BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Sheldon, R. and Frosh, Stephen and Vyrgioti, M. (2024) Redeeming marriage? Bittersweet intimacy and the dialectics of liberation among Haredi Jews in London. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute , ISSN 1359-0987. (In Press)

Downloaded from: https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/52948/

Usage Guidelines:
Please refer to usage guidelines at https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

Redeeming marriage? Bittersweet intimacy and the dialectics of liberation among Haredi Jews in London

Abstract: This article intervenes in feminist anthropological debates about marriage within Western cosmopolitan, 'post-traditional' contexts through a close ethnographic examination of food and ritualised meals among Haredi Jews in London. We focus on this diasporic religious Jewish minority, whose marital practices have been the object of debates over marriage, gender, and cultural difference in cosmopolitan London. Learning from ethnographic and conjugal instances of hunger around Haredi dining tables, we explore the broader question of how heterosexual marriages endure in the face of struggles for intimacy and freedom between different genders. By focusing on what can be learnt about marriage through mealtime rituals with religious significance, we develop a response rooted in a form of Jewish relational ethics that has been repressed within 'Western' liberal culture. This approach addresses some tenacious dualisms at play in the anthropology and politics of marriage and articulates a vernacular dialectical grammar of desire, tradition, freedom, and love.

In the spring of 2017, during the Jewish festival of *Pesach* (Passover), Ruth, a Jewish ethnographer in her late thirties and co-author of this paper, was invited to attend a family *seder* meal hosted by Bina[1], a Haredi[2] Jewish woman in her mid-fifties. Bina's invitation was the culmination of a relationship that had developed between Ruth and several local Haredi

[1] Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the identities of research participants.
[2] Haredi Jews, also referred to by outsiders as 'ultra-orthodox' or 'strictly orthodox' Jews, are characterised by stringent observation of Jewish laws and customs, and a critical relationship to liberal narratives of modernity (Fader 2009). There are several different branches of the Haredim, including Hassidic and non-Hassidic sub-groups.

women who had acted as her guides in this fieldwork. This was the fourth holiday meal that Ruth had attended in Bina's home, located in Stamford Hill, within the 'super-diverse' borough of Hackney in London that is known for its liberal cosmopolitan ethos of coexistence (Wessendorf 2014; Neal et al 2018). While there had been a didactic aspect to each of these meals, the *seder* ritual was a significant turning point in Ruth's learning. Organised around the consumption of foods including *maror* (bitter herbs) and *matzo* (unleavened bread), the *seder* consists of a large celebratory meal taking place in the home, and the reading of a text which retells the biblical story of the Hebrews' liberation from Egypt. The preparation and enactment of the *seder* is an important vehicle for the transmission of Jewish meaning and memory (Vincent 2010), and a key moment in the Jewish calendar when embodied and textual practices, and domestic and religious spaces, merge in the articulation of Jewish tradition.

This event took place as Ruth was nearing the end of her fieldwork exploring the ethics of neighbouring in London.[3] Discussing Bina's seder afterwards amongst the research team, an exchange recorded in Ruth's fieldnotes captured our attention, crystallizing our ongoing concerns with gender, power, and ethics in this ethnography (Frosh and Sheldon 2019). The moment in question occurred between one of Bina's adult sons and his wife at an early stage of the ritual when the assembled party of fourteen, including Bina, her husband, children, and grandchildren, were preparing to eat the bitter herbs for the first time. In accordance with *Ashkenazi* (Eastern European) custom, these herbs took the form of romaine lettuce, expressing the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. This was the second time that

[3] Between 2014-2018, Ruth conducted ethnographic fieldwork across homes, community centres, synagogues, and neighbourhood streets with (predominantly) Jewish residents of north Hackney. This included recorded conversations with approximately 35 residents, the majority of whom were women identifying with different Haredi groups (including Lubavitch, Ger, Satmar, and Litvish), and regular repeated conversations with a few of these women in their homes.

lettuce had featured in Ruth's fieldnotes from this *Pesach* period. The first occurred on the previous day when Ruth had visited Bina's home to observe the preparations for the *seder*. Then, Ruth, who was sitting in Bina's kitchen and peeling shells off eggs, saw how lettuce received special treatment because of the danger of non-kosher insects being hidden in its folds. Bina had come in with two bowls full of lettuce in soapy water saying, '*Fairy Liquid* – they're covered in flies.' Ruth's visceral response was later recorded in her fieldnotes, 'they soak their lettuce in *Fairy Liquid*? For a moment I gagged'. The 'they' here is instructive, sharing in the revulsion, the gagging, that Ruth felt. And this framed the episode that unfolded on the evening of the seder itself, as Ruth was sitting with Bina and her family, at the women's end of the dining table by the kitchen.

> Now – still in silence – bunches (large fistfuls) of lettuce were passed around, the leaves browning around the edges. I tried to erase from my memory the images of these leaves soaking in Fairy Liquid – but I couldn't quite. I noticed how Bina's daughter-in-law removed some of the brown edges of the leaves and tried subtly to do the same. I took some horseradish from one of the small dishes and then ate – intuitively staring at the titles of books on the bookcase as I did so, momentarily disassociating from what I was eating, from the image of the lettuce soaking in bowls of frothy water.
>
> As I was still chewing on the lettuce leaves, I saw that Bina's son had taken another large handful of lettuce, dipped it into the small glass bowl of *charoses* [a sweet mixture of dates and nuts], and then sandwiched it between two halves of a *matzo* and handed it to his wife. She obediently started munching. This process was slow – as we each took and prepared our *matzo* sandwiches – and again, I tried to remove the brown, soggy edges from the lettuce. Gratefully, I took a large lump of horseradish that Bina's son

passed around and put it in the sandwich, the strength of that taste helping somehow – and then again stared at the bookshelf and tried to dissociate as I crunched and chewed the lettuce sandwich… suddenly struck by the strangeness of this ritual as I shifted perspective from insider to outsider.

As the research team explored this material, we became stuck on divergent readings of this gesture. What passed between this husband and his wife, as he fed her something apparently distasteful that she chewed and swallowed? Was Ruth correct to read this wife's gesture as 'obedience', and what was the significance of the contrast between this woman's acceptance and Ruth's resistance? Yet, despite, or because of, its ambiguity, this conjugal exchange seemed to speak to wider concerns traversing this scene. This wife's apparently ritualized acceptance of the bitterness of slavery, served up by her husband, resonated with portrayals of the domestic lives of Haredi women in the liberal media and UK policy discourse. That is the idea that these 'traditional' religious wives are forced to swallow an anachronistic patriarchal order, which has been transcended within 'modern' liberal forms of marriage (Carsten et al 2021).

