

5 QUESTIONS FOR

Israeli Feminist Rahel Berkovits

Rahel Berkovits is an Israeli feminist, a teacher of Jewish texts and a founder of Shira Hadasha, an Orthodox feminist congregation in Jerusalem. She teaches at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem and has studied at Midreshet Lindenbaum and at the Shalom Hartman Institute. Her new book, "A Daughter's Recitation of Mourner's Kaddish," published last year by the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, is the third in the Ta Shma Halakhic Source Guide Series. Berkovits spoke to the Forward's Raphael Magarik about the state of Israeli feminism, gender and the Haredi world, and women's halachic writing.

Raphael Magarik: When did you start to write on Halacha and gender?

Rahel Berkovits: I've been researching these ideas for a long time.... The breaking point was the issue of women saying *sheva brachos* [traditional marriage blessings]. I did halachic research; I felt it was possible, and I thought, "I can't do it unless I get the rabbinic stamp of approval."

I had this really ridiculous idea: Sometimes in Halacha, it's the people with very big shoulders who make major radical decisions, because they're not worried about what people will think. So I made this appointment to meet [a prominent Haredi rabbi] to ask him about women saying *sheva brachos*. He treated me so poorly.... I just remember walking home crying. At that point, I decided I was going to make most of my halachic decisions for myself.

How do you make sense of the simultaneous emergence of the progressive, feminist Orthodoxy of this book on the one hand and the struggles over women and Haredi society in Beit Shemesh on the other?

When I first moved to Israel, I thought, "I'm coming from a society that embraces feminism, and I'm coming to this



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Driven: Orthodox Israeli feminist Rahel Berkovits writes about Halacha and gender in her new book, 'A Daughter's Recitation of Mourner's Kaddish.'

Middle Eastern culture which is behind the times." And to a certain extent that's true.... But as someone who lives a life committed to Halacha, I find the Israeli community much more liberal. There is this rabbinate that deals with marriage and divorce, and yes, that's difficult. But because everything is not linked to a synagogue... you can start *Shira Hadasha* [a partnership minyan that balances feminism with Jewish law], and no one cares.

Maybe ritual change is easier in

be getting bigger and bigger, so they want to remove from their midst anything that doesn't agree with them. I don't think it's so terrible that in their own street — and yes, it's a public street — in Mea Sharim, they had a separation in the street [during a public celebration]....

These independent minyanim aren't waiting for rabbinic authority.

There's a whole feminist question: If those women are happy with that, and they choose to live in that society, do I still fight for their rights because they don't know what's good for them, or do I accept their statement that they're happy with how they live?...

People have the freedom to live how they want.

It seems like you very strongly value people making their own choices.

That's a big issue with women and Kaddish. It's one thing to do my own wedding — that's under my control. With Kaddish, it's this point where women are so vulnerable, so emotionally raw. And they need a minyan or the synagogue; they're so dependent on the traditional male community — for those women who live in the Orthodox world. I hope the book will allow those women to have conversations with men in positions of authority, because they need those people. Most [Orthodox] women, particularly in America, go to traditionally Orthodox shuls. They don't have a choice, unless they are part of an alternative minyan.

These independent minyanim are groups of people who aren't waiting for rabbinic authority; they're getting together with like-minded people to take action. The question will be: What will history say about us?

Israel because the synagogue is only one part of Jewish identity. The harder feminist fights are elsewhere.

I don't know if it's just that the synagogue is less central or, if also, the more educated you are — sometimes — the more open you are.

So how should Israeli society handle Haredim who reject modernity and who are expanding?

Haredim just want to live their lives, in their communities, as they want; they just happen to