A Virtual Veibershul: Blogging and the Blurring of Public and Private among Orthodox Jewish Women
Author(s): Andrea Lieber
Source: College English, Vol. 72, No. 6, SPECIAL TOPIC: COMPOSING JEWISH RHETORICS (July 2010), pp. 621-637
Published by: National Council of Teachers of English
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20749306
Accessed: 01/09/2014 13:11
A Virtual *Veibershul*: Blogging and the Blurring of Public and Private among Orthodox Jewish Women

Andrea Lieber

A series of articles appearing in English-language Jewish newspapers in the United States and the United Kingdom have recently announced the "blogosphere"—the world of discourse propelled by the technological innovation of online interactive diaries known as *weblogs*—as a new liberating arena for Orthodox Jewish women. In July 2004 Debra Nussbaum Cohen, writing for the *New York Jewish Week*, proclaimed the "growing cadre" of Jewish bloggers, "The New Diarists," whose writing "offers a peek into worlds that are closed to many and give a public voice to those who otherwise might not have one." In a similar piece appearing in the autumn 2004 *Jewish Quarterly*, a London-based magazine, Miriam Shaviv profiled female bloggers, suggesting that "by means of blogging many [Orthodox] women have found a way to circumvent restrictions placed on them by their social circles, and gain a strong public voice." In August 2006 Izzy Grinspan wrote an article for the *Jewish Daily Forward* titled "Blogs Offer Glimpse into Hidden Corners of Orthodox Life," in which she suggested that "online expression has signaled a change in the frum [traditionally observant] world" that gives Orthodox women a voice in public debate. And in February 2006, Marcus Freed wrote a short piece for the *London Jewish Chronicle*, "How the Internet is Lifting the Veil from Orthodox Jewish Women." Freed noted that the anonymity of the blogging genre paradoxically enables women "to elude the laws of *lashon bara* [evil speech]" and nonetheless speak their minds without fear of recourse.

Andrea Lieber is associate professor of religion at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, where she holds the Sophia Ava Ashbell Chair in Judaic Studies. Trained as a scholar of Jewish literature of the Second Temple Period, she has published many essays in the field of early Jewish and Christian mysticism and is co-editor (with Lynn LiDonnici) of *Heavenly Tablets: Interpretation, Identity and Tradition in Ancient Judaism* (2007). At Dickinson, she teaches a wide range of courses, including Women, Gender and Judaism as well as Religion and the Internet. She serves on the Academic Advisory Committee for the Posen Foundation, and in December 2009 she completed a five-year term as co-chair of the Association of Jewish Studies Women’s Caucus.

*College English*, Volume 72, Number 6, July 2010
Although journalistic discussions of Orthodox Jewish women’s blogging portray the platform as a vehicle for thrusting Jewish women’s voices into the public domain from which they have been historically marginalized, the sensationalist approach taken in these popular pieces greatly oversimplifies the dynamics of Orthodox women’s blogging and relies on an overly rigid binary distinction between “public” and “private” in their conceptualization. This reductive approach obscures critical elements of the blogging phenomenon—elements that might help us to understand better the dynamics that make blogging activity among Orthodox women worthy of study.

In this essay, I suggest that blogging is better understood as a technology that enables an expansion of the private sphere for the Orthodox Jewish women who write them. Rather than break through the boundaries that separate public and private realms, these blogs represent the articulation of a new kind of “public” private—one that facilitates an extraordinary opportunity for self-expression, but one that is not viewed consciously by the women who write them as compromising social or religious boundaries. At the same time, it is also clear that the veil of privacy, so essential to the genre in general, is an illusion that masks the transgressive dimension of blogging. The writers examined here do not claim that their blogging is a feminist act, and do not view it as such. Nonetheless, their public writing does subvert certain aspects of traditional Jewish gender roles, and thus has consequences that, however unintended, have feminist implications. In this respect, the blogger’s home page comes to serve as a site for pressing at the boundaries of domesticity, but also for inscribing a new kind of public-private in the virtual domain.

