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“We Need to Worship Outside of Conventional Boundaries”: Jewish Orthodox Women Negotiating Time, Space and Halachic Hegemony Through New Ritual

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Abstract

This article focuses on the experiences, practices and perceptions of the women who participate in the amen meal ritual. The primary goal is to determine what we might learn from them about the mechanisms and social processes in contemporary Israeli religious communities. The amen meal is practiced by a broad spectrum of Jewish women in communities from the Ultra-Orthodox to the secular. It has a ritualistic-religious intention of maximizing the number of blessings recited by the participants and thereby the number of “amens” responded. I conducted a qualitative-ethnographic-feminist study using in-depth interviews and participant observations. The central insight is that the amen meal ritual quietly undermines the gender regime. The practices and perceptions of the participants toward amen meals enable us to reach a new understanding of the terms “time” and “space” in the Jewish halachic hegemony. These relatively new rituals reconstruct these heretofore clearly defined hierarchic terms, transforming them into un-defined and non-hierarchic ones. Moreover, the participants’ very perceptive critiques of rabbinic/halachic attitudes indicate that they also perturb the underpinnings of the fundamental Orthodox rules of male halachic hegemony throughout their daily practice.

Keywords Ritual · Amen meal · Jewish women · Gender hegemony · Time · Apace

Introduction

On one of the hottest days of the Israeli summer, having just finished an in-depth interview with an old woman who regularly participates in amen meals, I ran out to a Jewish book store to buy a book that she had recommended I read about these meals. As I stepped into the cool air-conditioned store, I asked the salesman

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about the book. “Amen meals?” he said, and his face quickly changed. “Do you really want to read about this silly ritual?” He began a long diatribe about the ritual, and I asked him to pause a moment, saying, “May I record you?” I quickly took the recorder from my bag, turned it on, and listened carefully to what he had to say:

There are many rabbis who very much oppose these meals, very much oppose! When and why did women invent this ritual? And [...] they stay out late, until 10, 11, 12 pm. They start at around 7 pm, and it can take about five hours! Women are away from home for five hours! Many men are furious when their wives return after 12 pm! It disrupts my life that my wife is away from home for such a long time. She can go to a class, for an hour, an hour and a half, but five hours? It stresses the husband! [...] I am talking about married women with children! It's the children's bed-time, and they are not always ready for bed! And she needs to wake up in the morning and to function well! [...] Many women go to these amen meals, and then they have [...] a rabbanit who talks with them, and they say a blessing, and everyone says amen, and if let's say, they have a hundred women, it can take a lot of time!

The man's face was flushed, and he looked angry, and he continued to speak with deep emotion. I looked at him, listening intently, trying to figure out why he was so angry. I have spent long, meaningful times with various women in amen meal rituals. We experienced deep religious feelings as we took part in the practices, as I'll explain below. These women did nothing wrong, they kept the strict halachic order when blessing before eating, they said psalms and sang softly, even though there were only women present. What could possibly be the source of this man's opposition?

Afterwards, when I listened to the recording, and then repeatedly read the transcription, I noticed that his tirade was not just angry in tone, but it also included many specific terms of time and space: “10 pm, 11 pm, 12 pm... Women are out of home for five hours.” On the face of it, his opposition to the ritual derived particularly from the fact that his wife left home for long hours during the stressful bed-time of the children. However, there was something else, something much deeper and more significant in his anger. His response sounds as though he is upset not only because he is being left to care for his children for an extended period, but that he is actually frightened of something. But what could be so harmful in a ritual of women eating and saying amen together? His attitude, among other antagonistic viewpoints I heard throughout my study, led me to focus on two of the most important aspects of the Jewish halachic order to which he alluded in his comments: space and time.

We will look at the ways in which the amen ritual as practiced by these women threatens to subvert the existing social order, challenging the understanding of the accepted Jewish standards of time and space. These women, for the most part, claim to be neither feminist nor subversive. Their experiences, practices and perceptions toward amen meals enable us to reach a new understanding of the terms

"time" and "space" in the Jewish halachic hegemony. These relatively new rituals are part of social processes in contemporary Israeli religious communities which reconstruct clear and very definite terms of hierarchic time and space, transforming them into undefined, non-hierarchies. The ritual participants use sophisticated mechanisms to define their own terms of time and space. By doing so, they begin to undermine the existing historical gendered Jewish religious order.

The main contribution of this article is its demonstration of the ways non-subversive subjects effect subversive outcomes. These religious women undermine the basic conventions of time and space – two essential and fundamental structures of every society, culture and religion – and challenge the Jewish halachic hegemony. Moreover, from what these women shared with me, other potential threats of this ritual derive from the rabbis' attitudes toward the amen meals. The participants' very perceptive critiques of rabbinic/halachic attitudes indicate that they not only undermine the accepted definitions of time and space, but also the Orthodox rules of male halachic hegemony in general. The practices and perceptions of these women toward time and space in this ritual enable them to question even without intention, the time and space of male rabbinic/halachic hegemony throughout all areas of their lives, and even to call for the creation of a separate women's worship culture.

The Amen Ritual

According to Jewish halachic law, different kinds of food require different blessings. There is a strict order of the blessings: *Borei Minei Mezonot* (on cake or crackers from grains), *Borei Pri HaGefen* (on wine or grape juice), *Borei Pri HaEtz* (on fruits that grow on trees), *Borei Pri HaAdama* (lit. fruit of the earth) on low growing fruits and vegetables other than grains), and *Shehacol Nehiya Bidvaro* (all other edibles), creating the Hebrew mnemonic acronym *MAGA ESH* (in Hebrew, מגעש, touch of fire). The primary reason for this order is to maximize the number of blessings each person can say. Since some blessings contain others, for example, the blessing for fruits of the earth could be made over things that grow on trees, because the trees themselves grow in the ground. For this reason, the fruit of the tree is blessed and eaten before the fruit of the earth, so as not to miss the opportunity to say both blessings. According to Jewish law, if one hears another's blessing, one must answer "amen" (Shulchan Aruch–Orach Haim 215:2).

The amen meal has a religious-ritualistic goal of maximizing the number of blessings one recites, and thereby the number of "amens" said. This ritual began in Israel at the beginning of the millennium, spreading from there to other places. It is practiced among a broad spectrum of Jewish women, from the Ultra-Orthodox to secular communities (Neriya-Ben Shahr 2014, 2015, 2018; Taylor-Guthartz 2016, in progress), as explained in the methods.

