

Discourse of Practice: The Negotiation of Sexual Norms Via Online Religious Discourse

RUTH TSURIA
Seton Hall University, USA

This article examines the negotiation of sexual practices through online discourse within a global religious community. Online questions and answers (Q&A) are analyzed while considering the technological affordances of the websites where these discourses take place as well as the discursive strategies. A total of $n = 60$ Q&A and $n = 81$ comments from three Jewish religious websites in the U.S. and Israel were collected and analyzed. These Q&A discuss issues of masturbation and touch between the sexes. It is argued that changes in the practices of the discourse—the fact that it is now online—shift elements in the concepts discussed in the discourse. Though the technological affordances allow taboo questions to be asked and enable a participatory discourse, this discourse is then used by rabbis and users to promote a strict approach toward sexuality and for peer regulation. Thus, this online discourse enforces traditional, and even fundamental, religious sexual practices.

Keywords: online Q&A, sexuality, online discourse, digital religion, Judaism online, authority online, social norms

This article examines how online communication can shift discussions related to social behaviors. It explores what happens when a shift in the practices of a discourse takes place, and, more concretely, what happens when traditional religious discursive practices meet new communication technologies. It has been argued that the Internet can allow for a more democratic access to knowledge, leading to the empowerment of those previously disempowered (Effing, Van Hillegersberg, & Huibers, 2011; Jenkins, 2006). This article complicates this claim and demonstrates that a careful examination of religious online discourses reveals the possibility of digital media strengthening traditional and fundamentalist views.

This argument is based on a four-year investigation on discursive behaviors in religious Orthodox Jewish online spaces. Here, I will focus on a specific case study related to the discussion of sexuality in these Orthodox online discourses. Orthodox Judaism serves as an important example for what happens when an “old” religion meets “new” media: how tools like anonymity and online sharing might reshape the way that Orthodox Judaism conceptualizes sexuality. A case study of questions and answers (Q&A) and comments, sampled from three different Jewish Orthodox websites (AskMoses.com, Aish.com, Kipa.co.il) serves as the main focus of analysis for this article. Although the digital format of Q&A allows individuals to ask questions

Ruth Tsuria: ruth.tsuria@shu.edu

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that would traditionally be considered taboo and gives them easier direct access to rabbis, especially people who in the past had limited interactions with rabbis—like women (Pitkowsky, 2011), this has not led to a change in doctrine. This article shows how digital discourse can be used to maintain traditional views and norms concerning sexuality, thus preserving certain traditional or even fundamental attitudes, such as the notion that female sexuality is nonexistent or the notion that masturbation is a dangerous sin. Thus, this article contributes to the understanding of the ways in which online communication shapes our lives and makes a distinct argument about how online media can support, rather than subvert, hierarchies and traditions.

Research on religious online communication has global and political importance (Hoover, 2012). In the 21st century alone, we have seen how religion influences politics and election results, might incite violence, and affects daily actions of religious and nonreligious people alike (Whitehead, Perry, & Baker, 2018). Digital media have been pivotal in the global spread of religious ideas and communities, and, thus, researching digital religion contributes to understanding current social trends and behaviors (Zeiler, 2014).

This article examines Jewish Orthodox communication online. Orthodox Judaism is a religiously strict Jewish denomination that has a specific lifestyle governed by the rules of the Jewish legal system, the *Halacha* (Liebman, 1979). Orthodox Jews pray, eat, sleep, celebrate, and have relationships in accordance with *Halachic* rules. Jewish Orthodox communities that adopt digital media often use them for various religious purposes, such as asking the advice of a religious authority, a rabbi. Consulting with a rabbi is an established custom in Jewish tradition, with a long, rich history. Questions sent to rabbis throughout Jewish history have created the *Halachic* literature known as *Responsa*. With the spread of digital technology, the scale and style of *Responsa* is shifting (Steinitz, 2011). Whereas in the past *Responsa* was a more elite activity, requiring both literacy and money, digital *Responsa* is much more accessible. *Responsa* in the past was an activity from which women were by and large an absent actor. Women rarely asked the questions themselves, and they never answered them (because there were no female rabbis until mid-20th century). In the vast *Responsa* literature, it is not uncommon to find questions sent on behalf of women, but these were obviously transcribed and thus translated by male intermediaries (Pitkowsky, 2011). From the turn of the 20th century onwards, as women became more educated and have greater access and freedoms, there is a growth in the number of questions sent to rabbis by women (Pitkowsky, 2011). For example, *Iggerot Moshe*, a *Responsa* collection by Rabbi Feinstein, with questions answered between 1959 and 1996, has some questions sent by women. Three of these questions even explicitly mention sexual issues (Pitkowsky, 2011). However, even in these modern *Responsa* collections, the number of questions asked by women is relatively small: For example, Rabbi Halevy's *Aseih lekha rav* contains more than 900 Q&A sent between 1976 and 1989. Only 24 of them were asked by women (Pitkowsky, 2011). In contrast, in online interactions, questions related to sexual and gender norms are more frequent, as both women and sexual minorities are actively taking part in the *Responsa* discourse (Pitkowsky, 2011). This negotiation of sexual norms takes place both in the general online discourse, and specifically in the *Responsa* discourse, where it has the potential to directly impact accepted practices (Tsuria, 2016).

