

# Was Rabbi Ovadia Yosef a Protofeminist? A Look at His Oral Sermons

Netta Schramm

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## Was Rabbi Ovadia Yosef a Protofeminist? A Look at His Oral Sermons

Netta Schramm, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Be'er Sheva, Israel

### Abstract

This article examines Rabbi Ovadia's sermons, exploring his stance on women through folktales and narratives dedicated to halakhic scenario-building. Yosef's editorial intervention in a folktale by Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad is discussed, revealing his departure from the trope of woman as seducer and a shift in the status of the evil inclination. In short narratives of halakhic scenarios, Yosef prefers depicting religiously empowered "good" women. However, the subtext of these sermons is not an untheorized feminism; instead, they express Yosef's pragmatic worldview. Yosef's positive concept of the human psyche and its capacity for reason, dignity, and virtue guided his editorial decisions in severing the link between women and sin, endowing women with responsibility and agency. Yosef believed negative depictions of women as temptation's embodiment, lacking inherent religious value, harmed the religious well-being of both men and women. Thus, pragmatic considerations led him to craft narratives with reduced misogyny and gynophobia.

Keywords: Ovadia Yosef, protofeminism, orthodox Jewry, Mizrahi Jewish women

### 1. Introduction

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (Bagdad, 1920 – Jerusalem, 2013) was the leading Halakhic decisor of 20<sup>th</sup> century Mizrahi Jewry, who also had a lasting imprint on Israeli society and politics. He grew up in Jerusalem and attended the Porat Yosef yeshiva. Yosef held a rabbinic position in Cairo between 1947 and 1951. He devoted his life to serving as a *dayan* (adjudicator in the religious court) and *posek* (halakhic decisor), and giving regular classes and sermons to the general public. When Yosef's term as chief Sephardi rabbi ended, he became the spiritual leader of the Shas party, a political power that has changed the power structures of Israeli politics.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the 1990s, his sermons were broadcast via satellite technology to thousands of viewers. During his lifetime, mainstream media often depicted him as a divisive figure, relying on saucy quotes from his sermons.<sup>2</sup>

Although Yosef was a staunch traditionalist whose take on modern values was highly ambivalent, he eschewed the hyper-sexualized fear of women.<sup>3</sup> Thus, one finds in his halakhic writings traditional portrayals of women ("women who go outdoors dresses provocatively transgress the prohibition against placing 'stumbling block before the blind.'")<sup>4</sup> As Ariel Picard summarized in the Shalvi/Hyman encyclopedia of Jewish women entry on Yosef, his rulings went "both ways:" Yosef emphasized women's education in his legal rulings but maintained the belief in a wife's inferiority to her husband; He rejected certain customary practices among women, including the recitation of blessings on time-bound prescriptive mitzvot; Yosef did not

consider menstruation as a reason to exclude women from sacred activities and allowed girls to celebrate a bat mitzvah.<sup>5</sup>

Yet thanks to those cases where Yosef attitude towards women's issues is more progressive than those of his predecessors and those of his haredi contemporaries, he has gained the image of a lenient *posek*.<sup>6</sup> At times, Yosef acknowledges that societal changes in women's status have halakhic weight. For example, in his approval of the bat mitzva he explicitly states that "those who oppose celebrations upon girls' coming of age help transgressors to accuse the scholars of Israel of depriving the daughters of Israel and discriminating between boys and girls."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, scholars have paid close attention to Yosef's halakhic rulings pertaining to gender, sex, and sexuality.

Yosef's relatively liberal views on some women's issues do not stem from a tacit uneasiness with the patriarchy, nor is it mere rhetoric. Looking beyond the details of his halakhic ruling, this article links his attitude to his positive, non-fatalistic understanding of man as a being able to stick to the path of righteousness even in the age of modernity and secularization. Nadav Berman suggested that Yosef exhibits traits of a pragmatic thinker; he judges religious ideas and beliefs by their practical outcome.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that, as some scholars have argued, Yosef's pragmatism may be part of a larger Sephardi rabbinic tradition.<sup>9</sup> Berman also explored the relationship between pragmatic thinking and a positive conception of God, the Torah, the world, and the ability of man to align with God's guiding laws. Pragmatism is thus the middle ground between deterministic optimism, which dismisses human responsibility, and deterministic pessimism, which holds the belief that redemption is not possible.

Yosef's portrayal of women is rooted in his concern that negative representations of women may adversely affect both men and women. Conversely, fostering women's religious agency within the confines of traditional gender roles can yield positive outcomes and fortify the Jewish tradition. Therefore, while Yosef actively revises available sources to present a more favorable image of gender relations, these choices arise from a pragmatic perspective rather than a protofeminist stance.

In what follows, protofeminism denotes a pro-female sentiment rooted in the promotion of female agency, anticipating the emergence of what is conventionally considered "true" feminism.<sup>10</sup> Notably, the term protofeminism has been applied in discussions about the 19th-

century English novel, 1950s British theater, and American pop art. Therefore, the term is not meant to imply a specific periodization within feminist history, but rather aims to encompass instances preceding formal feminism, regardless of their time or location. Therefore, protofeminism can be seen as the “subtext”<sup>11</sup> or the “untheorized prelude”<sup>12</sup> to feminism, existing within the framework of patriarchal norms.

Some scholars brush aside some “undiplomatic” invocations in sermons, claiming they do not reflect his “true” persona.<sup>13</sup> However, there are many instances in which, in Yosef’s live encounter with his audience—but not in parallel written texts—he actively cleansed available sources of gynophobia. That means that he often (but not always) replaced the character of the dangerous woman and “bad” wife and concentrated only on the persona of the “good wife,” endowed with intelligence, religious agency, and even positive sexual desire. By raising the possibility of Yosef being a protofeminist—although this idea will ultimately be rejected—the article highlights the significance of Yosef’s editorial practices in his sermon.

The following discussion commences with a brief introduction to feminism and Orthodox Judaism, touching upon gender-separation trends within the Haredi community in Israel. Subsequently, an analysis of two prevalent narrative forms found in Yosef’s sermons, the folktale and the halakhic scenario, is offered. The featured folktale is derived from a story by Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad, while the halakhic scenarios are either thoughtfully selected from existing halakhic literature or created by Yosef for the sermon. The article concludes by offering insights into the interpretation of Yosef’s lenient approach towards women. In light of his acceptance of the patriarchal structure, a pragmatic philosophy is found to be the basis for said leniency.