In effect, a number of women gather for a meal, supply themselves with various types of food, sit in a circle, and recite the blessings in the order of precedence set by Jewish law. Each woman takes a turn reciting a blessing, the others respond "amen," and the woman tastes the food she has blessed. At the end of each circuit, the woman who goes last recites a *Yehi Ratson* prayer (May it be God's will to grant

a special benefit or benediction to a particular person). While *Yehi Ratzon* is an acceptable opening for many prayers, this is an original prayer developed especially for amen meals. Each *Yehi Ratzon* prayer of the amen meal has an associative link to the relevant benediction. The blessing for baked goods is considered to be related to earning a livelihood; that for wine related to marriage; that for fruits related to children and fertility; that for vegetables to health; and that for food and drinks not covered by the other categories, to salvation.

Names can be inserted in the prayer, “especially for....” and the woman reciting the *Yehi Ratzon* usually inserts the name of the person to whom she is dedicating her prayer. At the end, all the women respond “amen” and, after a moment’s silence, various women begin to recite, in no particular order, the names of people who require assistance in the same sphere, and the other women respond “amen.” In some groups, the calling out of names leads to the revelation of a personal story (a family member who needs work or a sick child). The woman telling her story often bursts into tears and is comforted by the group. In most cases, no one explicitly decides who will recite the *Yehi Ratzon* prayer; a woman simply says “I wish to go last in this circuit.” In all but the very large groups, the women sit in a circle and maintain eye contact, making it easy to notice when someone is experiencing difficulty. The open space in the center allows free access for the purpose of supportive touch.

Beyond this basic model, amen rituals incorporate a variety of other components, such as narrating stories of miracles, *halachic* learning, reading psalms, learning Torah portions, and singing religious songs (Neriya-Ben Shahar 2014, 2015, 2018; Taylor-Guthartz 2016, in progress). Some also include another renewed ritual – taking of challah in public (El-Or 2006). For the purposes of this article, the most relevant features are the undefined times and places of the ritual, as contextualized in the literature review below.

Literature Review

This article engages with a classic question in the study of feminism and social change: Can practices that seem devoid of feminist content, and practitioners who distance themselves from progressive intentions, nonetheless be promoting feminist social change? The specific research questions are: What are the experiences, practices and perceptions of participants in amen meals toward this ritual? What can we learn from this about the mechanisms and social processes in contemporary Israeli religious communities? The following literature review will illustrate studies of women’s space and challenges to the structures of religious authorities. The existing literature confirms that feminist intentions are not necessarily required in the creation of feminist social changes.

Many studies have focused on the question of how seemingly naïve practices may undermine the masculine hegemonic order. Scholars have described the paradoxes produced for religious women, and their methods of coping with them (for example: Ecklund 2003; Gervais 2012; Manning 1997, 1999). The literature distinguishes between practices that overtly challenge the existing social order and those that do so

subversively, though often unintentionally. In recent decades, the scholarly emphasis has been directed to the main strategy employed by women to overcome their marginal status: entry into the public space and assumption of roles formerly considered the province of males. Indeed, there is evidence for the widespread growth of movements among religious women (from a variety of religions) who seek to strengthen and preserve their religious being (Herzog and Braude 2009). This attests to women's empowerment and their active influence on the religious way of life in their communities (Griffith 1997).

The marginality of women in religious societies and their systematic exclusion from the public religious space is well documented (Hampson 2002). The identification of men with the exalted-spiritual sphere and women with the terrestrial-material-physical one (Adler 1998; Anderson 1993; Heschel 1995; Ortner 1974) is pertinent to any discussion of the roles of women in traditional societies. The advent of feminism has spotlighted the traditional definition of women's role as facilitating male spirituality. Jewish feminism has challenged male dominance in the personal sphere (marriage and divorce) and in the public-religious sphere (minyan – prayer quorums, among others). This has fostered various attempts by Jewish feminists to address their exclusion from religious space and activity (Plaskow and Christ 1989). Such strategies include, to mention a few, rereading religious texts for new exegeses (Baskin 1985, 2002), development of feminist theology (Adler 1995; Plaskow 1991; Ross 2004), feminist historiography (Plaskow 1997), and active participation in the cultic religious space (Falk 1996; Hartman 2007).

This study follows scholars who have engaged deeply and ethnographically with contemporary religious women. We rely particularly on the ideas of Abu-Lughod (1990, 1991, 2013), Griffith (1997) and Mahmood (2005). Abu-Lughod argued that we actually need to see the experiences of religious women, rather than thrust Western-feminist choices upon them. Griffith found that evangelical women experience agency, liberation, and empowerment through their religious practices. Mahmood (2005: 17–18) defined agency "not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms, but as a modality of action that specific relations of subordination create and enable." Avishai (2008) argued that religious women are authentic subjects who choose their religious conduct, experiences, and complex identity. They expanded on feminist views of agency by showing its multiple forms and modalities and suggested changing the accepted views that obedience-empowerment and surveillance-independence are dichotomies.

The scholarly trends that look at the complex relationships between gender and religion (Avishai, Jafar and Rinaldo 2015) and the understanding that attempts to achieve agency are not always reflected by opposition, enables scholars to look carefully at the multiple, gentle and incremental methods of negotiation inherent in the tension between feminism and religion (Ecklund 2003; Gervais 2012; Manning 1997, 1999; Yadgar 2006). A sensitive look enables us to do a more complex analysis, asking what sophisticated mechanisms religious women use to enable their practices, perceptions, emotions and attitudes, to define time and space of their own.

Darwin (2018) suggested a framework of "redoing gendered religion" that "centers the experiences of practitioners who advance egalitarian social change, instead of those who preserve the status quo" (Darwin 2018:354). The amen ritual appears

to adhere to the existing order. The participants say and do many things creating the impression for themselves and the people around them that they are part of the existing social and religious order and have no agenda to advance egalitarian or feminist changes. However, they undermine, unintentionally and in much more complex ways, the existing historical Jewish religious and gendered order. A primary research theme regarding the lives, particularly of religious women, distinguishes between private/public, female/male, time and space (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). Participants in amen meals are negotiating the masculine halachic hegemony by blurring these divisions, and they do so without feminist declarations. Quietly and cleverly, they are changing the old systems of defined time and space, by creating a specific time for their ritual or making their private homes public.