Two specific religious practices related to sexuality are examined in this article: prohibitions regarding masturbation (*'wnnwt*) and prohibitions against physical touch between the sexes (*Shmirat Negiah*). Male masturbation has been considered illicit, although not always explicitly prohibited, in Jewish culture since biblical times (Patton, 1985). Later sources are clearer and stricter about this prohibition. Today, male masturbation is considered a severe sin (Theobald, 2012). Female masturbation, although not prohibited, is considered immoral.

This is because “this passion should be restrained in order to add love and devotion between a man and his wife, and not to satisfy selfish lust” (Melamed, 2016, para. 1, translated from Hebrew by the author). Abstinence, or *Shmirat Negiah* (keeping the touch), is a religious concept that has been rapidly evolving in the last few decades. The modern-day Jewish Orthodox sense of abstinence is simple: You cannot touch the other sex if the individual in question is not your spouse. This includes no premarital intimacy, no hugging, and even no hand-holding or hand-shaking. The purpose of this prohibition is to prevent adultery and premarital sex, and in this way, it is similar to the contemporary Evangelical Christian idea of abstinence. But it differs in two salient ways: first, *Shmirat Negiah* should be practiced not only with intimate touch but with any touch between the sexes. Second, *Shmirat Negiah* can also refer to touch between married couples during the wife’s menstruation.

Masturbation and *Shmirat Negiah* are both considered taboo in Orthodox religious society, not to be discussed in public, as Orthodox Jews generally refrain from speaking about sexuality. However, these topics are discussed in Orthodox digital spaces (Theobald, 2012). They became more openly negotiated in the religious online sphere, partly because the Internet enables discussing these personal issues anonymously. Therefore, examining the online discussion of taboo issues allows for the investigation of the construction and negotiation strategies of highly contentious topics in the anonymous, “democratizing” medium (Gottesman, 2009) of online Q&A websites.

Practices of Discourse and Discourse of Practice

Discourse is broadly understood in contemporary scholarship as an entangled web of signs and sentiments related to a topic or a field, such as academic discourse, medical discourse, etc. More elusively, Foucault considered discourse in the following way:

[discourse is] ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are [...] the unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. (Weedon, 1987, p. 108)

Discourses, then, construct the way in which a topic is understood by those participating in the discourse. In discourse, both power and resistance are enacted (Foucault, 1969/2012)—through discourses, knowledge is constructed and what is considered right and wrong is negotiated. As explained further by Van Leeuwen (2008), “[Because] discourses are social cognitions, socially specific ways of knowing social practices, they can be, and are, used as resources for representing social practices in text” (p. 6). Through that representation of the practice, the worth and meaning of it is revealed and/or negotiated. For example, the discourse on gender neutral bathrooms can enable a position that attempts to resist existing gendered power structures. In some cases, the resistance was able to reframe the social practice. In other cases, the existing gendered power “won” and even used this discourse to further establish gendered power structures.

Online media too can be theorized as a type of discourse, or a tool that enables discourses in various communities. By understanding communication technology as a tool for power and resistance, we can think of the digital as a “space” in which people negotiate social practices—specifically, in this article: negotiate religious sexual norms. Digital media are defined here as communication accessed through electronic and digital

computers, especially communication online (i.e., the Internet). Digital media tend to include diverse and malleable media (from e-books to video vines); thus, digital media can be thought of as a "meta-medium" (Finnemann, 2011). In this article, digital media refer to online communication through websites.

