

Visual Struggle for gender egalitarianism in Judaism in Israel

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Photographs of female clergy conducting Jewish ceremonies in Reform synagogues are considered highly controversial by Ultra- Orthodox Judaism in Israel. Such photographs appear on social media of Reform Judaism, which advocates egalitarianism in religion. This research presents a case-study of Beit Daniel, a liberal Reform synagogue, which employs visual material to promote its causes, one of which is gender equality in Judaism, introducing images of diversity and inclusion in their social networks. It is located in Tel Aviv, the hub of a secular metropolis with a majority of secular residents. Beit Daniel is unique in having attempted to create its own visual vernacular of gender equality as a struggle against gender discrimination in Israel. The study presents an analysis of its' forms of photographic documentation of ceremonies in and outside the synagogue, posted on Facebook and websites.

The visual material on social media has become, de facto, a new vernacular of Reform Judaism in Tel Aviv. The visual presentation contains images of women and men participating in services equally, female Rabbis, women wearing a *Thallit* and *Kippa*, women reading from the Torah, conducting services and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies.

The choice of topics allows a plethora of images of gender and social diversity, mixed couples and same sex partners. The visual material is employed as a means to construct a new form of liberal religious spectatorship and progressive religious viewing, that plays part in constructing a metanarrative of freedom of religious, egalitarian practice amongst Jews in Tel Aviv. The study expands on notions of secularism and liberalism in Israeli society, which are largely threatened by dominant Jewish Orthodox institutions that encourage discrimination towards women in Israel in all sectors of life.

The analysis employs social-semiotic tools for decoding the visual elements that participate in a struggle for visual cultural normalization of gender egalitarianism. The analysis relates to the social culture and period in which the images were created and presented.ⁱ Methodologically, the information on the synagogue media platforms is multi-modal; it includes music, live performances, images, texts, audio recordings, video recordings, writing, singing, liturgy, speech, ceremonies, and religious rituals. Hence, multiple paths of digital interactions with the viewers are created, allowing the viewers to engage with the images, to respond, and be proactive. The goals are to examine the influence of the process of construction, selection, and dissemination of visual material in various social media platforms.

The study explores the concept of viewing religion, which is internally negotiated by viewers in visual meaning making processes. Critical religious viewing can enable viewers to decode the visibility- the conditions of seeing, what is shown and what is lacking and the visibility- the potential determining power factors in the images. It can enhance gender sensitivity in relation to religious viewing of gender presentations.

ⁱ Van Leuwen (2005) *Introducing Social Semiotics*, London and New York, Routledge. p. 4