My analysis is based on research conducted between March 2006 and January 2008. In the earliest phase of research (March–November 2006), I began by following the blogging activity of three writers featured in the mainstream Jewish press: AidelMaidel, Nice Jewish Girl (NJG), and Chayyei Sarah. In an effort to expand my sample, I used Jewish blogging aggregators (Jewishblogging.com, JBlogCentral, and JRants.com) and blogroll links (a list of links to blogs recommended by the blog’s author) posted on the aforementioned blogs to identify additional sites maintained by Orthodox Jewish women. Through this process, I identified more than fifty blogs maintained by Jewish women who described themselves as Orthodox. Between November 2006 and March 2007, I followed regular activity on ten different weblogs, reading current posts as well as archived entries dating back to 2005. Of these ten blogs, the three that emerged as the most active and frequently updated became the center of my analysis, and I continued to follow these blogs through January 2008. These three bloggers share several commonalities; each woman embraced Orthodoxy as an adult (ba’alat teshuvaḥ), each is a mother of several young children, and each resides in North America. In November 2007, of the ten bloggers I was tracking, I was able to interview these three via email correspondence.
FEMALE PIETY AND THE PRIVATE SPHERE

The model of female piety envisioned by Orthodox Judaism hinges on a strict dichotomy between public and private. This theoretical distinction is pivotal to an understanding of gender roles as defined by Orthodox halakha (Jewish law). Halakhah, enhanced by custom, locates women’s realm of power within the private sphere, symbolized by the home as the locus of their religious duties. Jewish law limits a woman’s role in the public domain on the basis of a number of proscriptions derived from classical texts. In rabbinic thought, women may not serve as judges or as witnesses in a court of law, and in contemporary times, this proscription is sometimes extended to a prohibition against women serving on synagogue boards or as principals in Jewish schools (Ross 17). For a woman to hold such positions is viewed in classical sources as compromising the “honor of the community” (kavod ha-tzibur). If a woman is visible in a public position of authority, the assumption might be (on the part of the imagined onlooker) that there is no man capable of claiming that office, a conclusion that could bring shame on the community as a whole (Biale 26–28).

Laws of modesty (tzniut) affirm that a woman’s true honor is an inner beauty—one hidden from the public world and expressed in the oft-cited phrase from Psalms 45:14, “The glory of the king’s daughter is within” (kol kevudah hat melekh penimab). The concept of tzniut also involves a sense of women’s piety in which her absence or invisibility in the public sphere is valued. The custom of dressing modestly and covering the hair in public is an extension of this concept—a woman’s body is not to be displayed in the public sphere, partly so as not to arouse sexual desire among men. According to the principle of kol ishab, a woman’s voice is also understood to be arousing to men, thus prohibiting a woman’s ability to speak or sing in public settings. In some communities, it is even considered immodest for women to drive automobiles.

In the realm of public ritual, symbolized by the synagogue, women’s power is explicitly limited. Because women are exempt from a category of religious obligations defined by the Mishna as “time bound positive commandments” (Mishna Kiddushin 1:7), women are exempt and thereby excluded from being counted in a minyan (prayer quorum), leading the community in prayer, and reading from the Torah or Haftarah. Although feminism has penetrated the modern Orthodox community, resulting in many efforts to empower women in public synagogue ritual, such efforts are highly controversial and not accepted universally in the broader Orthodox community.

It is precisely the ambiguity of the blogging genre, a medium that conflates the public and private realms, that makes it interesting to study with respect to Orthodox Jewish women. Is a blog public if it has no readers? Is a blog public if it does not appear on a Google search? In what ways is a blog’s public nature determined by its accessibility? The bloggers I interviewed all ascribed importance to the comments
feature of blogging software as evidence of readership. Unlike wikis, which do not distinguish between writer and reader, and highlight instead the text produced by collaborative writing, the blog does maintain a hierarchy of writer over reader (Barton 180). A blogger can control whether readers are able to post comments, and some hosts even allow bloggers to restrict readers to a hand-selected group. Although the comments section of the blogs I studied would occasionally generate heated discussion, comments to blog diary entries are typically very terse. However, the mere presence of a comment, however brief or derogatory, indicates an audience, and for many bloggers the idea of an audience is a large part of the genre’s appeal.

