



Rachel's Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women

Debra Renee Kaufman

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"An engrossing account of the appeal of religious orthodoxy to formerly secular women, many of them once feminist, radical members of the counterculture. . . . This outstanding work of scholarship reads with the immediacy of a novel."—Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, author of *Deceptive Distinctions: Sex, Gender, and the Social Order*

Debra Kaufman writes about ba'alot teshuva women who have returned to Orthodox Judaism, a form of Judaism often assumed to be oppressive to women. She addresses many of the most challenging issues of family, feminism, and gender. Why, she asks, have these women chosen an Orthodox lifestyle? What attracts young, relatively affluent, well-educated, and highly assimilated women to the most traditional, right-wing, patriarchal, and fundamentalist branch of Judaism? The answers she discovers lead her beyond an analysis of religious renewal to those issues all women and men confront in public and private life.

Kaufman interviewed and observed 150 ba'alot teshuva. She uses their own stories, in their own words, to show us how they make sense of the choices they have made. Lamenting their past pursuit of individual freedom over social responsibility, they speak of searching for shared meaning and order, and finding it in orthodoxy.

The laws and customs of Orthodox Judaism have been formulated by men, and it is men who enforce those laws and control the Orthodox community. The leadership is dominated by men. But the women do not experience theologically-imposed subordination as we might expect. Although most ba'alot teshuva reject feminism or what they perceive as feminism, they maintain a gender consciousness that incorporates aspects of feminist ideology, and often use feminist rhetoric to explain their lives.

Kaufman does not idealize the ba'alot teshuva world. Their culture does not accommodate the non-Orthodox, the homosexual, the unmarried, the divorced. Nor do the women have the mechanisms or political power to reject what is still oppressive to them. They must live within the authority of a rabbinic tradition and social structure set by males. Like other religious right women, their choices reinforce authoritarian trends current in today's society. *Rachel's Daughters* provides a fascinating picture of how newly orthodox women perceive their role in society as more liberating than oppressive.

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