Scheduling Amen Meals

In the existing Jewish Orthodox halachic order, women are exempt from time-bound commandments (Adler 1995). In actuality, this exemption, which is framed apologetically as taking women's needs into account, actually excludes them from sacred, important time for Jewish practice, enslaving them to the immediate and demanding tasks of childcare and housekeeping. The typical explanation tendered is that this allows them to devote their time and efforts to what the patriarchal hegemony sells as "more important and real tasks." The accepted feminist interpretation of this exemption views it as serving men, because it cultivates a viewpoint whereby women believe that the essence of their religious existence is to enable men to observe the commandments (Heschel 1995).

The amen ritual has no specific time. There are groups that meet regularly, every week or every Rosh Hodesh, which is traditionally a woman's holiday (Lavie 2011). Others meet on happy occasions (bat mitzvah, simhat bat, house warmings) or sad ones (discovery of a severe illness, anniversary of a death). Other groups meet only occasionally and for no particular reason. Most of the amen meals are in the evening, though I participated in some, mostly for older women, that were held weekly in the mornings and were accompanied by a Torah lesson.

Ostensibly, this ritual is far from the typical oppositional Jewish feminist practice accompanied by gender tensions enacted to actively undermine the existing order of the status quo. Inside the crowded space of religious women's practices and their potential subversion, this is a non-public event, with no specifically mandated time. However, I argue that it is actually the undefined time and space that function to undermine the importance of specified sacred times and spaces in the male Jewish halachic world. The potential threat of this ritual to men's halachic hegemony begins with a simple change of the accepted definitions of time and space.

Amen Meal as a New Public Space

Sacred places or spaces in which religious commandments are carried out are an essential part of the rules of Orthodox Judaism. The creation of sacred places is grounded in an emphatic distinction between public-religious space, in which men

are present, and private-household space, in which men and women are present. Accordingly, the women's section in most Orthodox synagogues is situated in the rear, in a marginal area with poor conditions, while, in some synagogues, there are no provisions for women at all. Within the traditional Orthodox sector, women are not counted in a prayer quorum and have no significant role in religious ritual. The distinction between the synagogue as a public religious space and the home as a private one is a central tool in the exclusion of Jewish Orthodox women (Hartman 2007).

The deep meaning of the distinction between public and private isn't unique to religious society in general or Jewish society in particular. In Goffman's separation between the frontstage and the backstage, he defined region as "any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception" (Goffman 1956: 66). The key performance takes place in the "front region," or on the stage, and comprises certain standards, including decorous behavior, i.e., "the way in which the performer comports himself while in visual or aural range of the audience" (67). This performance, he explained, may be motivated by the desire to impress the audience or avoid sanctions. The backstage is a hidden space "where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (69).

The "gender regime" (Connell 1987) represents the long and deep connections between men and the public frontstage, and women and the private backstage. Goffman mentioned de Beauvoir's (1952) description of women's backstage activity sans a male audience, writing that in every social establishment we can find problems associated with backstage control. Ostensibly, the amen meal participants do not use the strategy employed by feminist women of entering the public male space (Hartman 2007), rather they participate in a ritual carried out in separate, largely private settings among women only. As Adler (1998) has pointed out, new and renewed women's rituals are generally carried out as separate events with non-mandatory attendance, provoking minimal friction with men because they do not compete with worship or the established cult.

The amen rituals are mostly domestic, home-based meals led by a family member or friend, that include between 8–80 women. Others are held in public, mostly in halls or synagogues outside of prayer times that include between 80–500 women and are led by a "rabbanit" who has been invited in advance. While the term "rabbanit" typically refers to the rabbi's wife, the "rabbanit" who leads the public amen meal is usually a charismatic grass roots leader, sometimes from the marginal periphery of the Orthodox community, such as newly Orthodox (Leon and Lavie 2013).

Based on Connell's (1987) argument that "the state of play in gender relations in a given institution is its 'gender regime'" (120) I argue that the women's decisions about the place of the ritual is not only technical, based on the number of the women, but is also a "gender regime" decision. Placing the ritual at home not only sanctifies the private house, but also excludes the men, as I'll explain later. Placing the ritual in the synagogue, especially on the men's side, even outside of prayer times, crosses the boundary of the women's "gender regime." Moreover, since times and places devoted to religious commandments are key within the gender divide in these communities, this de-definition of space and time is actually a significant subversion of the existing order, as will be discussed further below.

Women's rituals involving food possess profound historical roots (Adelman 1994; Bynum 1987; El-Or 2006; Jamazadeh and Mills 1986; Kanafani 1983; Mobley-Tanaka 1997; Sacks 1989; Sered 1988; Weinstein and Bell 1982). The scholarship suggests that what creates the strong links between women's rituals and food in particular, is the fact that in many societies, women are responsible for feeding their families (Bynum 1987; Sered 1988). This responsibility, which ostensibly preserves their marginal status, also gives them great power (Joyce 2000).

However, viewing the amen meal ritual from the perspective of negotiating the gender regimes represented by time, space, and male/halachic control, it is noteworthy that this ritual revolves around an unscheduled and not halachically mandated meal. In Jewish practice, meals often have religious significance, their times are mandated by halacha and controlled by men. There is a mandate to eat three meals on the Sabbath, and they have an accepted pattern of prayers followed by a meal, in the evening, morning and afternoon. Specific foods are eaten, such as wine and bread, and the men have the honor of blessing them; many men go to the mandated third meal of Shabbat at the synagogue, to enjoy the food and company there, leaving the women in charge of the children at home. Among Ultra-Orthodox communities it is common that women stay home from synagogue on Shabbat, to have everything in readiness for the meal when the men return from synagogue. This phenomenon is even more marked on Rosh Hashana, when women from other Jewish streams participate in prayers, even if only from the back of the synagogue, but many Ultra-Orthodox women come only for a special shofar sounding just for the women and run back home to cook fresh food for the men.

Paradoxically, the participation in the amen ritual enables the women to create their own time and space, giving them agency they would otherwise not have, along with the opportunity to privately discuss their opposition to the halachic hegemony in their life. While this opposition is a common ideology and practice among Orthodox feminist women (e.g. Hartman 2007), this is not the case for the population in this article, religious (Ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox) women, who live in an environment in which asking the rabbi questions on everyday matters is common practice (Friedman 1993a, b). These women share their critical perceptions of rabbis'/halachic attitudes toward amen meals. This article doesn't deal with the question of why the men oppose the ritual. For the purposes of this study, I have focused on the women and their own experiences, practices and perceptions of amen meals, and to determine what we might learn from them about the mechanisms and social processes in contemporary Israeli religious communities.