Yet in bringing matters of private concern even theoretically into the arena of public discourse, private matters become invested with public (and often political) significance. Jurgen Habermas discussed this phenomenon in his classic analysis of the emergence of the “public sphere.” Habermas looked at the relationship between letter writing (through which “the individual unfolded himself in his subjectivity”) and bourgeois diaries (48). He wrote, “the diary became a letter addressed to the sender, and the first-person narrative became a conversation with one’s self, addressed to another person.” In this respect, “subjectivity, as the innermost core of the private, was always already oriented toward an audience” (48–49). Matthew Barton uses Habermas’s work to talk about the significance of Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and wikis in maintaining a critical public sphere. He notes the similarity of blogs to Habermas’s treatment of the diaries and letters as genres that produce an audience-oriented subjectivity through deeply personal writing (179). Barton suggests that like diaries, blogs encourage the development of subjectivity through self-reflective writing in a space that is public, yet fully controlled by the individual (180).

**Women and the Web**

Blogging software enables any woman with access to the Internet to publish her personal narrative in cyberspace. Although much has been written about gender and technology that points to male dominance and the replication of patriarchal social forms in cyberspace (Haraway; Cherny and Weise), there are ways in which the Internet is a uniquely comfortable place for women to network, find support, and assert a feminist presence.

According to a 2003 study by a group at Indiana University–Bloomington led by Susan C. Herring, about 50 percent of bloggers are women (Herring et al.). Websites such as www.blogher.com (“The community for women who blog”), which counts more than 10,000 women bloggers among its ranks, and aggregate sites like www.allwomenstalk.com and www.blogdaisy.com, along with the recent proliferation of blogs dealing with women’s issues (“mommy,” “pregnancy,” and “infertility” blogs are a few popular subgenres), suggest at least anecdotally that this number has grown
in the few years since those findings were recorded. This increase in women’s activity as prosumers (a portmanteau of producer and consumer) of Web content is paralleled in real life by the increase in and popularity of women’s writing in other media as well.\(^6\)

In her essay “Always Already Virtual: Feminist Politics in Cyberspace,” Patricia Wise argues that the Internet’s virtual reality is an easy home for women because they “are constituted as always already virtual in modern and postmodern epistemologies and power relations.” Wise here relies on a usage of the word virtual in its pre-Internet context, in which it meant “not quite there,” “not quite real” or “that which is so in essence or effect, though not recognized formally, actually or by strict definition as such; almost absolute” (79). In this reading, Wise understands the position of women in modernity as analogous to the liminal nature of virtual online realities. Woman’s embodied presence is a fact, but her presence is written over by an absence of autonomy—women are present, but not fully so.

Wise suggests that women “are not necessarily unsettled to find themselves in a space in which their subjectivity is virtualized, nor unfamiliar with the idea of imaginary fragmentation or dispersion” (191). Wise employs this theoretical stance to argue that the Internet is an ideal venue for women because it presents a world that resembles the one women have always inhabited throughout modernity. She locates the greatest possibilities for women’s use of the Internet in translating women’s “multiple literacies and polyvocality” (their ability to speak, read, and write from multiple positions simultaneously—the very tools that have enabled them to function with limited agency within patriarchal culture) to the virtual realm, in which complicated, multilayered identities are the norm (188).

The reading of women as “always already virtual” applies easily to the gendered reality of women in Orthodox Jewish communities. Many (though not all) of the bloggers studied here work outside the home, and some have college educations and advanced degrees. They are by no means literally confined to the home or denied a public life in secular terms. However, in the context of their spiritual lives, their sense of religious identity, obligation, and womanhood very much depends on constructing a theoretical distinction between the public and private domains. Indeed, Orthodox tradition explicit justifies women’s circumscription to the domestic sphere by elevating women’s role in the private realm as vital to the perpetuation of tradition, even surpassing the importance of men’s public ritual role in the synagogue. It is in this respect that halakhic Judaism virtualizes women in Wise’s sense—their presence is a necessary given, but it is written over by a lack of autonomy in Judaism’s public ritual spaces.

Women in the Orthodox blogosphere often reject the media’s suggestion that blog culture is a liberating force. In a post titled “Funny, I’m not wearing any veil . . . Have you seen a veil?” blogger Chayyei Sarah, “[a]n Orthodox Jewish thirty-
something living, playing, writing, and dating in Jerusalem," writes a response to Marcus Freed’s February 2006 piece on bloggers in the *London Jewish Chronicle*:

Monday, February 27, 2006

[T]he premise [of the article] is one I’m getting pretty tired of seeing in media coverage about Orthodox blogs. The gist of the article (stated and unstated) is this:

*Until blogs came along, the Orthodox community was so closed. [...] Orthodox women in particular were shut up in their homes with no one to talk to and their lives were state secrets! But now, thanks to the internet, we’re learning fascinating things! [...] The veil has been lifted! It’s a window into the Orthodox world! The internet is just amazing!*

Chayyei Sarah resists the idea that her world is closed and, using sarcasm, points to the many ways in which Orthodox Jewish women do have voices and are not in need of the emancipating power promised by the Internet.