In this article, we take these exchanges around the *seder* table as our entry into pressing questions of marriage within a 'super-diverse' British neighbourhood. That is, we take this scene as an invitation to explore from a specific ethnographic viewpoint a long-standing public concern that crosses religious and secular spheres: how do heterosexual marriages endure in the face of struggles for intimacy and freedom between different genders (Cavell 1981)? Our argument draws on the case of Haredi minority residents of the London neighbourhood of Hackney, who have attracted public controversy for allegedly upholding an extreme system of 'traditional' patriarchal, heteronormative marriage that is framed as antithetical to 'Western' liberal values (Bilani 2023). However, rather than

offering a more conventional analysis of conjugal relations within a bounded cultural system, our research draws upon a framing of Jewish ethnography, which troubles anthropological distinctions between 'us' / 'them', West / non-West (Boyarin 1996), and which connects with Jewish diasporic imaginaries (Rose 1992). That is, we follow Boyarin's claim that the ethnographic study of diasporic Eastern European Jewish movements has troubled monolithic anthropological framings of the 'West', exposing the repression of Jewish forms of life by secularised-Protestant narratives of European modernity (McKinnon and Cannell 2013). Inhabiting a relational epistemology and ethos, we take up a vision of ethnography as a pedagogic process of learning a language through dwelling in proximity with one's neighbours (Brandel and Motta 2021), so that our research participates in negotiating dualisms which have structured debates about marriage and cultural difference within British liberal discourse (Bilani 2023).

We begin by situating our ethnographic case in relation to debates over the cultural and sexual politics of marriage. We highlight how an anthropological contribution drawing on the perspectives of a Jewish religious minority in Europe can help to disrupt the dichotomies between 'traditional/ modern', 'arranged / love', 'Western / non-Western' marital systems (Osella 2012) that form opposite poles within a normative 'world-historical telos' (Masqood 2021: 94). Our relational route to knowledge works by attending to Ruth's absorption, as Jewish ethnographer and local resident, in a field riven by cosmopolitan and gender politics. We reflect on how Ruth's relations to her Jewish neighbours shaped our findings, in relation to her own formation as a liberal feminist and Jewish subject. Focusing on the relationship between Ruth and her Jewish neighbours, who inhabit apparently competing marital ideals, leads us to attend to the questions of desire that arose within a very specific context of conjugal and ethnographic intimacy – the Jewish dining table. This

allows us access to the complex world of marriage through the prism of a focused research question: how does marriage play out through the domestic 'everyday' and specifically through mealtime rituals with religious significance that centre on food?

Our ethnographic analysis begins with a scene around a family dining table, which foreshadowed the subsequent events at Bina's *seder*. Learning from the embodied struggles of a young woman called Esther, we claim that tensions over hunger can be read as corporeal expressions of the brokenness of marriage within a (post) feminist, diasporic landscape. We then turn to the *seder* as a domestic stage for the performative '(re)ordering' of gender and marriage within Jewish life.[4] We approach the *seder* as a ritual that instructs spouses to relive gendered histories of power, and as staging a form of questioning in response to a pressure (Brandel and Motta 2021) to redeem liberation within a domestic register. Our analysis then unfolds by following a Hasidic wife, Shira, who invited Ruth into her domestic life during the Pesach period, and who offered a response to the marriage question. In developing an 'extended case study', we do not claim that Shira's marriage exemplifies the social relations of her Haredi neighbours. Rather, by 'engaging a singularity' (Das 2020: 149) and connecting with Jewish interpretive practices (Zornberg 2001), we respond to diasporic feminine voices repressed within 'The West'. Taking the *seder* as intimating intersubjective possibilities between liberal and orthodox neighbours, and husbands and wives, we redeem a dialectical language of liberation, which can speak to feminist dilemmas of marriage and cultural difference in Britain.

[4] Zornberg (2001:12) notes, *seder* means order and 'this is the theme as well as the name of the Passover night'.

The gendered ethics of marriage: between the 'West' and the rest

Introducing their recent volume on marriage, Carsten et al (2021) highlight a central paradox that marriage is a conservative social institution, functioning to reproduce the gendered order, and yet can also be an imaginative space of radical change. Within 'new kinship studies', marriage has become a site for exploring the everyday processes through which gender is negotiated, reproduced, and resisted, in relation to the binaries of tradition / innovation, naturalisation / denaturalisation, public and private (ibid). At stake are two competing pictures of marital kinship: a traditional institution concerned with gendered distributions of collective rights, property and exchange, and modern marriage as 'a broadly egalitarian relationship, contracted through individual choice between free individuals, and fundamentally about love, intimacy and companionship' (ibid: 6). This includes exploration of 'hybrid' formations, merging modern notions of 'love', individual desire, autonomy, and self-fulfilment with postcolonial idioms of 'traditional' alliances bound by collective and legal obligations (Mody 2022, Maqsood 2021). In mobilising the metaphor of 'hybridity', such interventions expose the tenacity of essentialist distinctions between modern Western and postcolonial cultures of kinship. They also demonstrate the importance of ethnographic investigations that do not take for granted what marriage 'is' but explore its lived reality in relation to other contexts, pressures, and histories in interlocutors' lives. Marriages are not homogeneous but may contain many paradoxes and contradictions.

While anthropologists have interrogated the negotiation of 'modern' ideals of marriage within postcolonial contexts, the limited work on 'Western' marriage (Carsten et al 2021) has focused on the ascendence of liberal individualist concepts of personhood, desire, and agency (McKinnon and Cannell 2013; Maqsood 2021). Within the UK, the moral ideal of 'love marriage' has been mobilised by the state as part of Orientalist discourses of the War

on Terror, as a site for defending ‘a deep psychic investment in choice, autonomy and individuality’ against the threat posed by cultural and sexual others (Bilani 2023: 261). Similarly, a pervasive liberal construct of ‘modern marriage’ figures in studies exploring how religious minorities within Britain negotiate what are framed as culturally distinct moral discourses and registers – between postfeminist ideologies and practices, and their analytically distinct ‘religious’ alternatives (Liberatore 2016; Aune 2006).

Meanwhile, sociological analyses of Western marriage have been dominated by the framing of ‘post-traditional reflexive modernity’. Marriage has been understood as transformed by processes of individualisation and de-traditionalisation into a matter of choice, agency, and the reflexive creation of intimate life-projects. Yet studies of marital aspirations in Britain have revealed how ‘modern’ women maintain an investment in the stability, certainty, and commitment of ‘traditional marriage’, even as they couch this in an individualised language of romance (Carter 2017). The concept of ‘tradition’ here has been a placeholder for aspirations for reproductive, financial, and legal security, of the desire to submit to normative gendered conventions in an era when intimate relations are increasingly contingent, fluid, and precarious (ibid). ‘Tradition’ thereby figures in Western societies as inherently regulatory, conservative, and incompatible with gendered liberation. Sociologists have claimed that modern marriage in the UK is embedded in a ‘postfeminist’ landscape of paradoxical ideals and material conditions. It materialises the contradictions of supposedly egalitarian partnerships still structured according to an unequal gendered division of labour in the private sphere (Aune 2006: 639) and entangled with the reproduction of static gendered and sexual hierarchical values between the masculine / feminine, public / private, and productive (paid) / unproductive (unpaid) work (Carter 2022).

In this context, the othering of the ‘traditional’ marriages of religious minorities is not only an expression of a secular nationalist discourse (McKinnon and Cannell 2013). It also reveals the fragility and ambivalence of ‘modern’ liberal subjects of kinship, caught between the claims of tradition and freedom.

