

Book Review

Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar. *Strictly Observant: Amish and Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women Negotiating Media*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2024. 205 pp.

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Despite living in communities consciously and determinedly separate from mainstream society, Old Order Amish (OOA) women in North America and Ultra-Orthodox Jewish (UOJ) women in Israel employ various media technologies to interact with the world outside community borders. In *Strictly Observant: Amish and Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women Negotiating Media*, Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar looks at the complicated relationships OOA women in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and Ashkenazi and Lithuanian UOJ women in Israel have with print, radio, television, and the internet. In particular, she explores how these women function both as “gatekeepers,” keeping unwanted influences away from home and community, and “agents of change,” interacting with the secular world to provide for their families’ needs. In doing so, Neriya-Ben Shahar makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the roles of women in religious communities that exist separate from but within mainstream society.

Neriya-Ben Shahar begins her comparative study with what she calls a “thick description” of OOA and UOJ life. Chapter 1, “Under the Eyes of God: One Day in the Life of an Old Order Amish Woman,” follows one day in the life of Emma, while Chapter 2, “From the Holy House and Community to the Secular Workplace and Back: One Day in the Life of an Ultra-Orthodox Woman,” follows Sara’s daily routine. Both chapters draw on participant-observation, questionnaires, and interviews. According to Neriya-Ben Shahar, the goal of these “day in the life of” chapters is to offer a comparison between the daily lives of OOA women and those of women in UOJ communities.

The portraits of Emma and Sara offer compelling similarities. Both women are devoted to their husbands and children in communities in which family is treasured. Both are set off from the mainstream by the clothes they wear, the language they speak, and religious proscriptions on their use of technology. Both live very busy lives, and both are determined to maintain the rules of their respective communities.

But these two chapters are not ethnographies. Instead, they are portraits that reflect the author’s “experiences of...days spent with each woman” (23). There is little demographic information to show how representative Emma and Sara are of their respective communities. Although the author



acknowledges that there are OOA women who work “outside the home” (21), Emma is not one of them, nor does Emma interact with OOA women who work or who own businesses. Nor is it clear that Sara’s overworked life, in which she rises at 6 a.m., works until midnight, and has little time in which to eat, is typical of women’s lives in UOJ communities. Interestingly, Neriya-Ben Shahar makes no claim that her informants always “spoke and wrote the truth” (22), raising the issue of authenticity in the stories she tells. Ultimately, because her informants’ “religious and moral grounding and their strong education for integrity” (22), she argues for the accuracy of her portrayals.

These two chapters set the stage for the discussion that follows of how OOA and UOJ women manage media technologies. Chapter 3, “‘Only Occasionally, When I Happen to be Around One’: Self-Justifications of Media Consumption as Boundary Management,” focuses on how women like Emma and Sara use media to reinforce intra-community relationships and inter-community boundaries. For example, the OOA rely on print media but, because they do not use electricity in their homes, eschew radio and television. Similarly, the UOJ do not permit television in their homes and seldom listen to radio but permit print media that reflects community standards. Nevertheless, as the portraits of Emma and Sara suggest, OOA and UOJ women are often encountering media technologies that have no place in their communities, and their consumption or lack of consumption gives them agency as they manage community boundaries.

In Chapter 4, “My Husband Told Me...”: The Women’s Relationships with News,” Neriya-Ben Shahar looks at the information women are getting from print and other media and how they manage their consumption of information. She argues that both OOA and UOJ women are heavy consumers of news and are able to enhance their own intra-community status through how they consume and share it. She also asserts that how they obtain the news is related to their consumption of news and their perceptions of different types of news. It would be interesting to know more about how news reinforces intra-community stereotypes, thus affecting community boundaries. Further, *news* itself is a term that needs some unpacking. Neriya-Ben Shahar shows that OOA and UOJ women distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate content, but on what basis? Is the source the determining characteristic? How does whether content is “secular” or “religious” affect its acceptability? Is “news” as presented in Amish-authored *The Budget* or *Die Botschaft* like “news” as presented in the mainstream Lancaster, Pennsylvania, newspapers or “news” shared by a taxi driver? Is all news equally subject to restrictions based on time expenditure?

