



Traditional prayers, returning voices

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'Traditional prayers, returning voices: Orthodox Jewish women and girls' singing in a public ritual under COVID-19'

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Theme - Disruption, Crisis, and Continuity in Religion

In this paper, I examine the contentious practice of Orthodox Jewish female voices being heard in public rituals. I draw on my recent ethnographic study of two UK-based online groups who synthesize tradition and innovation for ritual provision during the pandemic. The themes of disruption, crisis and continuity are present in intricate combination of authorised liturgy, technological opportunities, gendered divisions of labour, and women's desire to move from the margins to the centre.

My study was part of the project 'Social Distance, Digital Congregation: British Ritual Innovation under COVID19' in 2020. It was led by Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Chester, and supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's COVID-19 response funding stream. The project report explores the findings from a large survey of British ritual leaders and congregants and 15 case studies. In contrast to most of the project findings, my study challenges the emerging dominant narrative that ritual adaptations under the pandemic offer poorer experiences than previous face-to-face delivery.

The two monthly Orthodox online prayer services are advertised as women-only. Young girls are explicitly encouraged to participate as prayer leaders. Both groups were initially organized by London-based women under the auspices of their local Orthodox communities. But being online, they draw participants from across the British Isles and globally. They have built critical mass across age groups, access needs, customs, and Jewish movements. Before the pandemic, local versions of the groups met very occasionally in their synagogues and private houses.

Prompted by the first lockdown, the groups meet online once a month to recite Hallel on Rosh Chodesh. Rosh Chodesh marks the beginning of the Jewish month. Reciting Hallel on Rosh Chodesh is a religious obligation. The service follows an authorised liturgy that consists of Psalms 113 – 118 sung in Hebrew. Hallel means 'praise' and the service is commonly described as "uplifting". In his commentary, the late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes Hallel as "a choral symphony of faith in the presence of God in history" (Koren Shalem Siddur, p.733).

Both groups aim for a gender-sensitive response to pastoral needs under the pandemic, and to offer ritual participation for Orthodox women and girls. At the start of the pandemic, a lay member of a London synagogue took matters in hand when she realized that: "There was obviously a concern that the synagogues were closing, what could we do as women? There's plenty of stuff for the men, but not very much for the women." Hallel on Rosh Chodesh offers a regular, but not too frequent, relatively short liturgy of 15 to 20 minutes that can be delivered any time during daylight hours. It does not involve the use of a Torah scroll, which has been a barrier to permission for female-only Orthodox services, and it does not require the presence of ten Jewish men.

The groups' Orthodox communities permit online delivery when Rosh Chodesh does not coincide with Shabbat, the day of rest, which is the case most months. One group uses live Zoom meetings

including breakout rooms after prayers. This is a grassroots initiative with a changing line-up of prayer leaders. Attendance ranges between 50 to 250 participants. The other group uses Zoom as well as Facebook live streaming and recording which reaches about 600 views per month.

To understand the effect of Hallel on participants, I collected their experiences through two anonymous online surveys customized to each group and advertised to participants by the group organizers. The survey for the Zoom Hallel received 18 responses which is a 10% response rate; the Facebook Hallel survey received only 2 responses. In addition, I carried out eight semi-structured interviews with organizers and participants of both groups.

The data is indicative of the experiences of Orthodox Jews who are excluded from or not participating in public prayer. My analysis highlights the multi-faceted dynamics of exclusion and non-participation as a consequence of gendered divisions of labour in domestic and public settings. Although Judaism purports not to separate sacred and secular spheres, this study demonstrates a *de facto* privileging of the public performance of communal prayer in authorised settings. Due to Jewish law requiring the presence of ten men for many rituals, women's participation is secondary and their absence is deemed unproblematic. This is compounded by expectations that domestic and care work should take priority for women over their religious obligations. This is a consequence of men's fulfilment of their religious obligations. To close the circle, the complementarity of gendered roles acts as a barrier to change in ritual practices and programming that would increase women's participation. In 1971, this division of labour was problematized in Rachel Adler's seminal piece 'The Jew who wasn't there' in which Adler names Jewish women's position in public ritual, religious law and in the community as peripheral. This positionality at the periphery and how pandemic adaptation has radically altered it, is central to my case study.

Orthodox ritual spaces separate attendees by sex. From a balcony, women and girls might look at the backs of the men and boys below. COVID safety measures make the acoustics on the balcony even worse than before. Although not all Orthodox synagogues relegate women and girls to balconies, their restriction to peripheral spaces is widespread. Because females are exempt from certain communal prayers, although they are not forbidden to attend, many choose not to.

A Hallel newcomer at the time of the interview who is now a prayer leader describes her synagogue experience thus: "But to sit in the ladies gallery or to sit at the back of a synagogue with the ladies doesn't excite me, it doesn't turn me on."

