

The Exclusion of Women from Torah Study

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This article aims at understanding a practice prevalent in Israel's ultra-Orthodox community: the exclusion of women from Torah study. It shows that the halachic roots of the practice lie in the Bible, the Talmud, and the writings of Maimonides. The article attempts to identify the cultural justifications of the practice offered by the ultra-Orthodox culture: the religious duty to obey the community's tradition; the view of women as participating in the *mitzvah* of Torah study "by proxy," i.e., by creating the conditions enabling their husbands to devote themselves to Torah study; a "division of labor" according to which men devote themselves to Torah study while women devote themselves to another supreme communal value, namely the education and upbringing of children. The article claims that the major normative problem in the exclusion of women from Torah study is that it limits the scope of human flourishing available to women. This means that the practice may be objected to not only on liberal grounds, i.e., its violation of the liberal principle of equality, but also on general humanistic grounds. The article seeks to examine whether in recent years it is possible to identify the seeds of a cultural change in this matter in the ultra-Orthodox community.