Locating marriage dilemmas within the modern cosmopolis: Jewish wives in Hackney

The geographical location of our research, the ‘super-diverse’ London Borough of Hackney, has long figured as an iconic stage for diversity dramas relating to the cultural politics of marriage. Known as one of the most religiously and ethnically diverse areas of the UK, Hackney is home to the largest Haredi population in Europe (Flint-Ashery 2020).[5] Within a national context dominated by anti-immigrant sentiments, the area has also acquired a significant reputational branding as a site of liberal urban cosmopolitanism (Neal et al 2018; Wessendorf 2014) pervaded by an ambivalent liberal imaginary. Secular fantasies, fears and envy of the dense, ‘insular’ relationalities attributed to Haredi ‘others’ have exposed the nostalgia and disappointment shadowing public narratives of convivial encounters between residents of cosmopolitan neighbourhoods (Sheldon 2022). Furthermore, the figure of the Haredi Jewish neighbour has occupied a distinctive place within localised configurations of European belonging and otherness, and its related race-religion constellation. With their roots in histories of Eastern European Jewish migration to Britain, Haredi Jews have been identified with a religious culture that is figured as an outlier to a cosmopolitan ethos of mixing shared amongst multicultural residents in the borough (Wessendorf 2014). Yet, in contrast to their Muslim counterparts, Haredi women have struck an ambiguous position in

[5] Numbering 30,000 in the 2011 census, the Haredi residents of Stamford Hill carry diverse religious affiliations and migratory histories. Most are affiliated with various groups following spiritual leaders (*rebbes*) from Eastern European towns.

the eyes of their secular neighbours, racialised as white European, viewed as mediating relations with the secular world, and as inhabiting a gendered form of life that resonates with local nostalgic fantasies of a traditional gemeinschaft (Neil et al 2018). Within Hackney at least, this Jewish presence troubles the East-West matrix that underpins anthropological and political discourses of marriage.

Representations of orthodox Jewish wives in Hackney have featured prominently in UK diversity debates. In the period leading up to the fieldwork, a series of articles published in UK broadsheet newspapers had identified Stamford Hill as the location of allegedly misogynistic restrictions on women's freedom, focusing on issues such as married women covering their hair, alleged prohibitions on women driving, and gender segregation in public spaces (Wessendorf 2014). In 2016, a British Government report on integration outlined the 'regressive' and 'misogynistic' attitudes towards (in)equality within orthodox Jewish (and other minority) communities with the example of 'the treatment of women in some strictly Jewish Orthodox communities with children reportedly being taught that a woman's role is to look after children, clean the house and cook' (Casey 2016: 130-131). Such minority 'religious codes' of marriage were presented as contravening feminist ideals of gendered equality and freedom, drawing on a pervasive image of 'devout Orthodox Jewish women… trapped in a marriage they cannot get out of' (Casey 2016: 132). In addition, these political debates have been heightened and complicated by the increasingly vocal claims of Jewish, ex-Haredi campaigners against 'forced marriage', who have connected with 'Violence against Women and Girls' policy agendas, and drawn attention to the potential for coercion, control, and abuse within Haredi marriage systems (Fletcher and Sacks 2021).

Haredi marriage has thus become a divisive and high-profile issue within the UK context, and this has been reflected in growing interest in orthodox Jewish marriage within Western popular culture.[6] Anthropologists of secularism have long highlighted how Orientalist responses to the gendered 'religious' Other reflect the fragility of liberal concepts of freedom, agency, and subjectivity (Mahmood 2011). Building on this, while 'insider' Jewish activists are engaged in vital work in addressing issues of violence and abuse, the tenor of these public preoccupations reveal circulating tensions within the broader liberal-secular feminist imaginary. Haredi marriage has, in other words, provided a projective screen for liberal feminist anxieties over the compatibility of marriage with women's individual liberation.[7] We argue that this focus on 'minority' counter-cultural marriage exposes the diremptions between the poles of dependency and autonomy, law, and freedom, within cosmopolitan Britain. As philosopher Gillian Rose (1992) argued, the negotiation of this split between civil and domestic realms, communal law and subjective ethics, has defined the feminine and Jewish condition within European modernity. This has grounded a Jewish feminist dialectics, traversing the philosophical and everyday regions of 'Western' culture, to which we will return.

Imbibing and resisting Jewish marriage: a bitter taste?

While popular imaginaries of Haredi marriage formed the backdrop to our research in Hackney, academic and communal discourses brought the picture of a discrete patriarchal system into focus. Social scientific accounts of orthodox Jewish marriage have highlighted its

[6] For example, in 2020 the Yiddish-language TV series, *Unorthodox* achieved popular success. Inspired by the memoir of writer Deborah Feldman, this followed the journey of a young woman breaking free from a sexually coercive 'strict' Hasidic marriage. The production was widely praised in the secular press but highly controversial amongst orthodox Jews who claimed that it reproduced stereotypes and misrepresented the Hasidic experience (Vizel 2020).

[7] This resonates with the claims of queer theorists that debates over gay marriage in the UK have been animated by liberal ambivalence over the principle of individuality (Bilani 2023).

centrality in upholding a law-governed traditional form of life and have analysed the shared features and functions of a distinct cultural system (Lehmann and Seibzenher 2009). This is founded on the *shidduch* process, a form of arranged marriage incorporating practices (which vary between 'modern orthodox' and 'Haredi' groups) including the involvement of an intermediary matchmaker (family, friend or professional), and a relatively short period of dating (Golker and Senior 2021). In practice, processes of matchmaking, dating and engagement may appear closer to, or more distant from their secular counterparts. Nonetheless, orthodox Jewish communities share an overriding anxiety regarding Jewish continuity, with 'out-marriage' (estimated to be over 50% in the Jewish community as a whole) constituted as a key threat to the future of Anglo-Jewry (Flint-Ashery 2020). In this context the *shidduch* system is widely represented as playing an essential function in securing communal boundaries, integration, and reproduction of self-protective orthodox Jewish minorities within secular society (Lehmann and Seibzehner 2009; Taragin-Zeller and Kasstan 2021). The limited research on UK-based Haredi communities, has highlighted the role of increasingly early marriage and a high birth rate (an average of seven children per woman) in the 'rapid expansion' of this sector of the community (Flint-Ashery 2020; Kasstan 2019). This investment in 'continuity' has been associated with the intensity of Holocaust consciousness amongst British Haredi minorities, many of whom arrived in London after World War Two and identify as second and third generation Holocaust survivors and refugees (Loewenthal et al 1997; Perry et al 2018).

Moving beyond a functionalist framing, approaches to the lived experience of Haredi marriage have highlighted how negotiations of *shidduch* processes, modesty (*tznius*) and sexual purity (*niddah)* enacts a Haredi sexual ethics which departs from liberal conceptions of autonomy and freedom (Taragin-Zeller and Kasstan 2021; Taragin-Zeller 2012; Avishai

2012). Researchers have also highlighted how wives negotiate a gendered role differentiation that draws on 'essentialist' gender ideologies: the devoted wife, mother, and homemaker, and the ideal of men's full-time dedication to the public work of religious knowledge production and communal prayer, with women expected to take on the domestic and economic work of reproducing large families (Longman 2008; Taragin-Zeller and Kasstan 2021; El-Or 1993). Furthermore, the expected submission of wives to the spiritual leadership of their husbands, and the suppression of desires for intellectual and educational autonomy, is framed as essential to maintaining marital intimacy and stability (Fader 2020). Meanwhile, within the UK context, psychological studies have drawn out connections between 'communal obligations towards marriage and childbearing', including 'shidduch anxiety' – the reputational risk of stigma for marriage prospects – and the gendered mental health difficulties experienced by Haredi women (Perry et al 2018). However, as Taylor-Guthartz (2021) highlights, there is a lack of anthropological research with Orthodox Jewish women in Britain in contrast to their U.S. and Israeli counterparts. As such, there is little ethnographic insight into how Haredi marriages take shape within the unique liberal-cosmopolitan landscape of London.