## **2. Protofeminism and Orthodox Jewry**

As feminism is a modern project, it is not surprising that pre-modern Judaism does not align with a feminist agenda. Feminism challenges “the deepest foundations upon which rabbinic Judaism – as an authoritarian system – depends for its survival.”<sup>14</sup> Orthodox feminism has been, among other things, a movement that calls not only for serious Torah education for women but for positioning women “in the actual process of halakhic deliberation.”<sup>15</sup>

Within the folds of tradition, one finds different approaches to gender. In general, women are defined in sociobiological terms, and their self-definition is almost exclusively tied to their role in family life. Rabbinic literature is also patriarchal in its structural assumption that the man is

categorically above the woman. The women are grouped with ‘others,’ such as children and slaves, and have less status in society than men do.<sup>16</sup> Beyond the structural patriarchy, which Yosef did not object to, some Jewish sources regard women in overtly negative terms as frivolous, ignorant, and even dangerous beings.<sup>17</sup> Yet Yosef, unlike many Haredi leaders, especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, did not equate women, even modernized women, with danger, seduction, and sin. Although Yosef was not part of the modern feminist discourse, the scholarship focused on his halakhic rulings may hint he was a protofeminist.

For orthodox Judaism, protofeminism would mean imagining a world where women’s social and religious opportunities are better than what previous generations had envisioned for them. Ronit Irshai employed the gender perspectives to halakha analysis despite those who claim that “the masculine leanings of the halakha are so self-evident that they are not worthy of academic attention.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, masculine leanings, and the production of texts by men and for men, is a given with traditional Jewish texts. And yet, throughout history, male exegetes had the power to either add patriarchalism to the pile or cleanse their texts from misogyny and bias.<sup>19</sup> A reflection on the exegetical removal of misogyny in Jewish tradition could be a good place to locate orthodox protofeminism. Similarly, what follows examines depictions of women in narratives told by Yosef in his explication of halakha and in folktales.

Scholars focusing on Yosef’s halakhic rulings noticed the improved status, freedom, or agency, offered to women on matters of rites of purity,<sup>20</sup> women’s singing voice,<sup>21</sup> religious and secular education for women,<sup>22</sup> delicate issues of personal status (for example, the fate of an adulterous wife),<sup>23</sup> cosmetic surgery and celebrating the bat mitzva,<sup>24</sup> and more. Some noted that Yosef did not spread religious angst regarding sexual desires and sinful ejaculation and therefore had no interest in projects that hide women from the public sphere.<sup>25</sup> However, as mentioned above, Yosef also produced stringent halakhic rulings on the issue of hair covering for married women and prayer, and male presence at the conversion ritual in the mikvah.<sup>26</sup>

Another consideration, that may seem relevant, is that Yosef’s daughter, Adina Bar Shalom, is a haredi feminist activist, winner of the Israeli prize. Bar Shalom’s grand initiatives included the establishment of an institute of higher education for Haredi women (and men). Yosef thought very highly of his daughter’s projects and plans, which were, and still are, a big step forward for women in the Haredi community, and he supported her institution when too

many other rabbis were ferociously opposed.<sup>27</sup> This biographical fact could also bear weight in an argument for Yosef's protofeminism.

However, Yosef's attitudes towards women can also be understood not as a story of progress but as a story of an "authentic" traditional stance on the brink of erasure. Gender segregation in the Haredi society in Israel has seen a definite increase in the last few decades. The first gender-segregated public transportation buses began operating in the 1990s, removal of not only images of women and girls but also female given names from the press, and even gender-segregated sidewalks have become more common.<sup>28</sup> Yakir Englender linked this trend with Ashkenazi Lithuanian-style yeshiva norms. Englender argues that the rabbinic authorities are attempting to recreate the Haredi public sphere as "a space devoid of the female gender."<sup>29</sup> Even the haredi women, dressed according to the stringent laws of modesty, "are increasingly perceived as sexual temptations."<sup>30</sup> The mere sight of women is a temptation to men because they see her "strictly as a sexual being."<sup>31</sup> This gynophobic equation between women-sex-sin is by no means the core position of Jewish tradition.<sup>32</sup> It is also not the only voice within the haredi community, although it may be the loudest.<sup>33</sup> Rabbi Yosef, is an important counter-voice within this late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century haredi context. Unlike the ultra-Orthodox-Ashkenazi press, he responded to requests from the Ministry of Health and raised in his sermons the importance of gynecological and mammographic examinations and also ordered ads to be published in the Shas newspaper encouraging women to be examined.<sup>34</sup>

The current article will not consider written halakhic rulings as has been offered in many previous books and articles, nor will it reference Yosef's biography or engage directly with contemporary Israeli haredi sociology. Instead, it will focus on stories told in oral sermons where poetic freedom allows Yosef to intervene and edit the sources of the stories he tells as well as invent new ones. This inquiry will demonstrate that Yosef evokes the image of the "good wife" and rarely describes the woman as a dangerous sexual object of illicit desire. Thus, Yosef actively eliminates centuries of gynophobic sentiments found in a selection of Jewish sources at his disposal. Not ignoring halakhic discourse altogether, a consideration of very short scenario stories that Yosef uses when teaching halacha in his oral sermons as a way of explanation or elaboration will be discussed. The discussion now turns to a folktale told by rabbi Yosef Hayyim of Bagdad and shows how Yosef edits the tale to eliminate all fear of sexual sin instigated by the power of lewd women and menstruating wives.

### 3. Women and the Evil Inclination: Reading the Folktale

The focus of this section is Yosef's adaptations to a folktale by the popular Baghdadi halakhist and preacher rabbi Yosef Hayyim (1835-1909), also known as the Ben Ish Chai.<sup>35</sup> During his lifetime, Iraqi Jews felt the rising influence of Europe and were invested in modernizing their schools without changing their customs and traditions. When French AIU influence pushed to change traditional women's norms of conduct, Yosef Hayyim was sharp with his condemnation.<sup>36</sup> Yosef Hayyim was invested in creating suitable literature for women, wishing to successfully educate them in times of change. He was concerned about the effects of modernization on family life and fluctuated between endorsing traditional customs and giving voice to newer sentiments regarding the status of women.<sup>37</sup> For example, he was highly critical of lax dress code, but was also supportive of minimizing arranged marriages of very young girls.

The critical stance of Ovadia Yosef towards some of Yosef Hayyim's views is well documented: already at the age of 17, Yosef dared to rule against the Baghdadi rabbi on halakhic issues.<sup>38</sup> A review of the stories Yosef incorporated in his sermons shows that he did not hesitate to draw on the sermonic work of Yosef Hayyim but introduced significant narrative breaks with his source. For example, Avaraham Sacca compared source and adaptation of a story that deals with Talmudic education for women.<sup>39</sup> In the story, in both Yosef Hayyim and Yosef's versions, a clever girl is given a male tutor to teach her Torah. Because she is quick, they move on to study Talmud. The father discovers what the teacher has done and is angered. He sends him away and forbids the daughter from continuing her studies. She ignores the father and continues her studies by standing near the window and listening to her father learning. The story ends with her genius being revealed to the joy of her father. Sacca shows three main shifts between the Yosef Hayyim source and the Ovadia Yosef adaptation: (a) Ovadia Yosef eliminates all reference to marriage arranged by the father and the transfer of ownership from father to husband; (b) in Yosef Hayyim's version the relationship between father and daughter is patriarchal and strained whereas Yosef describes mutual respect between father and daughter; (c) Yosef Hayyim describes the girl as an exceptional genius, whereas Yosef stresses that her achievements were due to diligence and are thus replicable. This intervention in the Yosef Hayyim story aligns with my previous conclusion: Ovadia Yosef encouraged religious agency among women and believed being versed in religious teaching is desirable for the



woman as an individual, and, aligning with patriarchal assumptions of the role of women, for her family at large.