Methods

In the spring of 2011, I attended and participated in 23 amen meals that took place in Israel. I also conducted 53 in-depth interviews with women who had participated in amen rituals. Both methods, participant observations and in-depth interviews, are based on a qualitative-ethnographic-feminist study (Reinharz 1992). The participant observations took between 1–5 hours, since I arrived exactly on time or even a bit before (while in Israel it is acceptable to be late), and I usually remained until

most of the women had left. When possible, I kept a field-diary during the ritual and documented the rest when I arrived home. Most of the observations were digitally recorded, though there were some women and organizers who didn't allow this but did allow me to take written notes.

The in-depth interviews included basic subjects and questions such as asking the women to describe their experiences, perceptions, attitudes and emotions during the ritual, specifically during their first, but also their later encounters; I tried to listen to the narratives – women shared many miraculous stories and/or alternatively, very sad stories that they had heard or shared during the meal. I also asked if the ritual is conducted according to halacha and how their rabbi perceived it. The interviews were mostly at the participants' homes, but some women preferred to stay and talk at the end of the ritual. The interviews took between 40–90 minutes. All the interviews and most of the observations were recorded and carefully transcribed, and the data analyzed in line with grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1994).

My participant observations and personal interviews demonstrate that the population definition for this research included women from a large spectrum of Jewish communities and backgrounds who chose to participate in the amen meal ritual. I saw women from the Ultra-Orthodox "Toldoth Aharon" in *Mea-Shearim*, sitting with secular women at the same amen meal. I have participated in amen rituals where the food was not kosher and others in which everything was under stringent supervision. In observing these rituals, I did not personally meet or interview women from the Reform or Conservative movements, and therefore the broad spectrum of Jewish women in this research project includes women who self-define (in the interviews and my observations) as Ultra-Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, traditional and secular. In Israel/Hebrew the accepted measurement (Friedman et al. 2011) has five options for self-definition: "Do you define yourself as secular (Hiloni) / traditional-religious (Masorti-Dati) / traditional-not religious (Masorti-lo Dati) / religious (Dati) / Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi)?"

27 (50%) of the interviewees self-defined as from the Ultra-Orthodox sector, 18 (34%) as Modern Orthodox, 3 (6%) as traditional, and 5 (10%) as secular. While the multiple and varied voices of the amen meal participants are recorded in other articles about the amen ritual (Neriya-Ben Shahar 2014, 2015, 2018; Taylor-Guthartz 2016, in progress) this article specifically focuses only on the 45 Ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox women, comprising 84% of the interviewees. I've focused on this sector because their perceptions about rabbinic attitudes and the male/rabbinic halachic hegemony are relevant to the questions and the arguments here. The women's names have been changed to other typical Ultra-Orthodox or Modern-Orthodox names, according to their backgrounds.

Using snowball sampling, the participants assisted in the creation of links to their friends and updates regarding additional ceremonies being held elsewhere. Although this sample cannot be considered representative, I attempted as far as possible to collect representative data by carrying out my participant observations and interviews in diverse geographic and social settings.

The women interviewed reflect different geographic locations, age groups, ethnic origins, and occupations. They came from many places, from the center and the periphery, from Be'erSheva in the south to Haifa in the north, from big cities, towns, suburbs

and small settlements. Their ages range between 20 and 75. Most of them, 51 (96%) are originally from Israel, two (4%) women were born in the United-States. The ethnic division is based on the women's self-definition: there were 30 (57%) women of Sephardic and 22 (42%) of Ashkenazi descent. They had a variety of occupations. Most of them worked in the educational system: kindergarten teachers, elementary and high school teachers, and two educational supervisors. There were students, sports coaches, an architect, a graphic designer, housewives, a university administrative worker, a health secretary, a small business owner, a bookkeeper, a cleaning lady, a sales clerk, an alternative health therapist, a group leader (*mancha*) and a social worker.

My own academic and personal positions are complex, yet relevant to this study, so I share them here as part of the methods. I self-define as a radical feminist and commandment-observing (*shomeret mitzvot*) Jewish woman, using neither the term "religious" nor "Orthodox." I was raised in a nationalist Ultra-Orthodox family and community (symbolized by the yeshiva known as "Merkaz Harav") and have many Ultra-Orthodox family members and friends. During my academic studies I became a feminist and joined the partnership minyan community of "Shira Hadasha."

This complexity echoes throughout the study. From a practical aspect, my relationships gave me easy access to amen rituals. I began by asking my Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox family members and friends about them and received many personal invitations. Many participants told me about other planned meals, so I was able to use these as snowball sampling (Lee 1993), and move from meal to meal, participant to participant, extending my research. Many women gave me the telephone numbers of their friends at the end of the interview, some also phoned them in my presence to let them know I would be calling. One woman asked her mother to invite me to the weekly amen meal in the most Ultra-Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem, Mea-Shearim. She did call me, and I received a warm invitation and welcome. I also called some of the formal organizers whose names were mentioned to me by participants and requested to be allowed to join their public events. They asked many questions about myself and my research before they were willing to share their schedule with me. When I told them that I myself am religious, they invited me to join and introduced me to other women. My appearance is that of a religious woman, as I cover my hair and wear long skirts, so that even Ultra-Orthodox women allow me to come to their houses. During the rituals, I found myself conflicted. I prayed and cried with deep emotion along with the participants, while simultaneously being alerted by my feminist-academic self to the critical aspects of the situation. I decided to cope with the conflict by turning down the "volume" on my feminist-academic thoughts during the ritual, but listening carefully to them later during the qualitative analysis of the rich data, as illustrated in the next section on women's practices and perceptions.

"You could do it at home, all the time!"

Arguing that the women's practices and perceptions around the amen meal rituals negotiate male hegemony by obscuring space and time, two of the most important aspects of the Jewish halachic order, the women's responses to my various questions

were rich in references to both *time* (hereafter in *italics*) and **space** (hereafter in **bold**). For example, Esther (Modern Orthodox from Yad Binyamin, 65, a retired kindergarten teacher), smiled when she explained the rabbi's opposition to the amen ritual: "The rabbi doesn't like that we gather together [*neesafim*] just to eat and say 'amen.' He said: 'You can do it **at home all the time**! Say the blessing, answer amen and that's it!'" This brief quote represents the women's perceptions toward the men's mockery of the ritual. Women can say blessings at home, in private, so why go out into the public sphere? Moreover, they can say blessings all the time – why create a special time for blessing? Are they trying to create new time-bound commandments? Are they trying to make new sacred spaces? I posit that the men's concern is not only with women gathering and doing the things they do, but also with the blurring of the space and time boundaries.