In digital media, creation is considered participatory and interactive, and therefore, more democratic than "old" media (Jenkins, 2006). It is more democratic and participatory because the Internet is open: Any user can create and upload content, interact with other people and companies, blog, react, post, and repost. This means people have more avenues in which to voice their opinions, and more access to participate in the creation and distribution of media, which naturally destabilizes existing power structures of media production and distribution and grants more power to individuals and communities (Jenkins, 2006).

Given these participatory affordances, digital media especially have been theorized as tools useful for liberation and negotiation of gender and sexual norms and narratives. However, digital media have also been presented as tools used to intensify gender normativity and regulate "correct" sexual behavior (Banet-Weiser, 2018). I suggest it is precisely this tension between liberation and regulation that can be thought of as a tangible version of Foucault's (1977, 1969/2012) discourse.

Foucauldian discourse refers to systematic statements and practices that aim to define, produce, or regulate a term or structure. According to Pentzold and Seidenglanz (2006), "discursive practices delimiting the field of objects, defining a legitimate perspective and fixing the norms the elaboration of concepts" (p. 62). That is, discourse is understood as an epistemological power structure that works to maintain, for example, traditional sexual norms. In other words, discourses are "ways of constituting knowledge" (Weedon, 1987), and they allow for both domination and resistance.

The usefulness of Foucault and his notion of discourse has been recognized in digital media studies and used to investigate the construction of online identity (Aycok, 1995); information systems (Stahl, 2004); Wikipedia's knowledge structures (Pentzold & Seidenglanz, 2006); Internet archeology and genealogy (Goddard, 2015; Parikka, 2012); and even "e-religion" (Karaflogka, 2014). Although these studies use Foucault in various ways, the common underlying assumption is that through the digital, knowledge and power are constructed, negotiated, and maintained.

Knowledge and power are important topics for the study of digital religion, which explores the "evolution of religious practices online which are linked to online and offline contexts simultaneously" (Campbell, 2013, p. 1). Many religious institutions operate based on hierarchies (power), and these hierarchies are usually based on accumulating religious knowledge. On the Internet, access to knowledge becomes unilateral, and hierarchies can flatten (Cheong, 2013). Studies in digital religion and authority show that institutional religious authority does not disappear, but rather shift and change as individualized spirituality and religiosity becomes empowered through digital media (Cloete, 2016). Many of these previous studies have a Weberian understanding of authority and power (as one's ability to influence and control) instead of a Foucauldian one (a social-psychological process), and thus digital media are viewed simply as tools for liberation and empowerment, instead of as a discourse, in which power, regulation, and resistance operate. Especially in the study of Online Judaism and gender/sexuality, previous scholarship highlights digital media as a tool for female empowerment, a space to voice and explore divergent sexualities (Pitkowsky, 2011;

Theobald, 2012). For example, Theobald (2012) in his research of LGBTQI+ websites and online support groups, claims that, "Orthodox community members have used digital technologies to step outside the narrow confines of communal control and create 'safe spaces' for the exploration of non-hegemonic sexual practices and sexualities" (p. 289). Without downplaying previous scholarship's important findings, this article contributes by displaying a more complicated picture. In this article, the analysis of online Jewish Q&A on sexuality shows how these discourses foster resistance, but also maintain and stabilize traditional power.

Analyzing discourse means observing the practices of a discourse: the rules of engagement in a specific discourse, how knowledge is created and maintained, who speaks and in what way. Online, many knowledge-production social systems—many discourses—are shifting, or at the very least, the practices of these discourses are shifting. Through Facebook, Twitter, blogs, Wikis, and websites, knowledge is created and disseminated in new ways (Burger, Thornborrow, & Fitzgerald, 2017; Gruber, 2017; Kuteeva & Mauranen, 2018). The practices of discourses change. So how does a change in the practices of a discourse change the norms of the discourse and the concepts it seeks to define? This article examines such changes to a specific discourse—sexual prohibitions within Jewish law, negotiated through the legal literature of *Responsa* (Q&A)—to examine more broadly practices of discourse and discourses of practice.