Such literary comparisons between Ovadia Yosef and Yosef Hayyim must also consider some major differences in the social and historical contexts within each rabbi's milieu, a consideration which to be done in all detail would be beyond the scope of the current discussion. Yosef Hayyim inherited his father's position as *darshan* in the 1860s and his sermons, given in Judeo-Arabic, attracted the general public, including women and children.<sup>40</sup> During his lifetime, the Jews of Baghdad were in the midst of change. The rising socioeconomic status of the Jews also allowed rich Jewish and rabbinic cultural life.<sup>41</sup> David Rotman showed that Yosef Hayyim sermons were inconsistent in navigating the changing place of women in society. By and large, Yosef Hayyim sanctioned patriarchal norms and his sermons display defensive masculinity.<sup>42</sup>

The spread of modernization alongside changing historical circumstances between late 19<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad and later 20<sup>th</sup> Century Jerusalem undoubtedly explains editorial changes introduced by Ovadia Yosef. But another explanation can be suggested: two schools of thought regarding the *yetzer*, one aligning with the Tannaitic school of R. Ishmael, the other with the Tannaitic school of R. Akiva. According to Yishai Rosen-Zvi, one Midrashic tradition, sees the evil inclination as an "antinomian entity residing within men and inciting them against the Torah", whereas "in the school of R. Akiva, where the *yetzer* appears as the natural human tendency (or weakness) and occupies a marginal place."<sup>43</sup> The hyper-sexualization of the evil inclination seems to be a later, Amoraic development.<sup>44</sup> Thus, unlike Yosef Hayyim, Yosef, adopted a rabbinic concept of the evil inclination that "has no privileged sexual meaning."<sup>45</sup>

This significant difference in understanding human nature, drove Yosef to reject the gynophobia guiding one folktale by Yosef Hayyim to be here discussed. The story recounts how the evil inclination strikes a deal with the good inclination in order to persuade a Hasid, (here meaning 'righteous man') to sin. By the terms of the agreement, if the evil inclination is unsuccessful, he will quit his antics for good. The Yosef Hayyim sins are sexual and feature lewd and menstruating women whereas the Yosef sins are quite ordinary and do not involve sex. The other major difference between Rabbi Yosef Hayyim's version and Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's version is in the image of the evil inclination as a demonic entity external to the Hasid. This can be explained in theatrical terms. In Rabbi Yosef Hayyim's story, the Evil One and the



Hasid are on stage at the same time. Whereas in Rabbi Yosef's story, the act of evil appears only in the introduction and at the end of the act, but not when the Hasid is 'on stage'. To understand Rabbi Yosef Hayyim's version it is important to remember that his attitude to sexuality was anchored in his Kabbalistic view. He referred to psychological struggle as a metaphor for metaphysical struggle. Furthermore, metaphysical evil is an actual ontological entity that always seeks to fail man.

On the other hand, Rabbi Yosef described the act of instinct as negative thoughts and desires and described the world in neutral to positive terms. Finally, for educational reasons, Rabbi Yosef wanted to bring the act closer to the world of his audience. Therefore, in Rabbi Yosef's version to be presented immediately, the 'space of sin' is simply a neighborhood cafe, its occupants are, by implication, traditional Jews and the sin is laxity on a religious level but not break-ins. The moment when the Hasid decides to go to the cafe is described in reverse from the original by Yosef Hayyim. With Yosef Hayyim, the evil spirit 'entered him'; The devotee is shocked at the thought of going to the place of fornication, but then the good inclination, another figure external to man, comes and reassures him that no spiritual evil will harm him. Then, according to Yosef's version, thoughts arise in a person of going to the cinema or to a coffee shop and he wonders about himself. But the devotee does not know that the good creature has left him. In other words, naturally, the good and evil inclinations are in proper balance in the world of the devotee, but the power of good has left him.

The opening scene in Yosef Hayyim's tale is as follows:<sup>46</sup>

And I'll give a parable on morality about an encounter between the evil inclination and the good inclination. He who created good and created evil collided with each other. The evil inclination said to the good inclination: How long will we be fight[ing] each other and you oppose me do not make peace with me? ... Please make peace with me for just one hour. The good inclination said to him: What do you want of such peace? He said to him, "I want to invite one of your people to the big party of my friends and loved one, it is the lewd place called *teatru*."

The good inclination said to him: Who is it that you would like to invite? And he said: a certain Hasid. The good inclination said to him: the whole country is before you, and all the courtyards are open to you. Go and invite him. (Yosef Hayyim, *Sefer ben ish chai: drushim u-ramzim*)

Yosef Hayyim allows the evil inclination to lure the righteous man into an adult theater. As the tale progresses, the evil inclination attempts to time the trial so as to lure the righteous man have sexual intercourse with his menstruating wife in violation of Jewish law:

When he sees these ugly things, he will be enthused with lust, but he will certainly not commit his first sin with a foreigner, but will go to his home to sleep with his wife and quiet the fire of lust burning in his heart (ibid.).

In Yosef Hayyim version, the two inclinations are characters that talk to the righteous man. They are not internal discourse, but beings he encounters:

After two nights the evil inclination entered the heart of that Hasid and he said to him that he should go this night to the place called *teatru*. And the Hasid trembled at this word until the good inclination came and said: "Go, it is nothing, see the world with your own eyes and maybe something good will come out of this. Because you have never yet seen lewdness. With the fear of God upon you, you will not sin." (ibid.)

Indeed, the righteous man suppresses his evil urges and repents. He comes home crying, and rambles about gold and clay, making his wife assume he is drunk. He recounts his tale and explains that he is not drunk; rather he has learned to understand how inadequate his enthusiasm for Torah study is, when he saw the enthusiasm of the sinning men and women. The man describes the scene in terms of men and women dancing together. The evil inclination has a different account of the same scene. Upon the failure of the evil inclination to seduce the righteous man, he recounts to his rival, the good inclination, and explicitly mentions lust as the main component of his failed plan:

I thought of bringing him to *teatru*, so that he would see bad deeds and matters of ugliness that arouse the sexual desires in the heart of the observer, and I said that surely that Hasid, when he sees these ugly things, will be enthused by sexual desires. (ibid.)

In contrast, Yosef's oral version maintains the deal between the inclinations and the trials of the righteous man but eliminates all sexual sins.<sup>47</sup> As Ovadia Yosef tells the story, the good and evil inclination also strike up a deal. Thus, a righteous man busy learning Torah suddenly gets the idea he should go to a café or a movie, to see "what it's all about."