Similar sentiments are expressed in the comments section of Orthomom’s blog. Orthomom is one of the bloggers featured in Freed’s *London Jewish Chronicle* piece, and several of her readers shared Chayyei Sarah’s sense of bewilderment at the overly simplified characterization of their lives. On Sunday, February 26, 2006, Orthomom contributor Shifra said,

*It’s good we have blogging or else Orthodox women like us would never be able to speak our minds. Thank God the veil has been lifted—we’d been suffering in silence much too long! Gimme a break. I think it’s great that you and the Rebbitzen are getting well earned press but man [...] someone needs to get out more.*

SephardiLady said,

*Veil? I express these opinions at the table. I’m sure that most of the female bloggers do to [sic].*

Hirshel Tzig said,

*Explain to me the great “freedom” that’s [sic?] is the blog. Are you trying to tell us that Orthodox Women are victims of the Taliban or some other terrible regime, and that their only outlet is the internet?*

There is a great deal of irony in Shifra’s suggestion that “someone needs to get out more.” Her comment effectively turns Freed’s article on its head by suggesting that the journalist is the one who is confined to the home and thus not sufficiently worldly to understand the Orthodox Jewish blogging phenomenon. SephardiLady says that she already has a voice and uses it to express controversial ideas “at the table,” ironically, a reference to the domestic sphere and thus the private realm after all. And in his mocking comparison of Orthodoxy to the Taliban, perhaps the most repressive and violent regime exposed in our era, Herschel Tzig (presumably a male reader, though of course it is not possible to know) denies Orthodox women’s status as marginalized in any way through the absurdity of the analogy.
But of course, the greatest irony is that this entire exchange is taking place in a fully public arena—accessible to anyone with an Internet connection and a Web browser. So, although the writers here would resist the notion that they are transgressing boundaries in a radical way, and perhaps the anonymity and false intimacy of the blogging experience facilitate this fiction, in fact they are accessing a much broader audience than they might have reached in any other forum for communication within their communities. In spite of the resistance to that categorization, the bloggers’ writing might still be viewed as a feminist act, in that they are creating a new space for self-expression that at once reifies and challenges the relation between public and private.

**Why Orthodox Women Blog**

To be sure, the Orthodox women behind the blogs analyzed here are not actively or consciously engaging in feminist activism through their writing. Not one of them is a vocal advocate for social or religious change in her community, and overall, they are not seeking to overturn the conventional gender roles that structure their lives or to challenge the patriarchal order in any way. None of the bloggers cited here has taken on the agenda of Orthodox feminism, which is its own dynamic and rapidly expanding movement within traditional circles; and as is consistent with Alyse Fisher Roller’s work, many women even use the blog as a forum for speaking out against liberal feminist positions (5–6). Although most have not chosen blogging as a self-conscious foray into feminist activism, many do blog to overcome feelings of isolation and frustration with their lives and their communities.

AidelMaidel, one of the Orthodox bloggers who has received a great deal of media attention, views her blog as a “place to vent.” AidelMaidel began blogging in 2003, writing about her choice to become religiously observant, her struggle with infertility, and the subsequent birth of her two daughters. Over time, however, the subject of the blog focused on her ongoing divorce, which is the issue that drew so much attention to her website. Eventually, due in some respects to the ongoing litigation with her ex-husband, the older posts were removed from her blog. In her final post before the divorce, AidelMaidel expresses her deep connection to her blogging community, and her reasons for blogging:

Friday, October 7, 2005
I’m so sorry.
I started this blog 2 years and 2 months ago. I intended it as my place to vent about all the things I couldn’t talk about with the people in my real life. [...] It afforded me a platform from which to shout out to the entire world [...] while still protecting my and my family’s privacy. Unfortunately, this is no longer possible. I’ve realized that the wisest thing to do right now is, sadly, to stop my writing here. I will miss the refuge
I have found here [. . .] I never met any of you, but I feel I know you and I appreciate the support and love you've shown me.

