

An Abstract of the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis of:

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*Kollel* Women's Voices: An Exploration of Work/Family Balance within the  
Ultra-Orthodox Learning Community

A phenomenological study of one culture's approach to balancing work and family, this thesis presents the individual and distinctive voices of young American kollel wives living in Israel who support their families while their husbands study in yeshiva. It presents not only the ways that the value-message of a culture provides support to its women, but also seeks to position this cohort within American work culture and to bridge the gap between assimilated and ultra-Orthodox Jewish women.

This study synthesizes empirical and qualitative studies that explore the challenges that women encounter in the American workplace, discussions of Jewish feminism, research on ultra-Orthodoxy and its women, and literature written by and for the ultra-Orthodox community.

The qualitative research conducted in this study reveals six major themes that highlight what is unique about the women who are essential participants in kollel culture. It discusses the benefits that kollel wives derive from their dedication to their husbands' learning, their distinctive coping mechanisms, the interweaving of personal and family ambition, the seminary as a formative experience, religious perfectionism, and the relationship of this cohort to the larger Israeli culture. Not only does this study represent one view of the struggles of working women at a time when the impact of balancing work and family is in question, but resists the tendency to view ultra-Orthodox women as "other" and includes them within the discourse on the feminist project.