One night when he was learning [Torah], a thought appeared in his mind. Go to a coffee house for once. Once, you will see what cinema is. All the time sitting at home studying. What kind of thing is that? Go to the cinema, the café.

He doesn't understand where he got these ideas from. "Every plan devised by the human mind was nothing but evil all the time" (Genesis 6:5). Like Amalek; evil all the time.

"I don't know where the thoughts come from."

He didn't know that the good inclination had left him. Left him to the evil inclination.

He said: Well, he'll go for it, he'll go to a coffee shop, what's wrong with that. A café. And he went. (Yosef, Ovadia. *Parashat Bereshit*, min: 20:10)

In Yosef's version, the two inclinations appear as characters in the story only at the beginning and the end of the parable. They do not talk to the righteous man directly; they are not beings that walk and talk among humans but a manifestation of an internal conversation. An evil thought can arise only when the good inclination has left the scene. Otherwise, the good keeps the evil at bay.

The Hasid arrives at the café and watches the men play backgammon and dance. Women are not mentioned at all. Yosef's tone of voice is light, his tempo is joke-like and humorous. His word choice brings to life a neighborhood scene for the enjoyment of the audience. The storytelling mood is not harsh and critical, but parodic. It is clear the people at the café are not the height of religious perfection, but they are not beyond the pale.

He doesn't know how to play. Do you see people sitting playing backgammon? Do you know backgammon? Yes!? He sits like that looking at them. They are playing. "I said jinn!"<sup>48</sup> He says to him, "I brought a bigger one than a jinn." One says, another answer. [they] Order tea, coffee. Put [it] on the table and they are busy playing. The tea has already cooled down and is worthless. "And urine is good for this purpose."<sup>49</sup> They forgot about it. Playing, they continue their game. And he [the Hasid] sees how they fight among themselves "I rolled a jinn," "I didn't roll a jinn." Okay. This is what he sees. Good. He looks.

Then they finished the game. They play for an hour [and] get up to dance. There is an orchestra, the orchestra began to play, ta ta ta, like Simchat Torah, like Simchat Tisha B'Av. Playing and dancing. He sees them dripping sweat from the sheer effort of dancing. And he sits and sees them. It's *kultura*! (ibid., min: 20:26)

Yosef parodies this lifestyle calling in "*kultura*," a term which sounds like the product of Westernization. Although he doesn't call the dancing a sin, he criticizes it using a little joke. Dancing is what you do on Simchat Torah: you dance for the Torah. However, the dancing in this café is devoid of religious meaning, thus he parodies it as the "happiness" of a fast day, (Tisha b'av).

The man then returns home and is upset. His wife sees him crying and wants to know what happened. She is not depicted as stupid or silly. He answers, saying he doesn't learn Torah with as much gusto as the café goers have for their game. Throughout the Yosef story, the evil inclination is not a character that can speak to the righteous man. The *yetzer* resides in his heart.

[they] Went home. He also went home. It's time for the midnight prayer. Every night he said the midnight prayer. He had never prayed such a midnight prayer in his life. What tears, what sorrow. His wife woke up, [she] heard his voice crying. "What? What happened to you today?" - "I had a basket full of gold today that is not worth anything. It is pottery that is worthless". "I don't understand you, what basket and what goat?! what nonsense are you talking?"

He said "I thought, thank God, I fulfill everything that is required according to the Torah. I study Torah. Tonight, I realized that I am worthless. Why do they never drink their tea hot? [when] I am in the middle of studying, I will stop. I will enjoy my drink. They are playing a game of vanity and when tea is poured for them, they don't drink tea, they don't drink coffee. Because they are playing a game. Why am I not like them? (ibid., min: 21:00)

Yosef's freedom in adapting Yosef Hayyim's folktale, exposes Yosef's religious and psychological sensibilities which have roots in rabbinic sources. Furthermore, the evil inclination is not a fearsome almost unconquerable, external and demonic force, but rather a component of the one good human soul. Thus, when Yosef discusses the evil inclination, he

does depict it as a force that seduces men to commit murder or rape, but rather as a force that tempts them to go to the cinema, “waste” their time on backgammon, and be lazy about their Torah study.

To sum up, the guiding principle in Yosef’s adaptation does not express a corrective feminist perspective but rather it promotes an internalized, non-demonic version of the evil inclination.<sup>50</sup> In other words, Yosef changes the folktale not because of his progressiveness on gender matters, but because of his understanding of human (and specifically male) psychology and his natural ability to overcome temptations. However, curbing the extreme fear of sexual sin, is a necessary step in imagining greater gender equality. However, the folktale exhibits Yosef’s removal of fear of women, but does not offer much insight into the question of women agency, which will now be considered.

#### **4. Women and Religious Agency: The Halakhic Scenario**

Instead of assessing Yosef’s approach to issues pertaining to women only through his halakhic writings, it is worthwhile to review his sermons where he is teaching *halakha* to the public. In an oral sermon or *halakha* class, the apodictic formulation “It is prohibited to do X” or “Y must be done” is supplemented with a short narrative that explains when situation X could occur by referencing the realia known to the audience.<sup>51</sup> The specifics of these scenarios are very informative as to his sentiment towards women and illuminate more than the written account of said *halakha* offers us. Thus, the halakhic tradition may begin with situation X and then move to consider situations X’ and X.” Furthermore, the canonical halakhic texts string together adjacent questions, with each generation picking up the existing thread and adding details, elaborations, and explanations. Using Yosef’s oral classes on the laws of Kiddush, the following discussion exposes his editorial interventions, which ignore sub-scenarios that include the notion of women-as-danger and replace them with others.

Following a brief review of the topic, Yosef’s explanation of the *halakha* in writing is compared to two instances of oral texts. In the oral parallels to halakhic writing, Yosef eliminates the discussion of immodesty, empowers women as religious agents from their own self-perspective, but then undermines this feminist self-perception by telling men that their agency as men means they should not rely on women.

According to *Halacha*, it is known that a woman is required to observe the Mitzvot of Kiddush on the night of Shabbat. Because the obligation of women and men is equal, a woman

reciting the blessing in front of a man fulfills his obligation as well.<sup>52</sup> The “Mishna Brurah” states that a woman may not say kiddush in front of a man who is not her husband because such behavior is immodest.<sup>53</sup> In works of *halakha*, add multiple scenarios to explain why a woman is reciting the *kiddush* in the first place. The underlying concept is that a woman would not want to recite the *kiddush*. The scenarios are based on the man’s incapacity or absence: the husband is traveling, the wife is widowed, or the husband is sick. In some works of *halakha*, a second sub-scenario is discussed: the man is away, but a child under the age of 13 is present. This sub-scenario is then expanded further: what should she do if it is too difficult for her to say the blessing? Is there no way the under-aged boy can help? All these scenarios share the assumption that women may want to say *kiddush* in “ordinary” circumstances.