Responsa is a rabbinical term for the exchange of letters (or other forms of communication technology) in which one party consults another on *Halachic* or theological matters. Letters and scrolls found in ancient synagogues were later published in print editions. *Responsa* literature reveals the ways in which *Halachic* discourse develops—the discussions between rabbis and communities and the ways in which lived experiences informed legal traditions (Epstein, 1930). The practice of asking the rabbi is therefore a religiously and historically rooted form of negotiating social norms. *Responsa* can be thought of as a site of *Halachic* molding, a site of push and pull between lived needs and traditional decrees (Irshai, 2010). In what ways, then, does a change in the infrastructure of the discourse—a move from "old" to "new" media—change the concepts that this discourse seeks to dictate?

With advances in communication technologies, the traditional practice of religious Q&A incorporated new forms of media. *Responsa* were mailed, printed, telegraphed, faxed, broadcasted, and, more recently, e-mailed, texted, and posted online (Rashi, 2012). Online, we tend to think of our interactions as happening in the moment and the Internet as a "use-and-forget" source of knowledge. However, if Jews using online Q&A think of them as a new medium for an old practice, Q&A are not something they can forget. In fact, quite the opposite—the answer a rabbi gives online becomes part of the vast, ancient, and ongoing *Halachic* corpus, detailing the minutiae of how to practice Judaism. It is in this religious context that Jewish digital Q&A take place.

Analyzing Jewish Online Q&A Concerning Masturbation and *Shmirat Negiah*

Sample

The Q&A were selected from three Jewish websites: Askmoses.org (hereafter AskMoses), Aish.com (Aish), and Kipa.co.il (Kipa). AskMoses (Chabad) and Aish are two global organizations, operating from the U.S., but with headquarters and branches in Europe, Israel, Asia, and South America. Their websites are in

English. Kipa is an Israeli website, and all the content in it is in Hebrew. All three websites are created and operated by and for Orthodox Jews.

On all these websites, the Q&A are tagged or categorized by topics, such as “holidays,” “intimacy,” and “kosher food.” While the Q&A discussed in this article are sensitive in nature, they are not hidden on the websites—a simple search for words like “sex” or “masturbation” retrieved various Q&A dealing with these topics. During the three-month period of July 2016–September 2016, a total of $n = 60$ Q&A were selected from the three websites. In the case of Aish and AskMoses, all questions dealing with these topics were selected, which totaled 10 questions from Aish and $n = 22$ questions from AskMoses. In the case of Kipa, to keep a relative equal sample size among the different websites, the most recent questions during the time period of July–September 2016 were selected, totaling in $n = 28$ questions (note: questions would appear as recent in Kipa’s Q&A database if they had a recent comment, so the sample has, for example, a question from 2004 that has comments from 2016). The data were analyzed during 2016–17 and reevaluated in June–August 2019. This methodology is thus limited in analyzing only what exists online, and not how online readers of these Q&A or other community members think and act regarding these issues. Thus, this article’s scope is to highlight the trends in the online discourse about practice, not how the actual practice is carried out in real life. My argument is that a shift in the practices of a discourse (from closed to open, from elite to democratizing) can lead to a shift in the discourse about these practices (how these practices are conceptualized—in this case, the strengthening and normalization of strict positions that were less concrete in preonline discursive contexts).

The purpose of this investigation is to examine the ways in which the construction and negotiation of sexual norms take place online. Focus is placed on the ways traditional stances are empowered and resisted in the digital discourse. To fully understand the shift in the practices of the discourse, the analysis began with an exploration of technological affordances and how they structure the discourse. Then, a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989) of the texts sampled was conducted, to see how norms shift within this online discourse.

Analysis: Technological Affordances

To highlight the new practices of this online discourse, the first layer of the analysis focuses on the technological affordances identified in the websites studied. Technological affordances are defined as ways in which the design features of the websites request, demand, allow, encourage, discourage, and refuse users’ interactions and engagement (Davis & Chouinard, 2016). In other words, “the affordances of any given object make certain actions possible, they exclude others, and structure the interaction between the actor and user” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 27). The concept of affordances deepens the understanding of user–rabbi interactions because it highlights how website design allows certain actions (e.g., asking), encourages others (e.g., sharing), and precludes other actions (e.g., rating the answer or deleting it). Different technological affordances permit different types of discourses. Paying attention to the affordances of digital media helps us understand how these are used for the construction, negotiation, and representation of practices.