AidelMaidel initiated her blog in response to her desire “to shout out to the entire world,” and in the process of sharing her thoughts, she forged meaningful connections with readers. Her subsequent decision to delete all of her past posts represents a belated recognition of their truly public nature. In removing the older posts, she reclaims them as private, and reflects here on her ambivalence about withdrawing from the blogosphere. Though she would like to be able to write about her divorce, her awareness of blogging as a public act prohibits her from doing so, and the loss of her blog means the loss of a sense of a specifically public voice and the loss of an audience.

Giving public voice to private concerns is a major theme for Nice Jewish Girl, who refers to her blog as “her primal scream.” The subject of feature articles in both the Jewish Daily Forward and the New York Jewish Week, NJG blogged about her ongoing frustrations as a single Jewish woman bound by the Orthodox principle that prohibits physical contact with members of the opposite sex. When she initiated the blog, she was thirty-four years old and had never been kissed:

Tuesday, February 22, 2005
Writing is not my best skill. [. . .] Writing does not come naturally to me. So why am I making a blog about something so personal? First, because in the last few years, being S.N. [shomer negiah] to me has become a little like living in jail. There is a world out there . . . who are enjoying being sexual people, and I am imprisoned in my single, religious, Nice Jewish Girl life. Sometimes I think that if I do not have sex I will explode. Sometimes I think that if I do not find out what it feels like to have a man’s hands on me, I will go crazy. Maybe this blog is the explosion! Maybe after all I have gone crazy! Another reason I am blogging is that I want support from other people who are in the same situation . . . I don’t know any other frum women as far as I know who own a vibrator for example. I have owned three and do not know how I would survive without it. What does that mean? Who understands?

NJG’s comment about her lack of writing skills points to some broader theoretical issues in the study of blogging and other forms of computer-mediated communication. Text-based communication technologies blur the distinction between formal writing and speech. As email and text messaging emerge as preferred forms of communication over the telephone, there is a shift toward textuality, a technological change that echoes the shift from orality to literacy in ancient times (Wright). However, writing on the Internet is governed by a completely different set of conventions that sets it apart from formal “writing” (Fernheimer and Nelson; Wesch), and it is ironic to see that NJG does not necessarily view her blogging as writing in the formal sense.

Although blogs are clearly venues for writing, it is significant that the bloggers here emphasize voice in their rationalizations for blogging. For each of these authors.
the blog is a space “to vent,” “to shout out to the entire world,” or to utter a “primal scream.” The language of release is noteworthy, as shouting and screaming are certainly not behaviors that conform to classical notions of female modesty in Jewish tradition. NJG in particular, declaring publicly that she has owned three vibrators and cannot talk about masturbation even among her female friends, expresses a strong desire to talk about her feelings. She is not necessarily in search of a public forum for her concerns, or interested in activism to alter the limitations of her community, but rather she seeks a community of peers with whom to discuss private matters. In this respect, she is looking to expand her private world—to share private concerns with those who might be experiencing similar tensions. All of the bloggers analyzed here find this expressive power through writing in the blogging genre.

Indeed, it is the blog’s specifically written form that actually facilitates the sense of voice acquired by Orthodox women bloggers. If Jewish law limits the expression of women’s voices in the public sphere, the blog provides a paradoxically “silent” way to raise one’s voice. Perhaps writing is so empowering precisely because it articulates voice in a way that is perceived as non-transgressive: blogging allows for the assertion of a voice that is “heard” by readers, but does not overtly violate the halakhic prohibitions against speaking publicly. Blog readers, then, experience this process vicariously.

Blogs are usually, though not always, anonymous. The anonymity of the bloggers I interviewed is one of the more cherished aspects of the genre. It allows bloggers to express without consequences a voice online that is often not accepted within the circumscribed realm of their community, and it is this key feature that establishes the blog as a private space for the writer. As long as a blogger’s identity is protected, she feels free to write without fear of scrutiny from those within her community, and this enables her to become a free prosumer in the blogosphere. And yet, the perceived sense of privacy afforded by anonymity is a fiction, as any material posted on the blog is fully accessible to anyone in the world with a Web browser. In fact, it might be said that there is no true anonymity on the Internet, because one’s personal information and browsing habits are coded (through cookies and IP addresses) into the very software that powers blogging programs and Internet browsers.