Rabbi Yosef commented on Kiddush laws in the “Kol Sinai” journal. His summary is laconic and echoes the major decisors: women may recite the *kiddush*, he writes, but offers no scenario to explain why such a need would arise.<sup>54</sup>

Women fulfill the men’s obligation of Kiddush since they are commanded to do so from the Torah just like them. But for the sake of modesty, it is better that the woman should not recite the *kiddush* to men except when they are members of her household. (Yosef, Ovadia. ‘M’hilkhot Shabat - Diney Kidush’, pp. 81-83)

In Yosef’s halakhic writings, the technical obligation on women to recite the *kiddush* is not developed into a positive statement on women’s religious agency. However, in two sermons explicating the *halakha*, Yosef uses the case of *kiddush* to emphasize the autonomy and agency of women within the permitted type of blessings. In his writing, he includes the warning found in the “Mishna Brurah” that reciting the *kiddush* in front of men other than one’s husband is immodest; in the sermon, he does not mention this. Also in writing, Yosef offers no scenario to explain why the women would be reciting the *kiddush* in the first place. By providing no scenario, he also avoids including traditional situations that feature weak and meek women. In the sermons, one finds a much more developed narrative that describes the halakhic event of a woman saying *kiddush*.

In one sermon Yosef says:<sup>55</sup>

If, God forbid, there is a widow, she doesn’t have a husband, and she wants to hear Kiddush. [She] Must hear the *kiddush* from a person who is with the obligation. That is, not from an underaged child. If the neighbors have a small child at the neighbors, calling him so that he will say the *kiddush* for her? It’s not okay. Why? Anyone who is not obligated in the matter, cannot fulfill the obligation for someone else. An underage child is not obligated in mitzvot. That’s why she needs to bring an adult man who is obligated to come and recite the Kiddush for her. So that she can fulfill her obligation. If she knows how to say it herself - even better.

A woman fulfills the obligation for another woman. If she has a neighbor, who can read, she knows how to say the Kiddush, she should call her to say the Kiddush. But it is not permissible for her to go and hear the *kiddush* [elsewhere] and return to her home. The blessing should be recited in her house, on her table. To make *kiddush* in the place of one's meal. ... The obligation on the women for this *mitzvah* is equal to that of the man, there is no difference between them. She can recite the blessing for a man, to say the *kiddush* for him, it is the same thing, man like woman. Furthermore, a woman may fulfill the obligation for her husband in *kiddush*. (Ovadia Yosef, *Dinei Kiddush Le'Nashim U'Tefillah Va'Chazarah*, min 2:00)

This passage seems to suggest a different tone than the written account. The exact date of the sermon is unknown, but it must be later than 1980 and probably earlier than 2005. One could suggest that this hints at a development in Yosef's understanding of women's religious agency. But this is too hasty a conclusion. In the sermon, Yosef constantly juggles between contradictory goals. On the one hand, he believes women have religious agency, as traditional sources would have it, and furthermore, he has a positive view of the female as such. Yosef does not imagine a woman who would want to replace the fixed gender roles and say *kiddush* regardless of any exigency that would require it. It would not seem fit to adduce that in the context of the sermons he is ignoring knowledge of such desires because he feels they are foreign to the traditional Mizrahim who attend his weekly sermons.

On the other hand, he has a traditional concept of family life with fixed gender roles. To women in the audience, but also "of women" to the men in the room, he wants to say "women have religious agency." To men, he wants to say that family roles are fixed and timeless. Thus, the chosen scenario is taken for the Babylonian Talmud (although it may be, as he himself says, no longer common) to make fun of a man who will let himself be less knowledgeable than his wife. However, in line with the first goal of empowering women's religious agency, Yosef offers a scenario that does not shame the woman for her knowledge and religious knowhow or suggest she has stepped out of line:<sup>56</sup>

For example, if there is an uncultured man, he owns an apartment and everything, but he doesn't have, he doesn't know how to recite the *kiddush*. Today, this is uncommon; it used to be common. There could be a woman that knows how, and he says: you say *kiddush*, and I will fulfill my obligation. He can do that. Why? Because there is not difference in this [matter]. He is obligated just like she is obligated. So why should she lose part of her share? If she wants to say the blessing, and fulfill the obligation for all, she can. Therefore, if his wife is good, he chose a good wife, god fearing and proficient in reading [the *kiddush*], but he is uncultured; his father did not teach him, that the poor idiot, doesn't know how to recite the *kiddush*, he will call his wife and say to her: recite the *kiddush* and this will fulfill my obligation, on this the rabbis have said: "May a curse come to a man whose wife and children recite a blessing on his behalf" [(Berakhot, 20b) (ibid)].

The tale of the uncultured man unfolds as a folktale. Yosef employs a light-hearted and humorous tone to describe the unlearned man, taking care to commend him for choosing a good wife. Consequently, the sermon harbours two conflicting voices. While Yosef emphasizes

twice that a woman can recite the *kiddush*, he also suggests that it is unseemly for a man to be less educated than a woman. The double emphasis on women's ability to say the blessing appears only in the sermon, not in Yosef's parallel written text in "Kol Sinai."

The most intriguing step toward the religious empowerment of women occurs in a brief reference to women and *kiddush* found in another sermon. In this instance, Yosef avoids portraying women as powerless. Instead of relying on traditional scenarios such as widows or women whose husbands are away, Yosef introduces a new scenario—a woman whose husband feels unwell.

To make the format of this very short passage clear, consider its different segments: the halakhic principle, an invented scenario, and the halakhic ruling, which fits the scenario.<sup>57</sup>

Women can fulfill the obligation for men.

A man is feeling unwell. Her husband feels unwell. Lying down. And she can fulfill the obligation for him. She can recite the *kiddush*. And he will hear it and fulfill his obligation according to the rule hearing a speaker is like saying what he does [*din shome'a keone*]. (Ovadia Yosef, 'Hilkhot Kidush', min. 39:40)

This narrative contains one dramatic shift that hasn't been seen previously: Yosef shifts the perspective of the scenario from the husband's point of view to the wife's point of view: "Her husband feels unwell." The domestic scene is seen as mediated through the eyes of the wife, not her husband's. She sees him lying down, unable to come to the shabbat table. Yosef stated twice, in the active voice, "She can fulfill," and then again, "She can recite." Returning to the husband's point of view, he added, "he will hear." This subtle shift from the male to the female perspective suggests a sentiment rather than a deliberate theory. It appears unlikely that Yosef consciously chose to alter perspectives; the shift occurs rapidly in the course of his halakhic storytelling; yet the shifts between male and female perspectives show that Yosef is sensitive to both perspectives.

Furthermore, Yosef thinks favorably of the women of the house. He invents a plausible scenario that doesn't cast the wife as a sorry figure: she is neither a widow, nor a woman whose husband is away, nor a lonely wife taking care of her young boy. She is versed in the reciting of the *kiddush*, and furthermore, she has the agency to help the helpless, sick husband, and she is encouraged to take such initiative.