"Time for Prayers, Time for Asking, Time for Friends, and Time for Care"

From my field diary: in the beginning of one amen meal in Modi'in, one of the women entered the house, perfectly dressed, and announced: "I ran away from home." The other women laughed, and she added: "I left the kids with my husband before they were showered. He was shocked and tried to convince me to stay till *after they fall asleep*, or maybe I could just help him with the showers. I told him that the meal starts *at 8:00 pm* and I have to run. He calls me to the steps asking if maybe I can take the baby with me, and I answered: 'No! this ritual is only for women!'" One of her friends gave her a piece of cake and a cup of coffee and she smiled: "I think that I haven't had a quiet evening with friends since I first became a mother..."

Ostensibly, the amen rituals do not belong to the category of time-bound commandments, from which Orthodox Jewish women are exempt, because they are not commanded at all and have no set time to be performed. They are, however, primarily held in the evening, during the most demanding hours of household time, particularly in large families, as the shopkeeper complained in the story at the beginning of the article. As opposed to the elderly women studied by Sered (1991), who by dint of their age and personal status as widows with grown children are able to participate in rituals, most of the participants in the amen rituals are young women who have created these new rituals for themselves, while also carving out new time. Underscoring their control of their time resources is the fact that they take time off from demanding households and family-related tasks and devote it to a religious task of their own creation.

Indeed, in contrast to the clearly defined, halachically mandated, "Jewish/male" time based on lunar dates, sunrise, sunset, and set times as well as star visibility (for example, the daily prayers start with the morning prayer, after the sunrise; the afternoon prayer, before the sunset; and the evening prayer, after the stars are visible), these women create a time for themselves. Some of them decided to make these times specific. Orly (Modern Orthodox from Raanana, 42, a social worker) for example, tried to create a network of rituals taking place at a specific time in multiple places: "It's amazing, it's amazing, that when you do this, you are doing it *at*

almost the same time. They say [the organizers] that it will be on *Thursday evening before a specific Tora portion*, and we [all] do it *at the same time.*” Esther (Modern Orthodox from Yad Binyamin, 65, a retired kindergarten teacher): “I chose *Tuesday morning*, and I told my friends to come at this *specific time*. When I worked, we had it very early, at *5 am.*”

Other women described the ritual as non-specific, but as a unique time-space for women’s needs. Riki (Modern Orthodox from Jerusalem, 27, a sports coach) sees the ritual as a special time-frame to compensate for not paying attention during daily life:

Women meet together and say blessings. I think that this is amazing. These are blessings that we say *throughout the day*. You know, it comes and goes. But in this ritual, you get that *moment* when you say the real blessing, you really think about it, you say your *Yehi Ratzon*. When *during the day* do you ever really think when you eat? Do you think about your children, about your husband, about God? This ritual gives you a framework for thinking.

Yehudit (Ultra-Orthodox from Jerusalem, 34, a health secretary) spoke of the option of enabling the time to flow, to make it appropriate for the participant’s needs: “It’s not something heavy, something oppressive, *something [that takes] hours*. It’s very gentle and it flows, it could take a *very long time and a very short time*, depending on the women.” This appropriation can enable the blurring of the accepted time boundaries between the personal and the social, the private and the public, as mentioned by Tehila (Ultra-Orthodox from BetarIlit, 22, a sales clerk):

The issue of everyone sitting together, blessing and answering amen to each other and asking together... [but at the same time] everyone... one asks for fertility and one for livelihood, one for health... and each one has the *time most necessary to her [to ask]*, when she most needs to pray.

Hana (Modern Orthodox from Netanya, 35, a high school teacher) is almost poetic as she describes the power of the group in terms of time:

This is a *time of grace* [et ratzon], this is a *time for prayers*, a *time for asking*, this is a *time for friends*, this is a *time for care* for one another, this is a *time for listening*. This is the definition, and mainly, primarily this is a *time for prayer*, the real power of the group, of shared prayers, as we all answer amen together.

Some women spoke of their womanly time as compared to the male-halachic time, here represented by Rivka (Modern Orthodox from Jerusalem, 28, a kindergarten teacher):

A woman doesn’t have the *time to bless*, she doesn’t have *the time for prayer*. She is with the children *most of the time*. I admit that... sometimes at a *stressful time* I forget to bless, because this is a *time of stress*. A woman needs this... these commandments. The men have many – they have tefilin (phylacteries), *tzitzit* (fringes) and *talit* (prayer shawls), they are committed to the commandments from the Torah. A woman, what does she have? [...] Not so many. I would have had an amen meal *every week*.

Sima (Ultra-Orthodox from Betar Ilit, 40, a kindergarten teacher) said quietly: "Our daily *routine* is very busy. We don't *always* get to say prayers as needed. I think that *when sometimes* we have this ritual it gives us some power."

Some women tried to differentiate between the naïveté of the amen ritual and their view of women as adopting time-bound commandments such as tefilin or megillah as feminist appropriations. Adina (Modern Orthodox from Jerusalem, 30, a teacher) argued:

I don't think we *ever* had a ritual like this... but I don't think that this is a women's *trend*... like, we do not put on tefilin! We are definitely not part of that! We don't try to make new halacha!

Roni (Modern Orthodox from Jerusalem, 35, a housewife) also uses a time-bound commandment, megillah, to state that this is not a feminist act: "If you were to mention a women's megillah reading I would say that that is feminist." She explained that even though women also need to hear the megillah on Purim, the new act of women reading the megillah aloud is feminist and is totally different from the amen meals.

To Open a Space for Ourselves?

Actually, Roni's full response is a good segue from the discussion on time to that of space:

This [amen meal] is not a desire to rebel and **open a space for ourselves**. If you were to mention a women's megillah reading I would say that that is feminist, and this is just to enter, because we want to enter **into a place** which is not for us [...] this does not break through conventions, this [amen meal] is something elevated, connected and sanctified. Again, this does not break through conventions, it is just to open our connection [...] it's something for women, something which a woman really wants to give to herself, a **place** and abilities.