As Ruth began her fieldwork, the etic picture of Haredi marriage as a discrete, functionalist system was also imparted by communal gatekeepers: women in their fifties, whose children were of Ruth's generation. They proudly recounted how the marriage system was upholding increasing religious stringency amongst younger generations in the community. As Bina elaborated, there is a 'pressure nowadays… people get engaged younger', reflecting the importance of large families against the traumatic backdrop of the Holocaust, for people who may have grown up 'with nobody'. In this context, the subsequent exchange between Bina's daughter-in-law and her husband at the *seder*

brought to the fore a picture projected from without and within the community – of young wives, consumed by the reproductive work of procreating, birthing, and caring for their large families. However, Ruth's resistance around Bina's dining table was not only shaped by this more abstract knowledge of communal discourse of marital systems. Rather, her response expressed a gradual awareness that emerged as she encountered Haredi women of her own generation, and learned how the marriage question was embodied within their everyday lives.

Seven months earlier, during the Jewish High Holidays, Ruth had been invited to attend a *Rosh Hashanah* (Jewish New Year) meal hosted by Rivka, a woman also in her fifties, whose eldest child was the same age as Ruth. Across a large table laden with soup, bread, varieties of lokshen, chicken, and sweetened vegetable dishes (symbolic foods to express, as is customary, the 'sweetness' of the New Year), sat two younger women of Ruth's generation, who appeared to occupy extreme positions on each side of the marriage divide. On the left was Rivka's daughter-in-law, an American woman in her twenties, who had emigrated to London for her *shidduch* with Rivka's son. She spent the meal consumed with the work of feeding, entertaining and disciplining her young children. Then, part way through the meal, Esther, Rivka's twenty-eight-year-old daughter, drew up a chair next to her sister-in-law. Esther perched in a chair set back from the corner of the table, wearing a short-sleeved striped t-shirt concealing her tattoos, her hair was partially shaved on one side, her nose pierced. On her lap, she held a bowl of her own food that she had brought to the table, eating discretely, turned away from the table. She spoke softly with her nephews and nieces, falling silent in response to the religious talk, blessings, and prayers, which punctuated the meal.

Over the next few months, Ruth and Esther began an email correspondence, and Esther shared what lay behind her tentative presence around the dining table. Esther explained that she had been living in her family home only briefly for financial reasons when Ruth visited. She had left 'the community' at the age of 12, after feeling 'suffocated by the rules.' She described experiencing an upbringing where there is 'an expectation on women to be "aidel" – head low, humble, preparing for marriage and following the rules of the religion… family life was hard, there were many struggles, separate to religion, but it all was channelled into religion.' In response to narrow gendered and heteronormative proscriptions to stay within the domestic sphere, become a wife and mother in place of an education, a career and public voice, there was, as she put it, 'a lot of anger with the rules and also nothing to do.' She became sick with anorexia, 'I'd never heard of that in my life, but got sucked into it and found control in food anyways… [I] left home that way and never really came back.' Reflecting on her current struggles with the 'rules' of orthodox Judaism, this notion of religion as something she was forced to imbibe came to the fore: 'I'm very uneducated unfortunately. When I left the community, I had a real bitter taste to religion.'

However, as Ruth shared something of her own ambivalent 'return' to Judaism, and her domestic struggles with marriage and motherhood, Esther also described a yearning for connection not only with her family but also with Judaism. Though she was viewed as 'so liberal' by her family, and with a lack of acceptance and belonging, 'came a lot of pain', Esther 'could not go back to pretending I don't care.' And so, she had returned to the dining table, carrying the 'self-hate' of her family's judgement, and perched next to her young sister-in-law who had imbibed and accepted a traditional role as wife and mother. Yet despite the 'bitter taste' of this religious tradition, she shared her growing interest in 'learning about the history of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews and about the religion,' as a

way of trying to 'open up' and find the words for things that 'just were', to let go of the fear and secrecy, and 'appreciate the place I was brought up in'.[8] In this way, Esther expressed the limits of a liberal feminist concern with liberation as escaping from or transcending the authority of tradition. As a deracinated, uprooted subject, Esther expressed the paradox that this material religion was at once a source of bitter constraint and the vital ground through which she could find a voice within her history (Cavell 1981; Das 2020).

It was against the background of these prior encounters around Esther's family dining table that Ruth sensed disturbing undertones in the conjugal gesture of feeding at Bina's seder. Watching Bina's young daughter-in-law accept the bitter food, evoked Esther's struggles with physically imbibing a tradition that would constrain her within a life of domestic work, early marriage and motherhood. Through Esther, a connection had emerged between the regulation of feminine appetites in relation to food and the regulation of feminine desire in traditional marriage. As such, the demand to take in the bitter food at the seder triggered Ruth's feminist ethnographic dilemma, evoking a visceral 'repugnance that swelled up inside' (Mahmood 2011:37) and made her gag. In a sense, Ruth found herself embodying Esther's position around Bina's dining table, of the subjective inhabitation of the brokenness of marriage: an experience of being caught in a contradictory, deracinated relationship to tradition and so seeking freedom from *within* tradition's bonds.

The broken idea of marriage that emerged around Bina's *seder* table materialised in an embodied experience of hunger and bitterness: hungering for marriage, as the ground of tradition, and hungering for autonomy, as escape from its bitter confines. But this concrete, corporeal problem also had an epistemic dimension: it led to a confrontation with the limits

[8] This resonates with Fader's (2020) rich account of the gendered ambivalence and ethical dilemmas of Haredi women who lost faith in God or the System yet continued to hold on to families and Haredi traditions.

of a ‘Western’ feminist imaginary, unable to negotiate the oppositions of autonomy versus heteronomy, tradition versus freedom. This scene exposed what postcolonial anthropologists have identified as the limitations of feminist theoretical imaginaries that have unreflexively imposed liberal notions of personhood and agency as ‘the normative ideal for women’s lives’ (Avishai, Gerber and Randles 2012: 405). Yet as we will show, it also intimated a dialectical alternative to the tenacious dualisms of postcolonial feminist thinking post-Mahmood (2011). In what follows, we take up a feminist ‘epistemology of contradictions’ (ibid: 396) by turning to the vernacular philosophies, concepts, ethics, and voice of another Hasidic neighbour: a woman called Shira, who offered an intimate perspective on how marriage *endures* (Das 2020). Our approach draws this modality of feminist anthropology together with Jonathan Boyarin’s (1996) framing of Jewish ethnography as ‘thinking in a Jewish body’. Yet while Boyarin has focused on redeeming vernacular Jewish concepts that are internal to, yet repressed by, the so-called ‘universal’ Western theories of post-Christian European modernity, *his* Jewish body has been male (Frank 1997). In what follows, we draw these lines of critique and possibility together by developing feminist Jewish ethnographic practice. We turn to the table of Shira – who offered an immanent Jewish response to the tensions of hungering for a gendered tradition, for freedom, and ultimately for love.