To draw attention to Ovadia Yosef's unique openness to women's religious agency, it is helpful to compare a parallel sermon given by his son, Yitzchak Yosef.<sup>58</sup> Unlike the father, the son drastically limits the religious aspirations of women. In one sermon, for example, he



strings the following argument: (a) a woman is required to fulfill her gender role and know how to run a kosher kitchen. (b) for reasons of sexual modesty and the undesirability of proximity between men and women, a rabbi may not give a class to women regularly. (c) a rabbi should write a class for his wife, adding punctuation and even vowel points, and she will read his instructions to women. Thus, women will know how to make salads and serve kosher food for their husbands. The third point is most telling; it actively discourages women, even an elite few, from being versed even in the laws pertaining to running a kosher kitchen.<sup>59</sup> The suggestion that women require vowel points is doubly offensive, because it implies these women are as simple-minded as first or second graders. It is thus clear that Yitzchak Yosef would never suggest a woman could recite any blessing to a man because he frames women as dangerous sexual temptations and discourages their scholarly advancement.

Returning to the father, rabbi Ovadia Yosef, one final example ties together the concept of the evil inclination as a non-demonic, non-sexual force with the image of the “good wife” bound to the framework of tradition. Previously, Ariel Picard claimed rabbi Yosef did not seem to attribute the sexual desire to the “good” kind of woman, the women of the “house,” but only to the “bad” kind of woman, the woman that is beyond the folds of tradition.<sup>60</sup>

However, in sermons, Yosef instructs his community that a husband should be attuned to the sexual needs of his wife:<sup>61</sup>

A few things that the Gemara says: “Whoever knows that his wife fears Heaven and she desires him, and he does not have intercourse with her, is called a sinner.” That is, even not at its [intercourse] proper time.<sup>62</sup> *Onah*, for example, he is required once a week [to have intercourse with his wife]. But he sees that his wife is pampering herself and beautifying herself near him, she hints, she doesn’t have to explicitly say anything, that is shameful for her to have to ask with her own words, that, only the wife of Yosef’s master, was bold and said “lie with me.” But the righteous women, they are modest, the virtuous daughters of Israel, they are shy. She only hints, and he should take the hint and have intercourse with her [*lifkod otah*]. (Ovadia Yosef, *Mitzvat Onata bi-zmana*, min: 00:00.)

It is clear from Yosef’s sermon that he is reacting to a dominant voice within the Haredi society that fears sexuality and equates sexual desire with sin. His description is a corrective move that warns his audience against exaggerated piousness and promises the spiritual goodness of offspring created in sexual unions that are as described above. However, is this description of the sexual communication between a married couple protofeminist, or is it linked to his concept of the human as a basically good being who can contain illicit desires? Again, it can be argued that the description of the sexual behavior of a wife, her way of signaling to her husband that she has sexual desires, together with the explicit portrayal of these desires as legitimate, is an

improvement. However, no feminist would accept such a masculine-leaning depiction of female sexuality, nor accept the gender roles proscribed for men and women. As Judith Plaskow wrote: “For the bible and rabbis, good sex is sex that supports and serves a patriarchal social order.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, although Yosef is unique in his narration of a woman’s sexual desires as a positive thing, his ideas fall within the fold of patriarchy. The subtext is not a critique of patriarchy but a critique of competing ascetic interpretations of Jewish law.

## 5. Conclusion

During Rabbi Yosef’s years as head of the Shas party, news outlets liked quoting Yosef when he used offensive terms and produced what Western discourse norms deem inappropriate. This type of media coverage framed him as a fanatic reactionary and directed attention to misogynistic invocations (“A woman’s knowledge is only in sewing.”)<sup>64</sup> Academic scholarship has done much to dispel such an oversimplification, and continuing that trend, this essay focused on Yosef’s depiction of women in stories and short narratives presented orally to an audience.

The underlying question was whether or not Yosef should be considered a protofeminist; that is, can one say that the subtext of his words leads to an orthodox feminist perspective? First, it was shown that Yosef’s is editorially heavy-handed when the source material is folkloristic. In Yosef’s version of Yosef Hayyim’s tale, the evil inclination is “naturalized” by depicting it as an internal voice; the status of the inclination as an external demon is dramatically toned down. This less demonic idea of the evil inclination does not have any special relationship to sexual sins. Yosef’s version of the evil inclination, and not only the demonic Yosef Hayyim depiction, is rooted in rabbinic sources. This type of psychology supports a positive view of women as beings of equal human and religious capacity to men. However, all the narratives discussed here accept the division of labor and power between men and women sanctioned by patriarchy.

In discussing examples from Yosef’s public halakha classes, the article showed he offers short scenario stories that portray women as possessing the religious capacity for fulfilling commandments within the home setting. Yosef’s choice halakhic scenarios, highlight women’s religious agency within the framework of the patriarchal system. While he recognizes women’s capacity for advanced education comparable to that of men, he underscores their primary duty as wives and mothers. Moreover, Yosef’s positive attitude towards sexual

intercourse within marriage, framing women's sexual desire as a healthy norm, can be explained as a corrective move against trends of Ashkenazi piousness.

Yosef's editorial decisions reveal his sensitivity to offensive depictions of women, his objection to gynophobia, and his belief in the intrinsic moral-religious capacity of both men and women to choose good over bad. And yet, rather than categorizing Yosef as a protofeminist based on this evidence, an alternative explanation is proposed: his optimistic understanding of human psychology. This perspective posits that men need not fear, shun, limit the visibility, or impede women from Torah study. These positions are unique when compared to what David Rotman showed to be an ambivalence in Yosef Hayyim's literary corpus, and even more so when compared to Ovadia Yosef's son, Yitzchak Yosef, with his reactionary gynophobia. However, Ovadia Yosef's positive view of women coexists with patriarchal notions regarding the division of power between genders. This alternative explanation acknowledges Yosef's assumptions and halakhic rulings that diverge from feminist ideals. Describing Yosef as an orthodox protofeminist may oversimplify the multivocality of his opinions on matters of gender.

Thus, the responsibility of navigating the complexities of shaping Sephardi Orthodox feminism falls to individuals like his daughter, Adina Bar-Shalom, and other courageous individuals. They grapple with the intricate challenges of developing their version of Mizrahi feminism deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Yair Ettinger and Nissim Leon, *A Flock with No Shepherd: Shas Leadership the Day after Rabbi Ovadia Yosef* (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Zvi Zohar, 'On European Jewish Orthodoxy, Sephardic Tradition, And the Shas Movement', in *Jewry Between Tradition and Secularism: Europe and Israel Compared*, ed. Eliezer Ben-Rafael (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), 133–150.