Roni's "**place** which is not for us" represents the basic distinction between the male public-religious space, and the women's private-household space as essential components of the rules of Jewish Orthodoxy. This central tool in the exclusion of women is significantly symbolized in many Orthodox synagogues, by locating the women's section in the rear, upstairs or on the margins, as compared to the men's space in the front and center. The apologetic explanations include the issue that the men should not see women while they pray, and that women don't usually come daily to synagogue, so most of the budget should be used for the men's section. However, it is difficult to describe the humiliation felt by many women, including myself, sitting in these sections, behind the men, where it is so difficult to see or hear the prayers, often without air-conditioning or other facilities found in the men's section.

Since many amen meals take place in synagogues, particularly in the late evening, after *Arvit* prayers, these open the "**place** which is not for us" to the participants. For some women, it was the first time they had ever entered the men's section,

or at least since they were three years old. During the ritual, women went up to the ark containing the Torah scrolls, kissed the *Parochet*, prayed and cried. Some of them looked embarrassed by the situation, perhaps they felt that they didn't belong to this place. They were sitting on the edges of their chairs, as though indicating that this is not their regular place.

Many amen meals, especially those with less than 50 participants, are held in private homes. The women referred to their desire to sanctify their homes, as explained by Fruma (Ultra-Orthodox from Petach-Tikva, 45, a bookkeeper):

These are commandments that when a woman practices them, she brings blessing **to her home**, she invites God to be near her, and then she talks with him, connects to him. She is talking to God, so obviously he listens to her better, because he is much closer to the woman.

Sari (Ultra-Orthodox from Jerusalem, 63, a teacher) explained: "Even if I myself was not saved (*noshati*), [at least] I had the privilege (*zechut*) that many amens have been said **at my place, in my house.**"

Defining women's options as being between synagogue and home might be seen as a simple decision based on several choices, depending only on the time and the number of women who attend the ritual. However, these decisions have other effects. This praxis excludes men and includes women. This exclusion of males from amen meals displaces them from two venues that are considered their natural space: the synagogue as a male province, and the home as a private space. The women are included in both places, they take their places in the synagogue, at times in the men's section, from which they are generally excluded. In addition, in order to enter public space, they must leave the private sphere, leaving the men at home to deal with childcare (and other) tasks.

The exclusion-inclusion praxis applies also to amen ceremonies held in private homes since by granting access to a group of women, they have turned their homes into a new public space. However, in this case "public space" is redefined as being composed solely of women, while the man of the house must be elsewhere for an unlimited time during the ritual. I recall phones ringing at around 12 am, in the middle of a funny or sad story, the hostess picking up and responding to their husbands saying something like: "You can't come home now, we are still in the middle of the ritual!"

This exclusion-inclusion is one aspect of the issue of space. The next is far more slippery: the amen ritual doesn't need a specific place. According to Orthodox Jewish halachic rules, there are several defined spaces that have assigned importance, such as synagogues, the *Sukkah*, special sections of land set aside for the *cohen* (priestly caste), as well as specific commandments associated with and conditional upon being in the land of Israel (*mitzvot hatluyot baaretz*). Non-defined space undermines these mainstays. Yehudit's (Ultra-Orthodox from Jerusalem, 34, a health secretary) description shows that the undefined places represent undefined rules:

It was full, so women simply entered and **stood on the sides**, and everyone just **picked a corner**, and everyone took something and blessed. There were many, many women, it took *lots of time*, but it was amazing to sit and wait

for your turn and answer amen to everyone. I said to myself: wow, this is the way it works! [...but] in **another place** they said the blessings at the end of the ritual, **in another place** they said that everyone should say her prayers in her heart, **in another place** they had a different text, that I couldn't find in the **other places**. So, I noticed that there are many options.

Efrat (Ultra-Orthodox from Bnei-Brak, 50, a teacher) said:

I try to have many amen meals, as many as I can, in any **place**. We have it *every Rosh Hodesh*, we travel *every Rosh Hodesh* to **the Western wall**, to **Rachel's tomb**, to **Samuel the prophet's tomb**. We always have amen meals **in these places**.

The undefined places could be as simple as "in any place" or combined with women's rituals in sacred places and tombs (Bilu 1988, 1998a, b; Sered 1992), or at special times, such as *Rosh Hodesh* gatherings (Lavie 2011).

The participants suggested their explanations for undefined space. Hana (Modern Orthodox from Netanya, 35, a high school teacher) used historical-sociological terms:

It is a renewal [...] that couldn't happen during the *time of exile (galut)*. It's a part of the worship that comes with our moving towards the prophecy (*nevua*), to the salvation (*Geula*), to building the temple, to spirituality, because we need to worship **beyond the conventional boundaries**. *Long ago* they needed to build a **framework**, so the Jewish people would not forget. But there is something in the inner connection. The true God-worshiper has come out of the box, after *2000 years* of sleep. [...] *All the new age* culture, there are **many places** for connecting to a **place of good**, a **place of plenty**, a **place of blessing**, a **place of...** of course, it can connect every woman **wherever** she is.

Naama (Ultra-Orthodox from Netanya, 40, a group-facilitator) didn't use new age terms as did Hana but pointed to one of the most important aspects of the new age – being non-committed (Hanegraaff 1996; Werczberger 2017): "Nobody is committed, and this gives **everyone a place** for her personal request." Yehudit (Ultra-Orthodox from Jerusalem, 34, a health secretary) added: "Everyone owns this [ritual], and women are connected to it, they don't need to **get to synagogue**, or need to dress properly or have advance knowledge."

Orly (Modern Orthodox from Raanana, 42, a social worker) added the psychological meaning of undefined space:

This is **from a place**... I told you that I'm a social worker, so I think that there are several things: first, something happens in every gathering (*mifgash*). The energies, the issue that you are directing towards something and it is for someone else. **The place**... one thing you can always feel there is that they are **disconnected from reality**. Usually, social meetings are accompanied by conversations [...] these meetings are a **place of no gossip**, no lashon hara. People offer **their homes** [...] when someone gives

her home she invites her people, so she opens more circles, and my circle becomes wider. I always have more and more. Do you understand? There is something clean **in this place**, and it combines with the prayer. You can connect it initially to yourself, to your requests/needs, but often for someone else. I think that **this is the place** that you are seeking for yourself.

