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# **A Study of Eating Disorders in Judaism and the Impact of Patriarchal Values and Pressures**

## **Religion Final Paper: Eating Disorders In Judaism and the Intersection of Patriarchal Values and Pressures**

Numerous religious and ritualistic celebrations in Judaism center and revolve around food and eating as a community. Throughout the year, Jewish observances provide the time for family and friends to gather and experience these holidays together. Rosh Hashanah, Hanukkah, Tu B'Shvat, Passover/Pesach, and Tisha B'av are just some of the few holidays that include large feasts of food and communal celebrations. Differences in recipes and ingredients depend according to cultural heritage and customs but typically pious meals remain the same across Judaism. The term "Kashrut" refers to set of Jewish religious laws pertaining to food that coheres with the standards and requirements of Halacha. Lay people are most familiar with the word Kosher. Tedious processes of preparation go into making sure foods are in accordance with Jewish Law and are fit for ritual/communal use. Some of the details and rules involved are: all blood must be drained from meat and poultry before it is eaten, meat cannot be eaten with dairy, and grape products made by non-Jews may not be eaten (Judiasm101). The importance and emphasis on the strict dieting involved with religious tradition inevitably intersects and muddles with the deep psychological and societal expectations that are imposed on us throughout our lives. In authors Joanna Woolway Grenfell's article, "Religion and Eating Disorder: Towards Understanding a Neglected Perspective", she delves into the manifestations of mental illnesses in forms of eating disorders the combination of identity and cultural norms can cause in vulnerable young women in systems of faith. "It is clear from work in secular disciplines of sociology and psychology that many women have a difficult relationship with food and that society's preoccupation with eating and body image suggests there are unresolved questions in Western society about women's changing roles in the home and workplace" (Grenfell 368) - but what happens when religion comes into play in these problematic ideologies about body and diet?

The patriarchal values and submissive nature of the roles females typically have in religion makes women especially susceptible to falling victim to the negative pressures of eating disorders. In a scientific case study carried out by four doctors from around the United States and the American Psychological Association, 301 Jewish women from various backgrounds, heights, weights, and ages in the New York City area were given a series of questionnaires relating to eating attitudes and behaviors. The study aimed to explore the association between religious orientation and ED symptomatology among the pooled sampled of predominantly Orthodox Jewish women. In the collective analysis of the results, they found higher rates of disordered eating among Jewish females as compared with their non-Jewish counterparts. The distinction between different sects of Judaism is important in examining my hypothesis that societal and inter-religious standards are specifically and negatively affecting Jewish women. "The intrinsic-extrinsic religious distinction is of particular relevance in a community where extreme focus on external appearance and behavior is often confounded with religious obligation." (Weinberger-Litman 273).

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While Judaism can be split into several sects, just like many other religions, the main denominations that are being highlighted are Ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed. Going from most traditional and literal in the sense of following scripture to the letter, observing the Sabbath on Saturdays, and keeping kosher to the most liberal which tends to reject the binding authority that rabbinical Judaism seems to have on Conservative and Orthodox congregations (Jewishroots). In *Revealing Religion* by Cynthia Eller, we are given the opportunity to learn about the importance of scripture and canon. In the module of Myth & Scripture it introduces us, the readers, to the Torah, which is one of the main principle literature of Judaism and is surrounded by controversy because of the fact that it is known that women are banned from reading or reciting it. The term Haredi is a Hebrew originated word used to identify the most extreme of Orthodox Jews, most of whom regard themselves as the most “religiously authentic” group. In a scholarly journal and study by Marjorie C. Feinson, PhD, called “Disordered Eating and Religious Observance: A Focus on Ultra-Orthodox Jews in an Adult Community Study”, she concentrates on the ways Haredi women are affected by heavy food-oriented practices and neglecting secular media and societal norms. Feinson takes into account the responsibilities these women have such as preparation of the food and actually being able to provide the food for the typically large families in itself : “In Israel, one-third (33.7%) of ultra-Orthodox families have six or more children compared to 3.4% of secular families”. Mrs. Geula, an interviewee in Feinsons study perfectly describes the stress and anxiety the pressure these duties create for a seemingly simplistic task of eating - “Every holiday, everything is centered around food....it is murder. I’m very religious and I have 13 children [with grandchildren coming]. Sometimes it’s better and sometimes it’s worse...I get angry that I have to be in the kitchen a lot.”

The pressure that stems from meal preparation and civil expectations of what a woman should and shouldn’t be doing that Mrs. Geula details experiencing is not an isolated incident. In a blog post titled “Does Orthodox Jewish Life Promote Eating Disorders In Women?” by Julia Duin, a Washington Times writer, she focuses on the societal pressure that Jewish women face during the life stages of childhood through elder hood. Girls are first exposed at an early age by being indoctrinated to the high standards that are expected for their mothers, mentioning how these mothers have “slyph-life figure” with “sparkling clean homes”. The combination of the pressure to be attractive and thin woman, having to be a “good” housewife, and the extreme focus on food in Jewish culture only perpetuates eating disorders. Female Jews are instilled with these patriarchal judgments as early as they are viewed as sensual beings. Grooming and preparing for marriage for their prospective husbands only add to the list of preoccupations young girls are being forcibly assigned with. “In some cases, the prospective groom’s family not only wants to know the girl’s dress size, but that of her mother, so they can project what the potential bride will look like in 18 years.” (Duin).

Natural aspects of life that should be celebrated and enjoyed like sexuality, social experimentation, and body positivity have come under control by religious standards that have existed since it’s origin. Whether you look at Judaism or any other mainland religion, whether a distinction between sexes is made, it is almost always to the advantage of men. The correlations above showcase the saddening and alarming severity of eating disorders, religious conservatism, and societal impressions young Jewish women are subjected to throughout their lives. Girls turn to these extreme measure in efforts to cope with the unrealistic and impossible expectations that are formed by ignorant and harmful ideologies. “In one study of ultra-Orthodox and Syrian Jewish communities in Brooklyn, 1 out of 19 girls were diagnosed with an eating disorder, which is a rate about 50 percent higher than general U.S population”

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(Kennedy). Although the tragic nature of the problem at hand is at times overwhelming, especially for those involved, women are fighting back. In a new ritual practice performed and created by Jewish women, coined “amen meals” in the early 2000’s, they are created an intimate and inclusive space they are in control of, where they can do as they please with other Jewish women. The amen rituals provide a space imbued with strong spiritual, emotional, and deep energies that counter the women’s religious marginality.

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