<sup>3</sup> Yosef's ambivalence towards modern values resonates with his ambivalence towards the modern Jewish nation-state. His opposition to modern ideas was not hinged on their "modernity", but rather, as a traditionalist, he opposed systems that compete with Jewish religious observance and worldviews. See: Shlomo Fischer, 'Excursus: Concerning the Rulings of R. Ovadia Yosef Pertaining to the Thanksgiving Prayer, the Settlement of the Land of Israel, and Middle East Peace', *Cardozo Law Review* 28, no. 1 (2006): 229–44, p. 231.

<sup>4</sup> English translation from his halakhic book *Yehave da'at* quoted in: Adrian Thatcher, *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender* (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 418.

<sup>5</sup> Ariel Picard, 'Rabbi Ovadia Yosef', in *Jewish Women's Archive*, accessed 15 January 2024, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/yosef-rabbi-ovadia>.

<sup>6</sup> Beth A. Berkowitz, "Women's Wear and Men's Suits: Ovadia Yosef's and Moshe Feinstein's Discourses of Jewishness," *Defining Jewish Difference*, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> *Yahave Da'at* 2:29, translated in Ariel Picard, 'Rabbi Ovadia Yosef'.

- 8 Nadav S. Berman, 'The Application of the "Pragmatic Maxim" in Jewish Tradition: The Case of Rabbi Hayyim Hirschensohn', *The Journal of Religion* 102, no. 4 (2022): 441–81, p. 448.
- 9 On the heated debate on the existence of a Sephardi lenient tradition see: Benjamin Brown, 'Hachmey Hamizrach VekaKana'ut haDatit', *Akdamot* 10 (2000): 289–324 [in Hebrew] and Zvi Zohar, *The Luminous Face of the East* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 2001) [in Hebrew].
- 10 Of course, this is not a fully operational definition for protofeminism because: "The one word -feminism - is bound to be inadequate to capture the multifarious ways that women through the ages have protested male domination or attempted to redefine gender hierarchy." (Nancy F. Cott, 'What's in a Name? The Limits of "Social Feminism;" or, Expanding the Vocabulary of Women's History', *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 3 (1989): 809–29, p. 809)
- 11 Eileen Sypher, 'Resisting Gwendolen's "Subjection": "Daniel Deronda's" Proto-Feminism,' *Studies in the Novel* 28, no. 4 (1996): 506–24, p. 507.
- 12 Kalliopi Minioudaki, 'Pop Proto-Feminisms: Beyond the Paradox of the Women Pop-Artist', in *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958-1968*, ed. Sid Sachs (Philadelphia, New York: University of the Arts; Abbeville Press Publishers, 2010), 90–143, p. 94.
- 13 Benjamin Lau, *From 'Maran' To 'Maran' The Halachic Philosophy of Rav Ovadia Yosef* (Tel Aviv: Miskal Yedioth Ahronoth; Chemed, 2005), p. 13 [in Hebrew]; Beth A. Berkowitz, 'Women's Wear and Men's Suits: Ovadia Yosef's and Moshe Feinstein's Discourses of Jewishness.', in *Defining Jewish Difference* (New York: Cambridge, 2012), 190–235, p. 194.
- 14 Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2004), p. 24. Orthodox feminists, like Ronit Irshai, revisit and reread traditional sources. See below, note 18.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 231.
- 16 Tal Ilan, 'The Woman as "Other" in Rabbinic Literature', in *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Jörg Frey, Daniel R. Schwartz, and Stephanie Gripentrog (Brill, 2007), 75–92.
- 17 Paula Hyman, 'The Other Half: Women in the Jewish Tradition', *Judaism* 26, no. 4 (1972): 5–28.
- 18 Ronit Irshai, *Fertility and Jewish Law Feminist Perspectives on Orthodox Responsa Literature*, 1st. ed., HBI Series on Jewish Women (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2012).
- 19 Yael Shemesh, "Directions in Jewish Feminist Bible Study," *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 3 (June 2016): 372–406.
- 20 Aviad Avraham Stollman, 'Taharat Ha-mishpakha ha-Datit Leumit', *Akdamot* 43–219 (2004) 77.
- 21 Merav Rosenfeld-Hadad, "There on the Poplars [Arabs] We Hung Up [Rely On] Our Lyres [Jewish Music]": Rabbi 'Ovadyah Yosef's Halakhic Rulings on Arabic Music', *Jewish-Muslim Relations in Past and Present*, 2017, 172–205.
- 22 Abraham Sacca, 'Scholarly Women in the Literary and Ideological World of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef: A Study of His Account of the Story about the Talmudically Erudite Damsel, Compared with the Version by Rabbi Yosef Hayyim', *Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry*, no. 166 (2021): 51–100.
- 23 In a conference commemorating 10 years to Yosef's passing, three papers touched on these matters. The sessions are available online (in Hebrew): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5NvEjBKJa8&list=PLyD9d-D6KQ6sjDqWAntt85GRCI4uNl1RJ>
- 24 Z. Zohar, 'Oriental Jewry Confronts Modernity: The Case of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef', *Modern Judaism* 24, no. 2 (1 May 2004): 120–49.
- 25 Avishay Ben Hayyim, *Maran Rabbi Ovadia Yosef: A Leader between Halakha and Kabbalah, Politics and Mystics* (Jerusalem, Bnei Brak: Carmel, 2018), pp. 173-202. [in Hebrew].
- 26 Ariel Picard, 'Freedom, Liberty and Rabbi Ovadia Yosef', *Havruta; a Journal of Jewish Conversation* 1,2 (2008): 56–67; Amihai Radzyner, "Halakhah, Law and Worldview: Chief Rabbis Goren and Yosef and the Permission to Marry a Second Wife in Israeli Law.," *Diné Israel; Studies in Halacha and Jewish Law*, 2018; Dov Linzer, "Beit Din's Presence in the Mikveh Room for Conversion: A Case Study in Values and Worldview in the Psak of Rav Ovadia Yosef.," *Black Fire on White Fire; Essays in Honor of Rabbi Avi Weiss*, 2017.
- 27 After Yosef's death the college closed down because of funding problems. Lidar Gravé-Lazi, 'College Established by Adina Bar Shalom Set to Close', *The Jerusalem Post | JPost.Com*, 3 November 2016, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/college-established-by-adina-bar-shalom-set-to-close-471622>.
- 28 Zvi Triger, 'The Self-Defeating Nature of "Modesty"- Based Gender Segregation', *Israel Studies* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 19-28, 181.