Feeding the tradition

Shira was a married mother of three, who lived in Stamford Hill, not far from Bina, and was in her early forties, just a few years older than Ruth. Her parents were Hungarian Jewish refugees who had emigrated to London in 1956 and had been, as she put it, ‘very traumatised by the war.’ They had become part of the *Satmar* Hasidic group after settling in

the UK. Shira had married her husband, who came from an established *Satmar* family, at the age of 19. She explained that he had been the second potential partner she had met. She had met her husband-to-be once, marrying him three months later, though she did not recognise this as an 'arranged marriage'. A first child was born early in their marriage but, unusually, Shira and her husband waited over a decade before having more children. Shira's husband worked a few different jobs within the community to keep the family afloat though he primarily devoted himself to Torah study. Shira was, also unusually, engaged in professional therapeutic work, a move which, following discussions with their Rabbi, her husband hesitantly supported.

Early in the fieldwork when Shira agreed to contribute to Ruth's Jewish education, she began by inducting Ruth into the blessings said over the drinks and food that she offered during their meetings. 'You're really hungry, aren't you?' she exclaimed when Ruth expressed a desire to begin learning Hebrew, adding 'take care, you seem like you're in starvation mode'. Gradually it transpired that, in naming Ruth's 'hunger', Shira was not responding to her in a metaphorical register. Rather, she was offering a taste of the non-dualistic investment in the body that underpins the transmission of Jewish tradition (Boyarin 1996; Kasstan 2019). Shira's teaching followed Jewish time, structured by the demands of the weekly *Shabbos*, and interspersed with Jewish holidays, as she shared her absorption within a 'Torah' way of life. This meant moving fluidly between the study of texts, teaching Ruth the meanings of '*lashon hakodesh'* (biblical Hebrew) words, describing and showing detailed domestic rituals and practices, as Ruth's learning shifted from the living room to the kitchen. As *Pesach* approached, Shira began to teach Ruth how the rituals of cooking and cleaning of this festival brought to life a biblical Hebrew language for negotiating power

and powerlessness, tradition, and liberation in relation to her marriage and her Jewish inheritance.

Women's work? *Avodah* – preparing for *Pesach*

The festival of Pesach is distinctive within the Jewish calendar in setting its central rituals within the domestic spaces of the home. The intensive work required to prepare for the festival means that it is recognized as the most difficult of the Jewish holidays with the burden falling disproportionately on women (Taylor-Guthartz 2021). Specifically, *Pesach* is framed by the commandment to remove any trace of leavened food (*chametz*) from the home, which adds an additional intensity to women's already laborious tasks of holiday preparations. In the weeks leading up to *Pesach*, Shira reflected on the intensity of this time by talking with Ruth about Jewish ideas of work. She explained how the biblical word for work, *avodah,* encompasses spiritual and mundane work. This includes the spiritual work of serving and worshipping God, and *melachah*, ordinary activities, such as lighting a stove, that express mastery over nature, and are prohibited on the Sabbath and certain Jewish holidays. In this way, *avodah* expresses the mutual absorption of the spiritual and mundane, and activity and passivity, within Jewish orthopraxis. While Shira talked fluently about her professional work, and shared her engagement with Jewish study through texts, she also expressed the depth of meaning associated with the feminine, domestic work of cleaning and cooking, so that the work of studying texts or preparing food were of equal spiritual import.

Taking Ruth through from the dining room to the kitchen, Shira explained how the removal of *chametz* required the deep cleaning of every room in the house, and the 'turning over' of the kitchen, including submerging every utensil in boiling water, the covering of

surfaces, setting up alternative cooking stoves and ovens. Alongside this, Shira needed to shop for, prepare and cook food for numerous meals, including two seders, in advance of the holiday, when there would be requirements to refrain from certain forms of work. It was important to her that she make as much from scratch as possible, 'so, for example I make a lot of orange juice, home-made, lemon juice, lemon syrup, I make my own horseradish, I make… everything with potato flour, no wheat flour, obviously not'. This, Shira explained, was part of her commitment to the tradition of her ancestors, creating an embodied, spiritual experience of *Pesach* that was purer, more organic, and so imbued with deeper meaning.

As Shira shared her ambivalent experience of engaging in this work, it became apparent that it troubled the picture of essentialist gendered roles, and of a binary opposition between women's constraint and freedom. 'It's tremendous work', she explained. Jewish tradition teaches that we can be a slave to work, even as creativity is a condition of freedom-as-change. Yet, the difference between indentured and creative work did not map on to different domestic / public spheres, or activities such as cooking versus professional work or text-based learning. Rather, this was parsed in the internal aspect of her relationship to the activity, which could enable or block deeper spiritual growth. The preparations for *Pesach*, she explained, could be distorted if she was overtaken by 'external pressures, like people pleasing, perfectionism, society.' Real, creative work was defined by tuning in to her 'truth as a Jewish woman,' which she framed around the poles of modesty and mastery. The work here was in balancing the equilibrium between her compulsion to productivity as a form of control, and a modest acceptance of her limits and needs as a wife under pressure during the time of *Pesach*. For Shira, this dialectic between being and doing shaped a Jewish concept of creativity, as manifested in God's creation of the world. After six

days of work, on the seventh day, God stopped, withdrew, to make room for the excessive otherness, or reality, that exceeds mastery. This, Shira reflected, expressed how God, and human subjects, are continually formed in the movement between the feminine and masculine qualities of being and doing, accepting, and creating.

In recent years, anthropological accounts have depicted orthodox Jewish women as 'nonliberal' subjects, whose agency is not tied to realization of an autonomous will. Taking up Saba Mahmood's (2011) concept of 'docile agency', Fader (2009) and Avishai (2008) have examined how Haredi women choose to submit to gendered practices of modesty to discipline their inner desires as they redeem Jewish meaning within secular culture. Yet, while Shira's articulation of the virtue of modesty resonated with this picture of 'docile agency', it also troubled a Foucauldian framework that retains an individualist focus on ethical autopoiesis and gendered 'work on the self'. Shira articulated a dynamic, intersubjective account of gendered desire; in the work of negotiating being and doing, she was dependent not only on God to listen to her prayers, but on her husband to be receptive to her needs. Talking of the pressures of *Pesach*, she put this in concrete terms. She needed help in the struggle with her own compulsion to 'just put on one more pot of soup'. In this state of overwhelm, she was unable to nurture, 'I start becoming resentful, I resent when my children ask to eat something extra – "can I taste from the food?" I get angry, I'm angry at everybody.' In this situation praying to God was one recourse, but she also turned to her husband. She needed to trust that her husband would see her becoming consumed by this work of feeding her family and would respond to her needs.