A community educator with a Jewish Studies degree explains that "I had already stopped going to synagogue, because prayer was less and less meaningful to me."

The same woman's appreciation for female-only Hallel chimes with Susan Starr Sered's (1999) theory of women enacting their religious agency. This involves asserting their religious needs and celebrating rituals with likeminded people in a way that is meaningful to them.

My respondent claims that "The pandemic has acted as a catalyst to get people doing things that we could have been doing before. [This Hallel is] an example of how things can be even better than before the precipitating crisis. This has given women a chance to come together with others

worldwide. It's an act of compassion because it brings in women who were excluded from attendance for all sorts of reasons.”

In Judaism, while the words of the liturgy are fixed, the melodies are not. Although commonly a synagogue community develops a local repertoire, in principle the prayer leader is free to use any melody. However, with the professionalization of cantors developed a complex system of musical modes. While Hallel attendees might be used to very elaborate cantorial singing in synagogue services, the melodies used in the female-only Hallel's are often borrowed from Jewish children's songs. Some of the Hallel singers lack accomplishment, others are very confident.

I address shortly the contentious issue of women's voices being heard in public Orthodox ritual. This is one of four ways in which the Hallel women have asserted their religious agency during the crisis that forced ritual adaptations. I argue that they use the upheaval of the pandemic and the concomitant temporary reduction in their community's gatekeeping in order to first move from the margin to the centre, second to make their singing voices heard, third to make public ritual accessible under the gendered division of labour, and fourth to legitimate their ritual practice by linking it to the scriptural tradition.

First, the Hallel groups take an alternative route to innovation in contrast to the older contentious feminist Women's Rosh Chodesh groups for consciousness raising and often lacking a ritual element. Instead, the online Hallel's aim to operate within halacha, Jewish law, and follow an authorised liturgy. As one of the very learned leaders says: “everyone [recites] Hallel on Rosh Chodesh, and we want to [recite] it too”.

She explains further: “I'm very much into wanting to do things because there's a women's accessibility to things that are generally done rather than this can be something different for women that isn't really to do with what everyone else is doing. I don't think I would be interested in being part of a different kind of Rosh Chodesh group. To me, I want to be involved in something that's traditional for to do on the day. And if I do it with a group of women, then that's fine for me, but I don't want to set up to do something different.”

Or as another woman says in a nutshell: “I'm not going to take my bra off and wave around my head. I'm not one of those. But I want to be more involved.”

Second, the Talmudic teaching that “a woman's voice is akin to nakedness” (Babylonian Talmud Berahot 24a: Kol be'isha erva) is often interpreted as a prohibition against female voices being heard in Orthodox mixed services. Even permission to hold female-only services on synagogue premises is often withheld. However, the use of online spaces changes the dynamics of gatekeeping and community endorsement.

A community leader considers who is responsible for observing modesty online: “There's something about women's singing, which normally you don't get into an Orthodox synagogue. And having the ability to do that online also has been very interesting. I can imagine 10 years ago that it would have been a problem for an Orthodox woman to sing online. But there's been a big shift in thinking about that, that really the burden, the onus is on men not to watch women rather than women not expose themselves in terms of singing and their voices as a point of modesty.”

It is interesting that none of my respondents mentioned that within their Orthodox umbrella organisation, some synagogues had mixed choirs until the 1960s.

An important aspect of Hallel planning is how to maximise accessibility for women and make space for positive ritual obligations in spite of the dominant gendered division of labour. This is in sharp contrast to mainstream programming.

A regular Hallel leader explains that: "I was always taught that women didn't have to pray three times a day like men do, especially when their children were little, you do your best. (...) my husband always makes time to pray and that's not negotiable. But for me, it was not something that I was able to commit to on a daily basis until my kids got older, I just couldn't fit it in."

That Hallel can be recited any time during daylight is an important factor for fitting it around domestic and work commitments, as is one group's provision of a recording. The Zoom group stretch the daylight stipulation to the limit by making sure that at least one of the leaders is in the right time zone while others might not be. Whether this invalidates the ritual is not the group's priority.

Many of the women are nervous about raising their voices and leading communal prayers. Claiming scriptural traditions allows them to legitimate their new ritual role: "Miriam the sister of Moshe took the women aside and they also praise God in their own way after the splitting of the Red Sea when the Jews left Egypt and there was the songs of praise given afterwards. In Judaism, we do believe that song has the ability to really ascend spiritual heights. So personally, I find it very meaningful to have music through women, particularly because then I can express my own voice. There was something very powerful about hearing women lead prayer."

Interestingly, none of the respondents used the Hebrew technical term *shlichat tzibbur* for prayer leader, perhaps a claim they are not ready to make.

In conclusion, while it is clear that the pandemic has acted here as a catalyst to long-desired innovation, it is too early to assess whether the Orthodox community's gatekeepers are ready to accept this gender equality change in the long-term.