- 29 Yakir Englander, 'The Image of the Male Body in Lithuanian Ultra-Orthodox Thought in Israel and Corresponding Strategies for Forging an A-Feminine Public Sphere', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 3 (2 September 2014): 457–70, p. 465.
- 30 Ibid., p. 466.
- 31 Ibid. p. 467.
- 32 Adiel Shermer argued that by and large the Talmudic literature is not "especially frantic or hysterical" about sexuality. See: Adiel Shermer, "Marriage, Sexuality, and Holiness: The Anti-Ascetic Legacy of Talmudic Judaism," in *Gender Relationships in Marriage and Out*, ed. Rivkah Teitz Blau, *The Orthodox Forum Series* (New York: Michael Scharf Publication Trust of the Yeshiva University Press, 2007), 35–63, p. 55. But other voices are more critical.
- 33 For a detailed account of the attitudes towards sexuality among different haredi groups see: Noam Zion, *Sanctified Sex: The Two-Thousand-Year Jewish Debate on Marital Intimacy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), pp. 209-250.
- 34 Hannah Kehat, 'Uri Ur: Al hatzorech hadchuf bamuda'ut shel Nashim datiyyot l'ba'ayot hayichudiyyot lahen', in *A Woman and her Judaism: A Contemporary Religious-Feminist Discourse*, ed. Tova Cohen (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass; Kolech, 2013), 21–39, p. 22.
- 35 The Ben Ish Chai composed sermons that were aimed at teaching Halakha. See: Zvi M. Zohar, *Rabbinic Creativity in the Modern Middle East* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 69.
- 36 Zvi Yehuda, *The New Babylonian Diaspora: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Community in Iraq, 16th-20th Centuries C.E.* (Brill, 2017), 8-10.
- 37 David Rotman, 'Kach Nivreti: Nashim Umigdar Besipurey Harav Yosef Chayyim M'Bagdad', *Dameta leTamar Studies in Honor of Tamar Alexander*, no. 15 (2015): 674.
- 38 Specifically, Yosef wanted to revoke halakhic traditions that were contrary to the rulings of Rabbi Yosef Karo.
- 39 Abraham Sacca, 'Scholarly Women in the Literary and Ideological World of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef: A Study of His Account of the Story about the Talmudically Erudite Damsel, Compared with the Version by Rabbi Yosef Hayyim', *Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry*, no. 166 (2021): 51–100.
- 40 Itamar Drori, 'The Law, the Miracle, and the Kabbalist: The Discourse on Miracles in the Legends of Rabbi Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad', *Hebrew Studies* 59 (2018): 237–256.
- 41 Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2012), 20.
- 42 David Rotman, 'Kach Nivreti: Nashim Umigdar Besipurey Harav Yosef Chayyim M'Bagdad', *Dameta leTamar Studies in Honor of Tamar Alexander*, no. 15 (2015): 669–699. For an example that flips the equation is discussed see p. 686.
- 43 Ishay Rosen-Zvi, 'Two Rabbinic Inclinations? Rethinking a Scholarly Dogma', *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 39, no. 4–5 (1 January 2008): 513–39, p. 520.
- 44 For a detailed account of the rabbinic conceptions of the evil inclination see: Ishay. Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires: Yetzer Hara and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 102–19.
- 45 Ishay Rosen-Zvi, "Two Rabbinic Inclinations? Rethinking a Scholarly Dogma," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 39, no. 4–5 (January 1, 2008): 537.
- 46 Yosef Hayyim, *Sefer ben ish chai: drushim u-ramzim* (Jerusalem: stalaman, 1897), p. 50 [in Hebrew; my translation].
- 47 There is also a written version of this folktale. Some of the editorial shifts I mention here are also present in the written version. However, the tale is shorter, and is much less informative as to the parodic, loving tone, with which Yosef presented this folktale in oral form. Furthermore, the written account is also encased in a more didactic anti-secular rhetoric. This stringency does not appear in the oral sermon. See: Ovadia Yosef, *Anaf etz avot: al pirkey avot* (Jerusalem: Makhon Maor Israel, 2001), pp. 206-207 [in Hebrew].
- 48 I could not find a reference as to the source of the "jinn" exclamation, which is related to rolling a double six.
- 49 Here Yosef is making a pun, quoting from Bavli Kritut 6a, he hints that lukewarm tea is like urine.
- 50 Ovadia Yosef, *Parashat Bereshit*, vol. 11 (Ma'adaney Melech, Date Unknown), <http://soundbeliefs.co.il/index.php/ovadia/40-evil-inclination>.
- 51 This form is prevalent already in the Mishna. For a consideration of the narrative forms of halakhic scenarios see: Simon-Shoshan, Moshe. *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012, pp. 23-56.
- 52 Kiddushin 29a:6-7; Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 271:2.

- 53 “They [women] discharge men’s obligations [...] in any case, one should ideally be stringent that a woman not discharge the obligation of men who are not from her household, for the matter is undignified.” (Mishnah Berurah 271:4)
- 54 Yosef, Ovadia. ‘M’hilkhot Shabat - Diney Kidush’. Kol Sinai 3, no. 3 (1963): 81–83.
- 55 Ovadia Yosef, Dinei Kiddush Le’Nashim U’Tefillah Va’Chazarah, vol. 2 (Ma’adaney Melech, n.d.), min: 2.00.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ovadia Yosef, ‘Hilkhot Kidush’, (Jerusalem, 23 October 2004), <https://www.youtube.com/embed/R5K38DM1HG0>, min: 39:40.
- 58 Yitzchak Yosef, “HaRav Yitzchak Yosef - Ha’im Nashim Chayavot BeLimud Halachot?,” May 15, 2018, <https://www.hidabroot.org/article/234464>.
- 59 Although he also recounts a story about how his mother, the wife of rabbi Ovadia Yosef, would give halakhic rulings to people phoning the house asking for the rabbi’s instructions, because she was well versed in halakha, he immediately emphasizes that (a) only one woman was the wife of the great Ovadia Yosef and (b) after giving her ruling she would always update her husband and receive his approval for whatever she said. It would be unthinkable for Yitzchak Yosef to suggest that a woman could be superior to her husband (unless the criterion is cleaning and cooking).
- 60 See Ariel Picard, *The Philosophy of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef in an Age of Transition*, (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2007) p. 197; 237.
- 61 Ovadia Yosef, Mitzvat Onata bi-zmana, date unknown, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dh2-LTGvl80&t=1s>.
- 62 The time called “onata” when it is required to have sexual intercourse is on the night of ritual immersion in the mikvah and sabbath night.
- 63 Judith Plaskow, ‘Authority, Resistance, and Transformation: Jewish Feminist Reflections on Good Sex’, in *Judith Plaskow: Feminism, Theology, and Justice* (Brill, 2014), 69–82, p. 75.
- 64 ‘Rabbi Ovadia: “Women Should Stick to Cooking, Sewing”’, *The Jerusalem Post* | JPost.Com, 30 July 2007, <https://www.jpost.com/jewish-world/jewish-news/rabbi-ovadia-women-should-stick-to-cooking-sewing>; to be fair, news outlets also quoted Yosef on more liberal rulings. For example, it was reported that he is in favor of women serving on religious councils, but the press did not delve into the theoretical principles that guided his decision. See: Yair Ettinger, ‘Ovadia Yosef Favors Appointment of Women to Religious Councils’, *Haaretz*, 18 May 2011, <https://www.haaretz.com/2011-05-18/ty-article/ovadia-yosef-favors-appointment-of-women-to-religious-councils/0000017f-e275-d75c-a7ff-fefd4bd70000>.

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