OnionSoupMix (OSM), an Orthodox ba’alat teshuvah and a married mother of four, uses her blog to openly express her doubts about her faith and her criticisms of the Orthodox community in which she lives. In a private email correspondence with me (January 22, 2008), OSM describes herself as “Orthoprax,” meaning she “keeps everything” (that is, she observes all aspects of halakha), but “believes nothing.” Although she dresses modestly and wears a wig, she is not sure that she believes in the Torah. The issues she chooses to write about are concerns she could not discuss openly in her community or even in her own home, and she often employs a dry and ironic humor to convey her critique:
December 4, 2007
12:56 am: Mixed Bag
I went to my son’s Chumash [Hebrew Bible] party recently.
It was lovely. The little boys sang and received chumashim and the theme was derech eretz kadma leTorah [the way of the world precedes the Torah], which you know I liked.

In other good news, there were separate seating sections for mommies and tatties and this helped me to prevent myself from fornicating in the auditorium aisles like I usually do at my children’s chumash parties.

In this excerpt, OSM critiques the custom of segregating men and women at nonreligious events in Jewish communal settings. She appears to mock a typical mommy-blog entry by describing the ordinary act of attending a simple function at her child’s school, and then continuing in an ironic turn to voice a strong critique of gender segregation. Rather than a blog about home, OSM’s blog is a site devoted to challenging the strict norms of her community, and thus might be read as a threat to the stability of her home. This post in particular, in asserting a sexually aggressive wife and mother, inverts the logic often brought to justify the need for a mebitzah (partition segregating men and women) according to which it is a man’s sexual desires that are necessarily kept in check when women are removed to a separate seating area.

Reading OSM’s entries, it becomes obvious that she is not fully “at home” in her own home, and the blog provides a space where she can express herself freely and openly—where she can get support from other sympathetic individuals. In this sense, OSM has constructed a virtual home for herself online that represents a public-private space. In private correspondence, OSM has said that her ability to express herself online actually enables her to function in her real-life world, in spite of her ambivalence about Orthodox Judaism. She says that she was far more frustrated before she began her blog because so many of her feelings were necessarily kept inside.

OSM does use her blog to critique her community and views her blogging as definitively public. Yet the anonymity of her blog tempers the public nature of her critique. It enables the free expression of her voice, but also deprives her of the full experience of subjectivity. In OSM’s case, we see anonymity functioning as a virtualizing mechanism: the agency in her critique must be concealed, and as a result, it is not fully public—only virtually so. OSM does not view her blog as a medium for effecting change, and she does not envision leaving her community. In fact, it is her blogging that enables her to perform her roles as wife and mother, in spite of her doubts. In a private email correspondence (January 22, 2008), OSM wrote,

The blog is my outlet for my frustrations and I am typically able to be the ‘good’ frum [religiously observant] wife and mommy as long as I know someone has heard my vent and knows how I really feel. Before I started the blog, I felt much more frustrated than I do now.
OSM’s blog provides a mechanism for coping with complicated feelings by extending the boundaries of conversation, and by allowing the release of thoughts and ideas that would not be tolerated in her off-line community. At the same time, it is the expression of her voice in this forum that makes it possible to return to the more boundaried world in which she lives. She can tolerate her circumscribed role precisely because she has a place—a public-private realm of sorts—to articulate and share her subversive and conflicting feelings.

**Virtual Veibershul**

Avid blogger Kressel Housman is a ba’alat teshuvah in her late thirties, married to a “frum [religiously observant] from birth” Hasidic man. Both she and her husband maintain a Web presence through Jewish outreach sites designed to educate those interested about traditional Jewish thought and practice. Housman acknowledges that as a Hasidic couple, their Web use puts them in a very small minority in their Ultra-Orthodox community, and she has written publicly about her struggle to find a balanced place for the Internet in her life.10

Kressel’s blog is titled “Ayshes Chayil: Mi Yimtsa?” after Proverbs 31:4. She chose this title, which in its biblical context begins an ode of praise to an accomplished woman, because as she puts it, she is “striving to find the ayshes chayil within [herself].” She writes, “There are many translations of ‘Aishes Chayil’, most commonly ‘a woman of valor’, but I like the Artscroll’s ‘accomplished woman’” (March 28, 2005).

