attacked. But the truth is that there is no explanation, and so our response should be to become more connected to our Judaism and to Hashem [our God].'

Earlier, I described how, for Veena Das, ordinary ethics is framed around relations to the other under conditions shadowed by violence and is attentive to those for whom securing the

¹⁴ The Kohanim, or priestly caste are considered to be descendents of Moses' brother Aaron and continue to have special obligations within orthodox synagogues.

¹⁵ Within orthodox Jewish synagogues women and men sit separately. Communal prayers are led by men and the halachic obligation to participate in these is binding on men only.

everyday is an achievement. Participating in the precarious life of Wenton Row, a community for whom the survival of tradition is continually at stake, I began to sense how this notion of maintaining the everyday as an achievement has distinctive Jewish resonance. For the struggles of Wenton Road to achieve a minyan reflect a wider decline in modern orthodox Jewish observance in Britain (Staetsky 2015), and this sense of impending loss is shadowed by histories of the devastation of Jewish life, on a scale that is hard to articulate. This, I suggest, provides a frame for understanding the defensiveness of the rabbi's invocation of Amalek, the enemy, against the background of Jewish destruction, deracination and assimilation. At stake were ambiguous histories of Jewish patriarchy and racialization, carried communally, and in my own family, shaping law-governed forms of life in the present. So that for orthodox Jews inhabiting the multicultural, secular landscape of contemporary Hackney, in addition to the named 'enemy', the non-Jewish other, there was a deeper threat that was not explicitly named. That was the ambiguous Jew: the one who had drawn dangerously close to the hegemonic Christian-secular society, a culture that demands assimilation under the sign of the universal.

Towards the end of the Shabbat Zachor service, the rabbi raised his eyes to the women's gallery and Sonia muttered in my ear 'prayers for healing'. As the women around me fed him the Hebrew names of sick acquaintances, she leaned in to ask me 'what's your Hebrew name?'¹⁶ Her question caught me off-guard; I hesitated for a moment and then confessed 'I don't know. I don't think I have one'. She shrugged and I looked back down at my prayer book, and the impenetrable Hebrew text swam before my eyes. As I sat, tracing the odd Hebrew letter in the prayer book, unable to contribute prayers for healing, I began to realise how I might be an ambiguous semi-assimilated figure for the women I was meeting, unable to contribute to healing even as I apparently yearned to do so. In this way I was gradually appreciating the risk that I posed, for example, to Gila, even as she, perhaps, sought to 'redeem' me (Fader 2009): the trust required on her part in engaging an ambiguous, secularised and assimilated Jew, whose investments in this research were highly enigmatic. And this raised a question of my ethical responsibility, to resist the temptation to distance myself from her 'culturally relative' commitments to the 'good' in order to deepen my attentiveness to what was at stake in our tense relationship. To consider, in other words, how such violent assertions of exclusive moral community might be shaped by horizons of precarity and vulnerability, with which I was implicated.

The transcendent in the ordinary: Shira's dress sense

When the service had ended, Sonia led me downstairs where the softly spoken matriarch of the synagogue had, as usual, prepared what was perhaps the major draw for many shul attendees, her renowned kiddush buffet meal of European and Indian Jewish dishes. There Sonia introduced me to Miriam, a local artist who, I would learn, practiced an esoteric form of orthodox Jewish observance. Miriam looked me in the eye and with disconcerting directness, asked, 'What are you doing here?' I explained that I was working on a research project on the theme of Ethical Monotheism. 'Oh it's good to have a project' she asserted with more than a hint of sarcasm and then continued, 'well of course for us Jews, Christians aren't monotheists because they have the trinity – you know the idea that god can be split into the spiritual and material – it's ridiculous'. She began to talk about an art class she teaches with three strictly orthodox women in Stamford Hill who she said 'are really rather

¹⁶ Her question referred to the name that is given to a Jewish child (traditionally boys) at birth for use in the synagogue.

wonderful in the way they think and talk'. Then, as the beginning of the Rabbi's study session was announced, Miriam downed her whisky and made a dash for the exit, while I reluctantly turned away from this scene of 'ethical teaching' to politely assist the women washing up in the kitchen. Sometime later, I met up with Miriam again when she offered to show me around Stamford Hill and introduce me to some people. She looked down at my legs. It was a boiling hot day and I had rushed to our meeting point, my bare ankles just visible beneath a long skirt. She stubbed out her roll-up cigarette and smiled: 'you might feel more comfortable if you put some tights on, eh?' I hesitated, ashamed of my 'mistake', which exposed my orthodox illiteracy, yet also recalling my mother's anger, as I flinched at this repressive demand. Then, somehow trusting in Miriam's somehow - paradoxically - feminist ethos, I allowed her to guide me: home to retrieve some tights, staying with the mundane tensions of this dress-code, to see where this might lead.