Reflecting her optimistic mood at this stage of her *Pesach* preparations, Shira described how her husband had contributed by tending to the intense work of cleaning between the pages of their books for any crumbs of *chametz*. She then described her

husband responding to her bookish needs for textual learning. Shira had been struggling to stop her domestic work on Shabbos, during this intensely busy period. She had turned to her husband, initiating what she described as a 'real change', as she asked him to study the weekly portion of the bible with her:

> We're learning it together but I'm not always understanding things so I'm always asking questions. And it was nice because *motza'ei Shabbos* [after the sabbath] when he came home from shul, he said 'I've got an answer for you'… because I had a question, but he didn't have the answer.

How, Ruth asked, did this form of nurture came about? Shira explained that if she asked her husband, he would learn with her,

> If I want yes, but I have to make it happen. So, this is something else I've learnt which is that I think a woman, women, have to do a very lot… I think that women are also very powerful. And women can create. You see I think that women create the world. That seems huge but what I mean is that… I've learnt… that women's needs create. Like if I say to my husband if I have a real need to learn – say 'please will you learn with me' – he will learn with me yeah, but I think I need to find the need first – it has to come from the woman. There's a very lot that's on a woman.

This account of a negotiation of marital intimacy was not set in the bedroom. Yet in framing her marriage around the intersubjective interplay between giving / receiving, and recognizing, voicing, and responding to desire, Shira revealed the erotic and ethical texture of her relationship with her husband. This constraining and creative work of orthodox marriage, intensified in the time of *Pesach*, revealed a dynamic interplay between masculine and feminine work. It also pivoted around a mutual hunger for tradition as a source of

liberatory meaning. And this resonates with what Zornberg (2001) describes as a dialectical framing of desire, relationality, and the process of liberation in the story of Exodus that is redeemed during *Pesach*.

***Mitzrayim*: the fragility and redemption of tradition**

Two weeks before *Pesach*, Shira invited Ruth into her kitchen to give her a taste of the intensive preparations for the holiday, now underway. As she moved around the kitchen, she reflected on her ambivalence, as she struggled to cope with these domestic demands, 'How am I doing? In and out I'd say, you know, it's overwhelming, um, it's work but I also enjoy it, when I'm in the in-place'. Shira delegated the task of peeling beetroot to Ruth and began making brittle for her home-made ice-cream. As they worked, she talked about her spiritual understanding of the driving narrative of the Exodus story:

> On *Pesach* – the *Juden* [Jews] came out of *mitzrayim* [Egypt] and really every year on *Pesach* every person is supposed to see that they are coming out of *mitzrayim* as well…. *Mitzrayim* means constraints; everyone's got their own individual constraints. *Mitzrayim* is about… being redeemed… everyone's got their own difficulties where they need, where they think it's impossible for them to get through something.

For Shira, *mitzrayim* was both a place of exile, and a psychic, spiritual condition, to be embodied at *Pesach*, a theme that continued as she talked Ruth through the preparation of the seder plate, 'do you know that we eat *maro*r – horseradish?' We have, she explained, some things to show the lowliness of where we were, stuck in *mitzrayim*, something to express how hard the Jews had to work.

As Shira prepared the food, she began to articulate more of the constraints that left her detached, blocked, in the 'out place'. She reflected on growing up with parents who

were ‘very damaged’ by the Holocaust. The customs of food preparation on *Pesach*, Shira explained, are passed down through generations, ‘it’s very much how your mother did it.’ But when Ruth asked about how Shira’s mother had approached *Pesach*, she described an inheritance imbued with bitterness, ‘my mother was perfectionist. She suffered from perfectionism and because of that found it ongoing, forever, no break, no joy, I hated it growing up. So, I’m making my own experience of it [focusing on her brittle] I’m crazy doing this...’ The idea of *Pesach*, Shira explained is about ‘making a continuation; you’re appreciating your identity as a Jew but you’re also wanting your children to appreciate their identity.’ Shira’s mother was ‘so driven’ that she missed this. She was, Shira explained, like many who had lived through that history, very scarred, and detached from her feelings. She ‘didn’t really know how to teach’; in this sense, she had been unable to pass a living tradition to her children:

> What I think happened was that post-war many people didn’t want to question about what happened and why it happened in the Holocaust… the next generation grew up and they carried a lot of fear, a lot of questions… I’m second generation, a lot of my generation are asking questions – why this? Why that?... I think that the Holocaust did a lot to shut people down from the ability to think, and to feel, and you can’t serve *Hashem* [God] without thinking and feeling, you can’t be a robot – yeah, the problem was that they shut down their emotions but with that they shut down their understanding of who they were also in relation to the Torah.

Shira’s husband, she explained, also inherited a powerful sense of the fragility of Jewish tradition, or *Yiddishkeit*. His mother had grown up in Ukraine during the Soviet period when Jewish practices were repressed. He was, she explained, very ‘pure-hearted’, wary of

allowing anything into their home that might threaten their connection with Judaism. In the past, this had led to ruptures in their relationship, as Shira had struggled with depression, a source of stigma within their networks, and described experiences of feeling abandoned and excluded by her husband, unable to share the burden of secrets in her past. Yet, during *Pesach*, he had not done what many husbands do, and demand that Shira conform to his mother's customs. Her husband's one request had been to ask her to make a borscht soup, which he used to have when he was growing up. Though Shira had never made it before, she explained 'it's the first time he's asked me, so I want to do it for him.' She put this in context by adding, 'he's not much of an eater.'

Shira's account of *mitzrayim* framed an experience of constraint not in relation to the power of tradition but rather its vulnerability. The work of marriage for Shira and her husband was inseparable from the inheritance of intergenerational ruptures, the threat of discontinuity, and the vulnerability of shared meanings. It was shaped by their mutual hunger in relation to an inheritance of unmet needs. In this context, the threat that shadowed the relationship between Shira and her husband was not their coerced obedience to patriarchal rituals. Rather, it was a question of whether spouses who carry these pre-histories can come together to sustain tradition as a source of growth. This need for the intersubjective redemption of tradition was set within the context of the traumatic inheritances of Holocaust histories in British Haredi communities. Yet the underlying framing, a dialectical conception of tradition as a site of lack, constraint, but also meaning and change, has wider resonances within a liberal capitalist, 'post-traditional' milieu. It relates to diagnoses of a hunger for meaning that shapes post-feminist desires for 'traditional marriage' (Carter 2017), and are often projected onto religious 'others' whose

‘traditions’ are not only feared but desired (Vollebergh 2016). It also connects with anthropological and Jewish conceptions of ‘tradition’ within the corrosive, dislocating landscapes of secular modernity, as a source of paralysis but also vitality and voice (Cavell 1981; Boyarin 1996; Das 2020; Asad et al 2020).

***Maror*: arousing hunger around the seder table**

Talking with Ruth about the *seder* ritual, Shira described how she loved it when her husband would begin the *seder*. Yet the ‘anxiety of beginning’ (Rose 1992: 55), or as Zornberg (2001) frames it, the arousal of desire, is a profound issue in addressing *mitzrayim* and marriage. The setting of the seder ritualizes this elicitation and articulation of desire, and the oral imagery of feeding is central to this. The ritualized, unsolicited gesture of feeding strange bitter foods is the starting point for eliciting questions, stimulating the desire for knowledge. In this way, the *seder* enacts a picture of redemption as a heteronomous intersubjective process. Against an autopoietic vision of agency in which the subject knows and works on their ‘own’ desire, here, a condition of oppression is one of ethical dependency on the other. The ‘parent’ reaches out to their dependant to arouse their desire, in a gesture that is ethically indeterminate: at once a violation of their integrity and an expression of responsiveness to unarticulated hunger. Against the background of Shira’s pedagogy-as-feeding, the lettuce scene emerged as a moment traversed by countervailing pressures: the threat of coercion and the need for responsiveness to a hunger that could not be put into words.