Kressel’s outreach website and her blog are both clearly marked as women’s spaces on the Web. Her home page features a prominent link announcing that “Kressel’s Korner” is the “companion site” to “Being Jewish,” her husband’s outreach website, presumably for a male or general audience. In a similar move, AidelMaidel divides her blogroll into two gendered categories: “veibelah” (little wives) and “yin-gelach” (little boys), indicating that even the Web has gender-appropriate spaces. The veibelah section lists blogs written by women, and the yingelach section lists blogs written by men.

In the spring of 2006, after attending a lecture at her child’s *yeshiva* in which a prominent Rav warned of the various dangers of the Internet, Kressel made the difficult decision to disable her Web browser at home. Paradoxically, in order to maintain her blog, she must now go outside the home, to the public library to access the Internet. In one post, Kressel discusses what it meant to her to lose her blogging community, and in doing so, she describes her blog in explicitly gendered terms:

Cutting Connections—No more web browser in my home
May 30, 2006

In 2005, I discovered blogging, which far surpasses the website in dearness to my heart. My personal blog has 74 “subscribing” readers, most of whom are Jewish women of
varying levels of observance. We read about each other’s lives, celebrate each other’s simchas, and support each other through the tough times. Baby pictures, daily gripes, Shabbos menus, divrei Torah—we talk about it all. I think of it as my “virtual veibershul.” I love my Internet friends. And now I was being asked to give them up.

I find Kressel’s use of the term virtual veibershul highly significant as a strategy for the social shaping of technology.11 For Kressel, blogging is not about breaking down conventional boundaries of communication, but rather about extending traditional ones. Kressel’s home page replicates the gender dichotomy present in her own social world. Her Web space is, in her mind, a “women’s space.” Rather than break down boundaries, her website clearly affirms the very boundaries that structure her home life. Her online community is a “virtual women’s section,” playing on the gendered partitioning of the public space of the synagogue. She understands that her online presence is not a public presence, but rather represents an expanded private sphere—one in which she can have a more pronounced voice and reach an expanded network of “insiders.” This gendering serves to disguise blogging activity as a public act, creating a fiction that circumscribes it within the domestic, female sphere.

Yet, true to the concept of virtuality, the space of Kressel’s blog both is and isn’t as she describes it. The fact is that her writing is fully public—accessible to male and female alike. Her blogging is an activity she must pursue outside the home—in the public library—as the standards of her community frown on the use of Internet browsers at home. Kressel herself even acknowledges that in this veibershul, traditional definitions of Jewish female identity do not apply. She writes on her blog,

Aishes Chayil: Mi Yimtzah?
May 28, 2006
For those of you who don’t know Yiddish, a “veibershul” refers to the women’s section of a synagogue. In Orthodox synagogues, men and women sit separately for prayer services. “Veiber” is Yiddish for “wives” and “shul” means synagogue. I know that some of you are not wives yet, some of you are not Jewish, and a few of you are not even female but you’re all part of my virtual veibershul anyway.

In the space of Kressel’s blog, any reader becomes part of the veibershul—male or female, Jewish or not, her blogging community extends the bounds of this circumscribed feminine domain to include anyone who would be part of it. On the one hand, this represents an opening up of Kressel’s world to include those who would not ordinarily be involved. But, in considering the blogging space to be a woman’s space, she rejects the notion that her writing activity constitutes a fully public act. Like the virtual veibershul, the women’s section of the synagogue is both public and private—its public nature derives from the fact that it exists within the public space of the synagogue. Yet, defined as “women’s space,” it is not the site of public, male-centered ritual, and is therefore understood as an extension of the private sphere in public.
Thus, the blogosphere imagined as virtual veiershul for Orthodox Jewish women represents a more perfected private domain—a virtual space (a virtual home) in which women can really talk, without fear of judgment from the public or private eye. Such talk does bring conventionally private issues into the public sphere, and in this respect politicizes the everyday lives of women. Yet this politicization is not what motivates these women to blog, at least not consciously. In fact, it may be that the political dimension of their blogging is an aspect that must necessarily be masked in order for these traditionally observant women to embrace the medium. Perhaps it is the self-actualization that comes from writing a blog that empowers women to be stronger actors in all aspects of their lives—both public and private—by providing a forum for the development of their own voice. None of the bloggers I studied was at all interested in leaving her community out of frustration, or breaking out of Orthodoxy to explore more liberal or secular communities. Yet all of them love to write and crave an expanded community where their real voices can be heard. The blogosphere is a comfortable arena for this form of communication because it facilitates public expression, all the while masked by a perceived veil of anonymity that creates the illusion of privacy. This new public-private space thus constitutes a virtual home that challenges conventional ideas about domesticity in the Orthodox world.