Chapter 5, “Satan’s Tool to Draw Our Focus Away from God: The Women’s Perceptions about Media Technologies and Content,” explores some of these issues further, drawing on two theories. The first, *apparatgeist*, argues that use of technology is more socially constructed than shaped by what the technology can do. For example, both OOA and UOJ women accept the utility of the internet but limit its use. The second theory, “the influence of presumed influence,” argues that people perceive a message to have some effect and then react to that perception (106–107). In short, Neriya-Ben Shahar argues that both OOA and UOJ women perceive media, particularly extra-community media, to have a negative impact on society and act accordingly to protect home and family from that media. Community values act to shape how media are accepted or not.

Using these two theories, Neriya-Ben Shahar draws a distinction between media and message. As she makes clear, print media is far more accepted by both OOA and UOJ women, but OOA women read a wide variety of sources, while UOJ women are far more restrictive in the print media they allow. OOA women reject both radio and television, whereas UOJ women acknowledge the utility of the radio as long as content is controlled. The internet proves problematic for women in both communities, for it can be utilitarian as well as entertaining. Neriya-Ben Shahar provides an excellent analysis of how UOJ women restrict internet use to the workplace, protecting the home and family from its pernicious effects. Unfortunately, there is no suggestion that OOA women might use the internet at work or even have it in their homes for business or via smartphones, so we cannot compare OOA and UOJ strategies for restricting its influence. Further, Neriya-Ben Shahar's analysis reinforces the need for a more nuanced exploration of media content. What, for example, does "local" mean in reference to print media? Does the content of some Amish print media and the source of that media affect its use in diverse Amish groups in the same way it does in UOJ communities?

Chapter 6, "'We'd Rather Talk about Babies': Sharing Behaviors among Amish and Ultra-Orthodox Women," continues the discussion of media use by exploring how women share information with others to reinforce media boundaries and social ties. She argues further that women have agency in deciding what to share and with whom and, in this way, women manage social capital, maintain social boundaries, and act as agents of change. This chapter also raises a number of questions for future research, most importantly about the parameters of "sharing." Does the "use vs. ownership" that gives the OOA physical control of technologies they do not own also give the OOA greater flexibility in the sharing of information? For example, "Lovina" has no hesitancy in sharing with "Mary" that she has watched TV while visiting her father in the hospital, even though both agree that a TV is nothing they would have in their homes.

In her final chapter, "'I Made It as a Boundary for Myself': Concluding Discussion on the Women's Boundary Management," Neriya-Ben Shahar reaffirms her argument that "understanding media consumption as an essential practice...enables a better understanding of peoples' life experiences" (177). Her findings support the notion that women in religious communities actively engage in decision-making about media consumption in ways that both strengthen and challenge their separation from worldly society. Thus, understanding how women work to build, maintain, and strengthen boundaries is essential to appreciating the complexity and the flexibility of those boundaries.

Interestingly, Neriya-Ben Shahar argues that a primary difference between OOA women and UOJ women "is that the decisions of the Amish are reflected in practices and behaviors. In contrast, those of the Ultra-Orthodox are reflected primarily in discourse" (169). She suggests that this may be because "the Amish perceive Scripture as a reliable guide, whereas the Ultra-Orthodox have an interpretive, argumentative heritage related to the studying of religious texts such as the Torah and the Talmud" (169–170). This contention seems to ignore the importance of tradition and consensus in shaping the evolving Amish response to worldly issues and raises questions about the role of *Ordnung* in OOA decision-making. It also calls for further research of authority in women's

decision-making and attitudes in these two communities toward gender, Bible study, and religious texts.

Offering the first systematic comparison of Old Order Amish and Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, *Strictly Observant* makes an important contribution to a variety of fields, including communications, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and gender studies. Hopefully, Neriya-Ben Shahar's work will motivate others to engage in these kinds of comparative studies. Certainly, *Strictly Observant* challenges those who study OOA and UOJ communities to explore further how members of these diverse communities evolve strategies to strengthen personal and community boundaries in response to pressures from mainstream, secular society.