In September, as Jewish New Year approached, I was still searching for that elusive ethical object. Encouraged by Miriam, I finally put my long skirt back on and followed up on a suggested fieldwork contact with a Satmar woman called Shira. The Satmar, I had been told, are amongst the strictest and most observant of Haredi Jewish groups and so it was with a sense of trepidation that I made the initial phone call, introducing myself as a 'Jewish woman wanting to learn'. 'What do you mean you would like to learn about ethical teachings?' Shira asked, posing a question I had come to dread. But something in her tone made me drop my defences, 'to be honest, I'm not really sure', to which she replied that she would be happy to meet. And so a few days later I arrived on her doorstep. I was surprised to meet a woman just a few years older than me, wearing glasses, a shpitzel head covering¹⁷, and an understated smile. Early in our conversation she told me that she was training as a therapeutic counsellor and then towards the end of our conversation she said, 'I have the sense that you would like me to teach you?' I replied that I would like that. 'Let me think about it, I am not sure I would know how to it'.

In the subsequent weeks, we began to meet regularly, and Shira encouraged me to take things slowly. Somehow in our emerging friendship, it seemed possible to take risks. She had asked me directly if my husband was Jewish and when I nervously told her 'no', she asked 'how does that work?' in a tone less of judgement than of curiosity. Now we were sitting together on the first day of Succos, a festival that evokes the precarious, exilic quality of Jewish existence. I asked Shira if she would mind my recording the conversation, given that it was a holiday when her own use of electrical equipment was prohibited. She left the decision up to me and, despite my desire to 'capture' this 'data' I intuitively chose to keep the recorder switched off. In the hours that followed, as a deeper intimacy developed between us, it somehow seemed to me that keeping this law had opened up an adjacent ethical possibility, a way of being together made possible through conforming to this apparent prohibition.

As we sat together, Shira talked of her family's experience of the violence of the Shoah, and of her own ambiguous belonging to the Satmar community. She told me how her mother, a Hungarian Jew had been very detached from her emotions, how her parents like many in Stamford Hill were traumatised and somehow fearful people. She had not, it turned out, always been Satmar, rather her parents had been drawn to the Satmar rebbe (leader) when she was young, so that she was in a sense still an outsider. We talked about my family, and of a very different response, how Jewish traditions were not passed down, of assimilation, anger and shame. She asked me, 'how do

¹⁷ A shpitzel is a partial wig with hair at the front and the rest covered by a small hat or headscarf, which is worn by particularly observant Hasidic women.

you find it when you are learning?’ and I told her that there were aspects that were somehow familiar to me. She smiled and said something that in one sense troubled me, invoking the belief in naturalised gender differences that had contributed to my own rupture from Judaism, and yet simultaneously touched me, in somehow acknowledging my desire to repair this loss of meaning: ‘you know that the Hassidic teaching is that a woman has an internal Torah, she is born with the Torah inside of her. So when you are learning Torah now, it resonates with the Torah that is already inside of you.’

A few months later we were sitting at Shira’s table again talking about her therapeutic work. I was surprised to learn that she had been working with a teenage boy who was Muslim. She told me that the work had been difficult; he had been aggressive at school and she was nervous, ‘what if he would attack me?’ She added, ‘because he was a Muslim as well that raised issues for me that I needed to think about’. A short time later, she was elaborating on the detail of Jewish laws, for example of cooking, eating, dressing and talking, which organise her everyday life, when a surprising connection began to emerge. There are laws about everything, she explained, written in the bible, but there is also a further dimension of these actions, an inner dimension of connecting, of drawing connections deeply, ‘so we could do an ordinary thing and just be dry, and the same thing and do it with a quality, a richness, relating to the soul. It’s a kind of passionate experience of being Jewish and how to relate that in our everyday life.’ She continued,

‘A lot of the laws don’t make sense but we still do them and that’s really the, the power of a Jew. I’ll give you an example: we have a law that we mustn’t wear wool and linen [shatnez] together in clothing. Now to the mind it does not make sense, what’s wrong with wool and linen, I mean? But there are certain laws that we don’t know why and we’re asked to keep them... but it does something to a person to keep the law without knowing why’.

She added that this was a distinctively gendered aspect of Judaism, for while men learn to study the reasons for laws, it is women who focus on how to embody the practice. I registered my discomfort and anger as she justified Haredi women’s exclusion from textual study in terms of an essential, naturalised difference between the genders. I paused and then asked if she could put into words what it ‘does to her’ when she keeps the law of wool / linen without asking why. She explained,

‘it makes me have a connection way deeper than intellect or understanding, of listening to some power... telling me what to do, and I trust him so I’m going to listen whatever the case. And it helps me in life and in my counselling. It is a way of learning to be uncomfortable, learning to own feelings and staying with what I’m feeling.’

