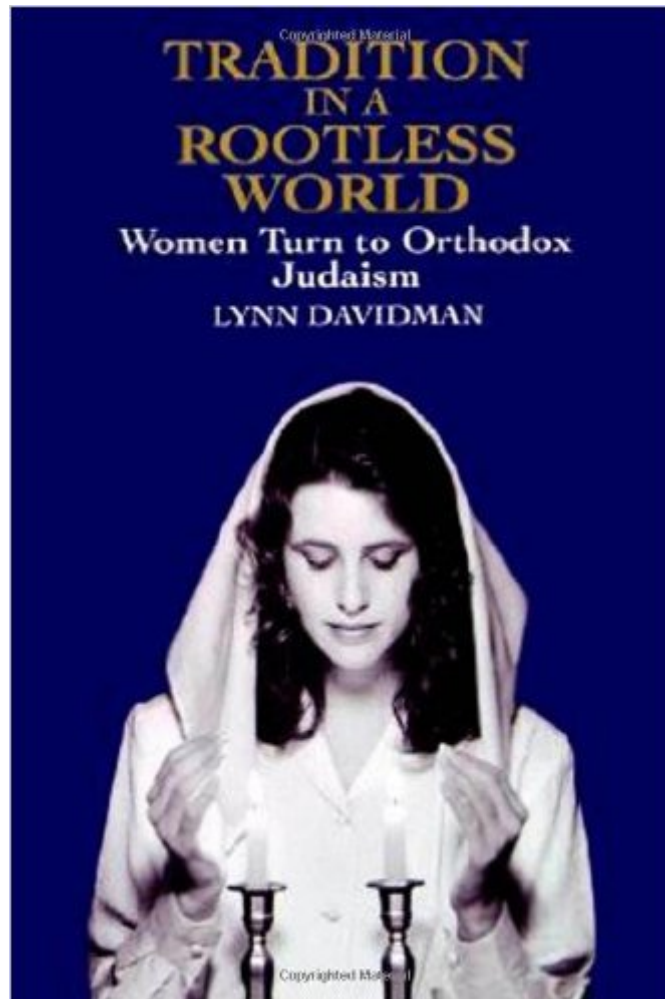


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# Tradition In A Rootless World: Women Turn To Orthodox Judaism



## Synopsis

The past two decades in the United States have seen an immense liberalization and expansion of women's roles in society. Recently, however, some women have turned away from the myriad, complex choices presented by modern life and chosen instead a Jewish orthodox tradition that sets strict and rigid guidelines for women to follow. Lynn Davidman followed the conversion to Orthodoxy of a group of young, secular Jewish women to gain insight into their motives. Living first with a Hasidic community in St. Paul, Minnesota, and then joining an Orthodox synagogue on the upper west side of Manhattan, Davidman pieced together a picture of disparate lives and personal dilemmas. As a participant observer in their religious resocialization and in interviews and conversations with over one hundred women, Davidman also sought a new perspective on the religious institutions that reach out to these women and usher them into the community of Orthodox Judaism. Through vivid and detailed personal portraits, *Tradition in a Rootless World* explores women's place not only in religious institutions but in contemporary society as a whole. It is a perceptive contribution that unites the study of religion, sociology, and women's studies.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A fascinating book that tries to understand how and why some young secular Jewish women are drawn to more orthodox religious communities which reinforce more traditional gender-definitions, and also, how these women are resocialized according to the norms of these communities. In using an ethnographic approach, the advantage her study offers is that we get not only retrospective accounts of these women's stories, but we also can "experience the contexts, ideas and

relationships that led [these] women to be converted" (p. 50). In addition, she notes that "a case study that pays close attention to a specific experience--even an exceptional one--reveals patterns and designs that pervade the larger picture as well" (p. 27). So through her study she hopes to be able to shed some light on not just a few individuals who return to traditional / strict forms of religion, but "on the more general question of the nature, status, and appeal of religion in modern society," and "what religion offers modern secular individuals" in general (p. 27). These are important questions that a comparative ethnographic approach can address that quantitative variables-based approaches simply can't. From reading the accounts of her participants, it seems that these women turn to traditional religion because they are unable to fit into conventional social scripts for people in their situation. These interviews were done in the early-80s; these women were in their mid-30s, single, wanted families, weren't strongly attached to their careers, and were going through some experience of crisis or loss, so they needed order and meaning. But one could argue that as more social scripts and role-models develop over time (e.g., 'Sex and the City' etc.), there will be narratives for them to fit into which will further reduce the need for such people to turn to religion, unless religion can somehow provide a more compelling alternative to even these now-available forms of order and meaning. This argument could be further strengthened by the fact that many of these women seemed to be seeking self-understanding and a sense of identity, so much so that what seemed to matter to them more was "the powerful feelings of belonging and of being part of an ongoing community" rather than religious experience or actual faith (p. 103). It would be good to investigate whether such 'belonging without believing' can persevere over time (e.g., does 'belonging without believing' in stricter religious communities eventually lead to frustration/burnout? Is it possible for the question of 'right belief' to become more important over time in such contexts?, etc.) An interesting point she brings up is the "wisdom of interviewing people who are at a transitional stage in their lives" (p. 60). One concern she tries to address here is dealing with the vulnerability of people whose identities are in a state of flux. But another question might simply be to what degree are people who undergo religious conversions adequately capable of articulating why it is they are doing what they are doing? I would think such accounts would also change over time depending on sustained reflexivity, the nature of interlocutors, and so on. So it would really take something like a longitudinal study, assessing people's accounts over time, to gain better insights into such phenomena.

people who haven't been exposed to Orthodoxy very much. Just to sum up briefly: the modern Orthodox Manhattanites profiled tend to have busy but slightly empty lives, and are trying to fit their

new religious commitment into those lives. Their rabbis tend to focus less on beliefs about Divine existence and desires than on the utilitarian virtues of plugging into the wisdom of a 2000-year-old tradition. The women in the Lubavitch "sleepaway" camp tend to be younger, suffering from very troubled lives, more focused on Divine will, and looking to make a major change in those lives (not surprisingly- since people with satisfactory jobs are usually going to be unable to take a month off). Their rebbes view Chasidism as these women's personal destiny, rather than as a freely chosen alternative. For those of you who are more familiar with Orthodoxy, the charm of this book lies in offhand points that the book makes in passing: for example, its implication that Orthodox triumphalism (that is, the idea that Orthodoxy is the future of Judaism) was far more rare in the 1980s, and that the Lubavitchers were struggling with the Messianic issue (that is, the issue of whether the Rebbe, may his memory be a blessing, was the Messiah) even then.

A very thoughtful depiction of two different groups of women attracted to orthodoxy and the organizational differences as well as the persuasive characteristics of the groups to which they were attracted. Dr. Davidman has an clear and engaging writing style that made this a real page-turner (surprising in an academic book).

An interesting anthropological and sociological look at the impact of feminism on women, and the way modern women have (attempted to) reconciled their modern ideas of womens roles in society with their newfound religiousness. The author's use of two very different groups highlights this, and clearly demonstrates the reasons why women were drawn to the different groups. The look at Bais Chana (a Chabad-Lubavitch residential center) and Lincoln Street Synagogue (a Modern Orthodox synogogue in NYC) is insightful and makes for a very interesting read, although the book is a bit dated due to having been written in the 1980s. I'd definitely recommend it!

Exactly what was said was given. The time in which it arrived was much sooner then expected as well. Excellent service!

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