Discussing the power dynamics embedded in the seder ritual, Earl Schwartz (2012) has argued that it manifests ‘sovereignal freedom’: freedom as the exercise of power over others. This is expressed in the gendered distinction between husbands who fulfil a

commandment to recline during the meal and the wives who serve them. However, drawing closer to the embodied gestures that constitute the *seder* ritual reveals an ambiguous reversal in the gendered distribution of tasks between server and served. While the women prepared the food, the men took on the task of feeding it; the husband handed his wife the bitter food, and she accepted it, this being the basis of stimulating questions and arousing desire. Rather than a patriarchal 'command' to eat, this might be received as a gesture of trans-gendered nursing. Opening the dialectical space between the poles of masculine and feminine, activity and passivity, it is here that spouses can negotiate bitterness in relation to Jewish tradition and each other.

Bittersweet intimacy

In the final weeks of Shira and Ruth's meetings, the question of marriage surfaced again. Shira was beginning to negotiate a marriage match for her eldest son, who was in his late teens, studying abroad. Shira struggled with her regrets that she was not there for her son when he was young, while she had been contending with depression, exacerbated by her husband's lack of responsiveness to her needs. In recent years, Shira had sought out therapy, first as a patient and more recently training and working as a psychotherapist herself. Gradually, her husband had accepted the immense reputational and spiritual risks of her participating in this secular realm, beyond the bounds of the community. 'Over the years' Shira explained, 'He's become more open to it'. 'We are', she explained, 'on a journey.'

This year, Shira's son had returned for *Pesach*, and Shira proudly introduced him before explaining how they had just been talking about her 'big questions about free will.' Her son had explained that even negative things, even ruptures, are intended, and it helps

to trust in that. Ruth pushed Shira further, asking how to trust in the process when a feeling of wishing that the past had been different is overpowering. Shira's response drew together a Jewish and psychoanalytic language of bitterness and mourning. She articulated freedom, the possibility for growth, in relation to a non-passive acceptance of hurt and pain.

> If you're grieving something true, it's got to become sweet. It's bittersweet. It's got to become sweet because it's, it's a good grief. You're grieving because you're a person who wants connection. You're grieving because…you're a person who's so alive. Do you see what I'm saying? Because if you were half-dead, I'm talking about emotionally, or mentally, or spiritually, you wouldn't be grieving. You're grieving because you're feeling the pain of the non-connection so that's how alive you are... So it's very precious that grief. And at the end of grieving there should be some kind of coming to terms with – and accepting and choice about where you want to move forward with it. I'm just thinking about myself and how I have grief to do about quite a few things. But when I really let go, then afterwards I come to a sweet place – connected place – a place where I can ask Hashem – a place of prayer – a place of connection – a place of forgiveness – a place of appreciation.

Shira's version of grief as a gift towards meaning and growth is rooted in her religious outlook, but also has strong resonance with the psychoanalytic idea that depth is granted to experience through exposure to, and working through, loss. In Rose's (1997) framing, this Jewish and conjugal work of mourning, acknowledging hurts, attempting forgiveness, is also the work of love. This work involves swallowing a bittersweet dialectical truth: that the other, that is the tradition, or as Rose puts it 'the beloved', may be simultaneously coercive and oppressive and the basis of liberation and change.

Redeeming marriage: a dialectical ethics of liberation

This ethnographic analysis responds to a pressing question within modern 'Western' societies: how do 'traditional' marriages endure in the face of bitter struggles for intimacy and freedom? We have situated the marriage questions within a Western liberal cosmopolitan landscape that is lacking feminist resources to think outside a static, dualistic gendered order, or beyond an ideal of moral individualism. Focusing on a religious Jewish minority, represented as inhabiting a regressive patriarchal system, we have redeemed a relational ethical tradition repressed within liberal Western post-Christian culture. Against freedom as transcendence of 'primordial' (non-Christian) traditions, we claim that the redemption of marriage entails struggling with what Rose (1995) framed as the broken middle of post-Enlightenment modernity. This means acknowledging the bitterness produced by patriarchal systems and actively accepting the precarious traditions and relationships such systems sustain. It also means becoming intimate with dialectical, intersubjective concepts of tradition and liberation, which trouble feminist orthodoxies, and offer immanent transformations of the gendered order.

We have focused on encounters with two Haredi women struggling to endure the concept of 'traditional' marriage, and we have imbibed a conjugal language which finds expression in the Jewish time of *Pesach*, and in the negotiation of hunger around the *seder* table. In contrast to a liberal feminist grammar that fixes marriage as a source of constraint, and an autopoietic framing of a post-secular freedom, this Jewish ethics takes a dialectical form. Put more simply, the 'quarrel' (Cavell 1981), about the interplay of freedom and tradition, activity, and passivity, power, and powerlessness – and masculinity and femininity – is taken up as the work of love. We have thus connected the question of how marriage endures to a picture of marriage as mutual parenting, of the willingness to accept a hunger for meaning, and to mourn the bitter wounds embedded in history, institutions, and

relationships. In this context, the combining of bitter *and* sweet foods (*maror* and c*haroses*) served at *Pesach* can be received as a ritualised ethic of redemption. It is an embodied expression of an active acceptance of fragile interdependency, a conjugal taste of bittersweet intimacy.

The marriage question is a key site in which the dilemmas of 'Western' modernity play out. Can this institutionalized form of intimacy be sustained when exposed to liberal concepts of freedom as the transcendence of gendered tradition? Our ethnographic analysis has responded to the marriage question by redeeming a dialectical diasporic tradition internal to the 'West'. This resonates with a critical Jewish and ambivalently feminist approach that resists any settled claim for religious or gendered identity, and which endures the struggle over power and powerlessness by redeeming this negotiation as 'love's work' (Rose, 1997). Addressing some tenacious dualisms at play in the anthropology of marriage, our Jewish feminist ethnography gives voice to a dialectical conjugal ethics of tradition and freedom. By accepting the bittersweet taste of the seder table, we have struggled with the diremptions of 'Western' tradition, and we have sought to redeem this work of love.

References

Aune, K., 2006. Marriage in a British evangelical congregation: Practising postfeminist partnership?. *The Sociological Review*, *54*(4), pp.638-657.

Avishai, O., 2012. What to do with the problem of the flesh? Negotiating Orthodox Jewish sexual anxieties. *Fieldwork in Religion*, *7*(2), pp.148-162.

Avishai, O., 2008. "Doing religion" in a secular world: Women in conservative religions and the question of agency. *Gender & Society*, *22*(4), pp.409-433.

Avishai, O., Gerber, L. and Randles, J., 2013. The feminist ethnographer's dilemma: Reconciling progressive research agendas with fieldwork realities. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *42*(4), pp.394-426.

Bilani, S. 2023. What's love got to do with it? Marriage and the security state. *Identities*, 30:2, pp.257-275.