Later, I pressed her further on this question of dress, still preoccupied with the discomfort I felt in my modest skirt. She explained that, for her, modesty is about how she clothes herself, but again this surface act opens up an internal quality. Modesty is, she explained, about the capacity to hold things, anxieties, inside you without immediately externalising them. It is about not pretending to know things you don’t know; it is about the capacity to hold and listen. And as I listened intently to Shira’s account of how she keeps laws of dress, something shifted for in my relationship with her. The opposition of symbolic law and ethics that had felt so visceral in my encounters with Gila was in this context being transfigured. In evocatively articulating this relationship of ‘doing before hearing’ (Levinas 1990), Shira had somehow inverted my assumed relationship between ‘values’, knowledge and action, transfiguring my relation to laws that, from another perspective were patriarchal and

exclusive. She thus opened up a sense of an adjacent possibility: that keeping such laws could *also* be about allowing oneself to sustain discomfort and trust in the unknown quality of a relationship with an enigmatic other, an act of simultaneously connecting with one's own ambiguity that, in this important way, makes intimacy possible.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have claimed that in order to engage with the question, 'where is the good in the world?' we must first address prior epistemological and methodological concerns, which are also ethical. Challenging the hierarchy which sees philosophy as providing concepts and ethnography as a source of evidence (Das 2014), I have traced how my inherited theoretical schema for locating ethics, specifically the opposition of a transcendent, sacred realm to the immanent, mundane everyday, has been transfigured in the course of my fieldwork. In contrast to an approach that objectifies ethics as higher 'values' which then compel (via codified laws or emotive force) everyday social relations, I have framed ethics as a difficult process of, as Stephen Frosh (2008) puts it, 'making contact' under precarious conditions permeated by racialized and patriarchal representations of the other. My approach has turned around what initially seemed to be a purely superficial question: what should I wear for my fieldwork? Now, thinking of the debate between Robbins and Das, this question can be considered superficial in two distinct senses: my putting on a skirt might be a banal pretence, a means to an end in my study of ethical teachings or it might in Robbins' framing have an *obvious* meaning, as a symbolic instantiation of both a higher particularist value and a patriarchal law.

However the narrative I have developed through turning over this question has, I hope, challenged such a theoretically secured approach to the ethnographic study of ethics. In contrast, I have sought to exemplify how an embodied method of reluctantly putting on a skirt and then staying with the discomfort of this superficial action, has brought me into a deeper relationship with those I seek to know.¹⁸ My claim is that, the women who taught me to repeat what felt like an alienating symbolic gesture of feminine conformity, enabled me to engage in, as Das (2015) puts it, 'ethnographic work on the self'. This iterative act brought to the surface histories of rupture, exclusion and assimilation, histories that were carried in distinctive ways by myself and my fieldwork interlocutors, and which shaped our relationships. By allowing these hidden depths to surface, it became possible to make contact with aspects of myself and of others that otherwise blocked the development of more intimate relationships, and this opened up a connection with Shira through which aspects of Jewish ethics emerged that I had not anticipated. Guided by Shira, I began to learn how, within a potentially violent religious tradition, apparently wedded to an absolute truth, we can locate an ordinary ethics that is radically open to the unknown. She showed me how the uncomfortable gesture of conforming to a seemingly patriarchal and exclusive law can allow for a deeper connection with the transcendence of the other, the possibility of transfigurative contact across symbolic difference, even under precarious, potentially hateful conditions.

¹⁸ The anthropologist Clara Han (2014) has made a different but related case for a relationship between ethics and modes of pretending. Researching neighbourly relations within a context of urban poverty, Han reveals the kindness entailed in acts of pretending *not* to recognize the shameful critical moments of neighbours, while engaging in subtly supportive actions. This she suggests opens up the possibility for 'inexhaustible relational and temporal capacity within human beings... "inexhaustible depth" that makes it possible to be open to visions other than our own' (p.88).

Against representations of the good in terms of a Christian and masculine realm of higher symbolic values, a Jewish and feminist practice of oscillating between surface and depth has emerged in this chapter. And this locates ethics in a deepening relationship to the fragile potentiality of the ordinary.¹⁹ It is also, significantly a creative movement for uncovering unanticipated meaning, that, as I learned in this fieldwork, traverses Jewish textual, domestic and ethnographic practices. Thus, in the *Ethics of the Fathers*, the text which I skipped at shul as I helped the women with the mundane task of washing up the meal which brought this community together, there is a classic midrash on the study of the Torah²⁰: 'Turn it over and over, for all is in it' (Pirkei Avot: 5:22, cited in Zornberg 2009: 238). Avivah Zornberg elaborates: 'precisely because it contains all, the Torah requires this kind of transfigurative study: the plough exposes new surfaces of earth to the light and the student reveals unexpected or long-buried facets of meaning'. In this chapter, I have narrated my search for transcendent 'ethical teachings' that seemed always beyond reach. Yet, in taking up a Hebraic method of turning over the surface, an ethical possibility for intimate contact with the other has emerged within Jewish everyday life.

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¹⁹ This is also an insight figured in different ways in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas (see Aronowicz 1994) and Walter Benjamin's observation that, 'we penetrate the mystery only insofar as we rediscover it in everyday life' (cited in Scholem 2012).

²⁰ Within Judaism, a delimited concept of Torah refers to the written scriptures, but Torah is also much broader than this, evoking *all* Jewish learning, and in this sense a form of life.

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