Notes


2. Curiosity about Hasidism as an insular, inaccessible world drives much of the popular interest in Ultra-Orthodox blogs. Such interest is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, most scholarly work on contemporary Hasidism has taken the form of providing a secular readership with an “inside” view of the Ultra-Orthodox lifestyle, often from an ethnographic perspective. Classic examples include Heilman; Harris; Eisenberg. More recent studies include Fishkoff; Winston. Several studies have been specifically concerned with highlighting women’s experiences in Hasidic communities: Levine; Rotem. Davidman and Kaufman are specifically concerned with secular women who choose to live an Ultra-Orthodox lifestyle.

3. Ba’alat teshuva (plural ba’alot teshuva) is a term used to refer to a woman who has chosen to become more religiously observant. The idiom implies that the individual has “returned” to the faith.

4. See the summary discussion in Ross 16–17.

5. Time-bound commandments are those religious duties that must be performed at specific times of the day. The classic example is the recitation of the Shema, a prayer affirming of God’s unity, which must be recited by a particular time of the morning.

6. In their study “Women and Children Last: The Discursive Construction of Weblogs,” Susan Herring and her colleagues noted a strange paradox: despite the substantial presence of women in the blogosphere, public discourses about weblogs tend to focus predominantly on adult males.

7. Indeed, within the Orthodox world, there has been a proliferation of writing by women. In a recent cover story for the Jerusalem Report, Netty C. Gross asks, “Does the exploding genre of religious women’s inspirational ‘chick-lit’ reflect the flowering of a new, Ultra-Orthodox feminist consciousness?”
Gross reports the growing interest among publishers in this expanding market, citing sales in excess of 30,000 copies for some self-help-oriented books written by and for Orthodox Jewish women. In her 1999 study of writing by Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women, Roller asserted that much writing among this group of women is in fact reactionary—coming as a conservative response to liberal feminist arguments. Roller also identified two distinct voices in this body of literature—that of the ha’alat tekhvah, which often is preoccupied with refuting feminist claims, though taking the form of a “post modern, feminist self-reflecting narrative style,” and that of women who were raised in observant homes (“aligned with traditional, masculine, universalizing narrative style”) (5–6). See also the recent work of Judy Baumel-Schwartz on the role of online chat rooms in the development of Orthodox Jewish women’s identity.

8. Shomer negiah is a Hebrew term referring to an individual who observes the prohibition against physical contact with a person of the opposite sex.

9. Although Orthodox halakha mandates the separation of men and women during prayer and other rituals, such as weddings, the practice of requiring gender segregation at other types of public assembly (lectures or cultural events) varies by community and is not mandated by Jewish law.

10. The technology of the Internet, with its capacity to blur so many fundamental boundaries, has posed an intense challenge to the Ultra-Orthodox world. While Hasidism and other forms of Orthodoxy have wrestled in the past to establish appropriate uses for evolving technologies such as telephones, televisions, computers, cellular phones, and recording devices, the Internet presents a new set of dangers that are perceived as a threat to the stability of the home. At stake is the extent to which technologies facilitate exposure to secular culture, which can potentially threaten the insularity of the community (Poll 11, 217). Many studies of Ultra-Orthodoxy have emphasized the community’s unlikely embrace of technology for business, education, and outreach purposes, noting the ability of the community to shape technology to suit its needs (Heilman; Poll; Berkovic), and even to sacralize the use of technology when employed for holy purposes, like outreach and Torah study (Mintz). Though computers in general have been used for decades in Hasidic communities for a variety of business purposes, the advent of the Internet effectively transformed the computer from a useful business tool into a gateway to the secular world. In this respect, the Internet is positioned alongside television, which was banned from Ultra-Orthodox homes in 1975 because it threatened to bring the corrupting influences into the Jewish home (Kelemen; Perlow).

11. There is a growing literature on the social shaping/structuring of technology. See, for example, MacKenzie and Wajcman; Oudshoorn and Pinch.

Works Cited