Boyarin, J., 1996. *Thinking in Jewish*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Brandel, A. and Motta, M., 2021. Introduction: life with concepts. In Brandel and Motta (eds.) *Living with Concepts*. Fordham: Fordham University Press: 1-28

Carsten, J., Chiu, H.C., Magee, S., Papadaki, E. and Reece, K.M., 2021. *Marriage in Past, Present and Future Tense*. London: UCL Press.

Carter, J., 2022. Traditional inequalities and inequalities of tradition: gender, weddings, and whiteness. *Sociological research online*, *27*(1), pp.60-76.

Carter, J., 2017. Why marry? The role of tradition in women's marital aspirations. *Sociological Research Online*, *22*(1), pp.1-14.

Casey, L., 2016. *The Casey Review: A Review into Opportunity and Integration*. London: DCLG.

Cavell, S., 1981. *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Cambridge MT: Harvard University Press.

Das, V., 2020. *Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology after Wittgenstein*. Fordham: Fordham University Press.

El-Or, T., 1993. The length of the slits and the spread of luxury: Reconstructing the subordination of ultra-orthodox Jewish women through the patriarchy of men scholars. *Sex Roles*, *29*(9), pp.585-598.

Fader, A. 2020. *Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in The Digital Age.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fader, A., 2009. *Mitzvah Girls*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fletcher, Y. and Sacks, E., 2021. Position paper on forced marriage: analysis of arranged marriage as practiced in Jewish communities. *Nahamu.* Available at: https://forcedmarriagecommission.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Position-Paper-on-FM-Nahamu-Feb-2021.pdf

Flint Ashery, S., 2020. *Spatial Behavior in Haredi Jewish Communities in Great Britain*. New York: Springer.

Frank, G. 1997. Positively Diverse: Jewish Difference in Western Culture and the Academy. *American Anthropologist*, 99(3), pp.619–21.

Frosh, S. and Sheldon, R. (2019) Transmission, relationality, ethnography. *Angelaki - Journal of the Theoretical Humanities,* 24 (3): 117-134.

Golker, C. and Senior, V., 2021. Dating experiences of Orthodox Jews in the shidduch system. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, *24*(2), pp.164-180.

Joseph, S. 2005. Learning Desire: Relational Pedagogies and the Desiring Female Subject in Lebanon. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies,* 1(1), pp.79–109

Kasstan, B., 2019. *Making Bodies Kosher: The Politics of Reproduction Among Haredi Jews in England*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Lehmann, D. and Siebzehner, B., 2009. Power, boundaries and institutions: marriage in ultra-Orthodox Judaism. *European Journal of Sociology*, *50*(2): 273-308.

Liberatore, G., 2016. Imagining an ideal husband: Marriage as a site of aspiration among pious Somali women in London. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 89(3), pp.781-812.

Loewenthal, K.M., Goldblatt, V., Lubitsch, G., Gorton, T., Bicknell, H., Fellowes, D. and Sowden, A., 1997. The costs and benefits of boundary maintenance: stress, religion and culture among Jews in Britain. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, *32*, pp.200-207.

Longman, C., 2008. Sacrificing the career or the family? Orthodox Jewish women between secular work and the sacred home. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *15*(3): 223-239.

Mahmood, S., 2011. *Politics of Piety.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Maqsood, A., 2021. Love as understanding: Marriage, aspiration, and the joint family in middle-class Pakistan. *American Ethnologist*, *48*(1), pp.93-104.

McKinnon, S. and Cannell, F. (eds.), (2013). *Vital Relations*: *Modernity and the Persistent Life of Kinship*. Santa Fe: SAR Press

Mody, P., 2022. Intimacy and the Politics of Love. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *51*, pp.271-288.

Neal, S., Bennett, K., Cochrane, A. and Mohan, G., 2018. *Lived experiences of multiculture*. London: Routledge.

Osella, C., 2012. Desires under reform: Contemporary reconfigurations of family, marriage, love and gendering in a transnational south Indian matrilineal Muslim community. *Culture and Religion*, *13*(2), pp.241-264.

Perry, A., Gardener, C., Dove, J., Eiger, Y. and Loewenthal, K., 2018. Improving mental health knowledge of the Charedi Orthodox Jewish Community in North London. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, *64*(3), pp.235-247.

Rose, G., 1997. *Love's Work*. London: Vintage.

Rose, G., 1992. *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*. Oxford: Wiley.

Schwartz, E., 2012. Server and served at the seder. *Conservative Judaism*, *63*(4): 3-25.

Sheldon, R. 2022. The avoidance of love? Rubbing shoulders in the secular city. In B. Gidley, & S. S. Everett (eds) *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion: Special Issue: Jews and Muslims in Europe: Between Discourse and Experience,* Vol. 13, pp. 211-230

Taragin-Zeller, L., 2021. A rabbi of one's own? Navigating religious authority and ethical freedom in everyday Judaism. *American Anthropologist*, *123*(4): 833-845.

Taragin-Zeller, L. and Kasstan, B., 2021. 'I Didn't Know How to Be with My Husband': State-Religion Struggles over Sex Education in Israel and England. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *52*(1): 5-20.

Taylor-Guthartz, L., 2021. *Challenge and conformity: the religious lives of Orthodox Jewish women*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Vincent, A.M., 2010. Seder and imagined landscape. In Anderson, E. et al (eds.) *Memory, mourning, landscape*. Amsterdam: Rodolpi: 147-163.

Vizel, F. 2020. I left the Satmar Hasidic community. 'Unorthodox' is a grossly inaccurate depiction of that world. *Forward*. Available at: https://forward.com/life/442798/i-left-the-satmar-hasidic-community-unorthodox-is-a-grossly-inaccurate/

Vollebergh, A., 2016. The other neighbour paradox: fantasies and frustrations of 'living together' in Antwerp. *Patterns of Prejudice*, *50*(2), pp.129-149.

Wessendorf, S., 2014. *Commonplace Diversity: Social Relations in a Super-diverse Context*. London: Palgrave McMillan.

Zornberg, A.G., 2001. *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*. New York: Schocken

Note on contributors:

Ruth Sheldon is Lecturer in Religion and Social Science at King's College London. She is the author of *Tragic Encounters and Ordinary Ethics* (Manchester University Press, 2016) and

has published in *The Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, *The Sociological Review* and *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities.*

Stephen Frosh is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Birkbeck, University of London. He is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, an Academic Associate of the British Psychoanalytical Society, a Founding Member of the Association of Psychosocial Studies, and an Honorary Member of the Institute of Group Analysis.

Marita Vyrgioti is Lecturer in the Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic at the University of Essex, and a psychodynamic psychotherapist in training.

Acknowledgements:

Ethical approval to conduct this research was provided by Birkbeck, University of London (2014). The research presented in this article was funded by Dangoor Education. We wish to thank Ben Gidley who contributed to the wider research project upon which this article draws. We are also grateful to the three anonymous reviewers and the editors of the JRAI for their detailed, generous, and extremely helpful comments.

Correspondence details:

Department of Theology and Religious Studies, King's College London, Strand Campus, 22 Kingsway, 22 Kingsway, London WC2B 6LE. Ruth.sheldon@kcl.ac.uk