The undefined multiple spaces could be viewed as an implementation of marginal religious spaces. The women who participate in amen meals technically enter sanctified public space, such as synagogues, but do not seek out the male time-based rituals such as putting on tefilin (phylacteries), being called up to the Torah, or being counted in a minyan. If held in a synagogue, the ritual takes place only during hours when it is not in use by men. In other words, these women do not seek to be part of the “hard core” religious order but rather to create a seemingly marginal religious “addendum” that, on the surface, does not overtly threaten the existing order. However, in a society whose rituals are so strongly anchored in time and place, and in which this anchoring usually serves to include men and exclude women, the very creation of a women’s ritual time or space undermines the existing order. This is not just a question of men complaining that women will not be home to put the children to bed, but something significantly more threatening. The amen rituals overturn the accepted Jewish definitions of time-related commandments and of sacred space as the male province.

These women’s practices and perceptions enable us to see that the participants not only appropriate undefined space and time for this ritual, but they also create space and time of their own, in which women are included and men are excluded. These women’s voices have provided the basis for the first argument in this article that their experiences, practices and perceptions of amen meals have enabled us to reach a new understanding of the terms time and space in the Jewish halachic male hegemony, by blurring these two most important aspects of the Jewish halachic order.

These changes in space and time undermine not just these hierarchic terms, but the male halachic hegemony in general. Paradoxically, feminist Jewish women join the hegemonic rituals, including their time and space, by entering the synagogue, the public male space, at specific prayer times (Hartman 2007). In contrast, non-feminist women separate themselves from the Jewish order. The creation of non-specific time and space takes gender separation and differentiation a step forward. Thus, their practices and perceptions of the time and place of the ritual effectively position these women to question, albeit without intention, the time and the space of rabbinic/halachic/male hegemony over their entire lives. The following are some of the participant responses to my general questions regarding rabbinic opinions of the amen rituals. The women’s responses include three main reactions, all of them holding potential for negotiation: 1. Why should I ask a rabbi? 2. I don’t care what the rabbi says. 3. Men can’t understand a woman’s life and worship. These responses themselves demonstrate the emerging new space, and perhaps the distance between the Jewish religion as practiced by men versus by women.

If You Want to Eat Lunch, Do You Ask the Rabbi?

Adina (Modern Orthodox from Jerusalem, 30, a teacher) argued loudly:

There is no reason to ask a rabbi, if there is no question. If you know that you are doing a good deed, if you want to eat lunch, do you ask the rabbi? This is a trivial thing. If you are on your way to volunteer do you ask the rabbi whether to volunteer or not? If you want to go with your husband out to dinner, do you ask the rabbi? There is no issue here to ask a rabbi [...] I ask, what is the connection between a group of women who sit together and recite blessings and something that opposes the halacha? What, is this a Christian ritual?

Adina reiterates different versions of "do you ask the rabbi?" Her comparison of the amen ritual to eating lunch or volunteering simplifies and trivializes the ritual. However, her remarks about Christianity and creating opposition for halacha, show her consciousness of the deepest fears for the Orthodox Jewish order.

Sari (Ultra-Orthodox from Jerusalem, 63, a teacher) argued:

Is there anything prohibited in this ritual. Why should I ask a rabbi? If I had a doubt whether this thing is allowed or prohibited, I would ask a rabbi, but I have no doubt, so why ask? There is no doubt whether this is a good or bad thing, this is good. It would help one person, perhaps not everyone – but whoever it would help it's good! If it wouldn't help, we had the privilege [*zechut*] to say "amen." I had the privilege that many said amen at **my space, in my home**. This is not a thing that I should ask a rabbi, why do I need to ask?

Sari's repeated declarations and rhetorical questions about the needless questions reveal her anger and frustration. Her understanding that she should ask the rabbi only when she has a doubt about that which is prohibited and that which is permitted is broader than Ahuva's (Modern Orthodox from Jerusalem, 30, a small business owner) perception, that there is no connection to the halacha:

People have told us that this is not according to halacha. I've gotten very angry at them. Who are you? Not who are you for making the decision for me, but what is the connection to halacha? There is no connection here to halacha! [...] I don't even know how to explain that there is no connection here to halacha! This is only women who meet together. Only women, not a mixed group! Women meet together to say blessings, which is good, and to petition, and what we are asking for are things that everyone asks for! This is definitely not connected to halacha! Would someone tell me that this is not according to halacha? This is not connected! There isn't any connection! I don't think that there is a need to ask. There is no question here for a rabbi. It's like that I wouldn't ask my rabbi if I can clean my house.

After the participants' responses that this ritual is irrelevant to specific halachic questions, the next responses were much more critical, as they represent religious women brave enough to say, even if only privately during interviews, that they don't really care what the rabbis say. The meaningful insights of these women

could undermine the rabbi's authority. As Rivka (Modern Orthodox from Jerusalem, 28, a kindergarten teacher) said:

Forgive me for saying this, but I don't really care what the rabbis say. I'm doing whatever is good for me, for my friends and for my family and community. It may sound like heresy [*kefira*] to say this but... I don't really, well, feel connected to what the rabbis think. Some rabbis say they approve that [the amen ritual]. Who asked you [= the rabbi]?! Forgive me for saying this, but I do whatever is good for me and God, not what is good for the rabbi and God. There are issues where I ask a rabbi, and I accept his answer. But for this ritual, I don't relate to the rabbis who oppose it.

Adina (Modern Orthodox from Jerusalem, 30, a teacher), after comparing the amen meal to lunch on one hand and to a Christian ritual on the other, speaks critically about naïve people who follow rabbis:

I'm not prepared to hear such remarks, all sorts of, pardon me, really stupid irrelevant remarks, and people who blindly follow the rabbi and say, wow, the rabbi said that's not good. Tell me, have you no character? Don't you understand whether what you're doing is good or not? Are you so insignificant to yourself? Had the rabbi been there? Did he see what you are doing? Did he tell you that you are doing the wrong things? Did he tell you that this is fine, and this is not? There is nothing we have done that it's not good. At my *first time* in this ritual I was so excited... what could be better than that? All these types of rabbis who come and... this is the opposite! First of all, the woman's health, her mental health, the fact that she is **going out and freeing herself** a bit, enjoying with her friends a bit. There is no aspect that you can say that there is something wrong in this.

Maybe Adina pointed out the real threat here: when the women go out and free themselves, they might start negotiating the halachic order, where religious people following their rabbi is of primary concern.

The women's critical voices represent not only their wish for presence in spheres of life unrelated to halacha or to the hierarchic order, but another deep feeling, that halachic men fail to understand the lives of their women and the importance of ritual within them. Tovi (Ultra-Orthodox from Jerusalem, 28, a graphic designer) shared her feelings:

I don't like that they think that because this is not part of the tradition, we need to ask about it. We are doing a great thing, we bless [...] why complicate this? [Q: So, why are there rabbis who oppose the ritual?] Perhaps, they don't see the importance of the ritual, maybe they don't feel connected to it, or maybe they just don't like it. It's funny, there are always rabbis who look for the less [favorable] sides. I believe that for sure the more fanatical among them don't like this.

The term "fanatical" leads us to Hana's (Modern Orthodox from Netanya, 35, a high school teacher) critical response, which directly addresses the hard time men have in understanding women's feelings about worship:

It doesn't interest me to ask the rabbis because I don't search here for a halachic thing. [...] I feel that the fact that we sit together for something sacred [...] has no connection to halachic issues. We say blessings, yes, we are blessing, and we are asking, these are permitted things. There is no prohibition to do that, and I don't care if a rabbi says that it is unimportant, because I know that it has meaning. We speak with God, we open our souls, *sometimes* we cry, *sometimes* we sing and rejoice [...] we do something here that creates a connection between us and God. Clearly, this is very good. But perhaps men can't understand that! Do you understand me?

I don't feel that there is a need to ask a rabbi. [...] I felt that my rabbi from the Ulpana (a religious high school) couldn't understand me as a woman who worships G-d [*Isha ovedet hashem*]. He can't understand me, because he is a man! We need women, women need to learn from women, women need to empower women!

It is clear to me that we need to operate a culture of female worship. In my opinion, the amen meal is a part of this culture. This is a part of the culture of women who worship God. I wouldn't ask rabbis because this is not a halachic issue, and because they can't understand what it means to be a woman who worships.

The brave attempts by these women to oppose, or at least negotiate the male hegemony in their lives, whether in their religious or non-religious practice, can be viewed as signs of a new feminist consciousness, though they themselves may not be at all or fully aware of this, nor perhaps ready to call it by this name. I suppose that these women would never join a partnership synagogue, even as Orthodox as Shira Hadasha, since they believe that this is the male space. Paradoxically however, their practices have far more potential to undermine the religious order – because they not only negotiate the Jewish rabbinic authority on their life, but call for the creation of a separate women's worship as well.

Conclusions: "You can't enter our space!"

While sitting with an Ultra-Orthodox woman in her home in the Bait V'Gan neighborhood in Jerusalem, I could feel the difficulties of coping with the dissonance between what I hear, what I see and what I feel. Yehudit's (Ultra-Orthodox from Jerusalem, 34, a health secretary) response could be found in any article about the tensions between gender and religion: "In Ultra-Orthodox Jewish society the men rule the home. So [...] the amen meal is something sought after. It's ours. Like [...] stop here! You can't enter **our space!**"

I didn't even mention the word "feminism," because I wasn't sure that Yehudit is familiar with it, and I didn't want to hurt her feelings. Her words, however, definitely sounded feminist. I tried to find a sign or symbol in Yehudit's appearance that might

help me to fill the gap between the text and the interviewee, but I couldn't. She was completely covered and dressed according to the strict rules among the Lithuanian (Yeshiva's) Ultra-Orthodox community. Her hair was covered by a wig, her long sleeves and skirt didn't expose any part of her body. Her socks were long. She wore this modest dress even though it was just the two of us in her home. Her home itself also provided no explanation of this type of speech. The shelves contained many religious sacred books, including the most recent and more traditional halachic books. The walls were covered with pictures of rabbis, and the *Yated Neeman*, the newspaper of the Lithuanian Ultra-Orthodox community was on the table.

Yehudit's words: "Stop here! You can't enter **our space!**" reverberated with me for a very long time, while my mind struggled to understand the significance of what she was trying to teach me. The simple movement between spaces isn't a new idea and is not connected only to amen meal rituals. Geertz (1973) asked how religious people move back and forth between sacred and profane spaces and modes of experiences. Orsi (2012:153–154) wrote that everyday religion exists "either in religious spaces or at home" and "undermines the assumption that the two are absolutely divergent registers of experience and being."

However, the addition of the gender variable to the equation of space makes it much more complex. Budgeon (2014) discussed the "move from a private to a public gender regime, a perceived feminization of the public sphere, and the complication of contradictory gender ideals" (317). These movements, with or without feminist intentions, are themselves an important part of these social changes. Darwin (2018) argued that Jewish feminist women who wear a "kippa" are performing a "gender-transgressive religious practice [...that] poses a challenge to the gender binary that bifurcates traditional Jewish religious practice" (349). Even though the "kippa" as a feminist practice and the amen meal ritual look so different, they are both gender-transgressive religious practices, which complicate and blur the gender regimes.

Manning (1999) found that the religious women in her study are "trying to be both fluid, responsive to the changes of our time, and grounded, finding moral certainty in their [...] tradition. [They] are shifting their conception of themselves as women in both place and time, demonstrating [...] the protean self" (158). I argue that this fluidity is one of the most significant threats to the Jewish Orthodox hegemony. The halachic view is based on order in terms of time and place, where priority times and places are owned by the men. The ostensibly naïve redefinition of these aspects might change that entire halachic and hierarchic hegemony, as shown by the women's criticisms of the rabbinic opposition.

Riki (Modern Orthodox from Jerusalem, 27, a sports coach):

I would say that there are many things in this ritual. Why does it matter [to the rabbis], old, new? People are blessing, answering amen. What could be bad? That God thinks that this is not fine? No way. This is nonsense.

The amen meal participants understand that the game has changed. The era of pre-determined space and time is ended. The social order itself and the multiple aspects that might undermine it are less clear and defined. While some of the women's voices reiterated that this ritual is not a feminist trend similar to women putting on tefilin

(phylacteries) or reading the megillah in public, others didn't even try to engage with the "feminist" label regarding their practice. They negotiate, sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly, practically and ideologically, the definite and prioritized men's times and spaces, through their creation of newly defined times and spaces of their own. These changes are part of their ability to negotiate and oppose the masculine hegemony in their lives, even if only quietly and anonymously during the safe setting of an in-depth interview. By doing so, they enable us to understand that their emphasized femininity is multifaceted, which cleverly and quietly undermines the existing order.

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