Aish, AskMoses, and Kipa all have affordances that contribute to and enable the construction of a participatory discourse. Most notable are options for engagement. The websites operate on a spectrum of

possible engagement: Aish allows the most minimal engagement (sharing the Q&A to social media platforms), Kipa allows some user engagement (sharing posts, commenting on rabbi's responses), and AskMoses allows a high level of engagement (sharing, commenting, rating the Q&A, and chatting directly with a rabbi).

The analysis of these platforms highlights three elements: anonymity, sharing, and direct access. The option for anonymity is exemplified in Kipa's comment section. On Kipa, users have the ability to comment on the Q&A, using a Kipa internal username, one's Facebook profile, or anonymously. The findings show that in the Q&A section, most people react either anonymously, or using a one-time username (such as "S" or "Thanks!"). In the sample from Kipa collected for this article, of $n = 49$ comments, only one person reacted using their Facebook profile, and two people commented using their Kipa profiles. The fact that most users commented anonymously might indicate that the option of anonymity is helpful when taboo issues of sexuality are discussed. It could also have to do with the relative ease of anonymous reaction, which does not require a login.

In terms of sharing, as mentioned before, all three websites allow sharing the Q&A on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. A visual analysis of the websites suggests that sharing is even encouraged, because the sharing buttons tend to be relatively large, visible, and placed strategically in easy-to-see places on the webpage. Finally, regarding direct access, while all websites allow users to ask rabbis directly by submitting questions through a platform, the AskMoses site is unique in its direct-chat capability. This, then, makes access to the religious authority immediate and intimate, and the website designers seem to value the sharing capabilities of Web 2.0, and they deploy them in their website. After direct chats take place between a rabbi and asker, selected chats are then published publicly, sharing an edited conversation. In these ways, the websites allow and encourage users to "speak" directly with the experts (the rabbis).

In summary, when viewed together, the three websites' design features enable a discourse that is interactive either through sharing/spreading or through commenting/rating. These design features create an open digital discourse, which encourages sharing and spreading the Q&A. This digital discourse is not elite or closed, but rather tries to be open and spreadable, something that can be shared between lay people and even people from outside the community (when sharing on Facebook, for example). Putting Q&A online shifts the norms of traditional *Responsa* discourse in a few noteworthy ways: First, the interactive options expand the creation of knowledge, which is now not only in the hands of the rabbis and the elite, but also in the hands of lay users. Second, in this discourse, taboo questions are more easily raised. Here, the technological affordance of anonymity allows women to ask questions directly to a rabbi and also allows women to react to these *Halachic* rulings through the comment section. However, the ability of these women to post anonymous questions does not always result in a challenge to or diminishment of rabbinical authority. As argued by Balsamo (1996), shapers of technology already work within a hierarchical and gendered mindset, and consequently tend to reproduce patriarchal structures. In fact, it can be argued that constant access to rabbis through digital media only increases their authority. Regardless, rabbinic authority online operates in a digital discourse that also assumes and promotes users' participation. Thus, the discourse negotiating sexual norms in the Orthodox Jewish digital spaces is openly accessible, public, and participatory. It is not in the hands of the religious authority alone; the implications of these technological affordances are that this negotiation is entrusted to "everyone and yet no one in particular" (Bartky, 1997, p. 142).

Analysis: Discursive Strategies

The term “discursive strategies” refers to the types of arguments, word choices, and implicit or explicit assumptions that rabbis and users implement. The following analysis was conducted by separating and examining each of the three elements of the Q&A: questions asked, answers given, and the reactions users posted.

Questions

Unlike other sections on the religious websites, in which the website editors or religious leaders decide about the topics worthy of publication, the Q&A sections are a bottom-up type of knowledge creation. Users’ questions initiate the discussion of topics, including taboo ones such as sexual norms. Of course, the website editors still make the decision to publish it, and the answer—the “correct” knowledge—is still in the hands of the experts, the rabbis. Therefore, it would be more precise to think of these questions as knowledge creation that includes anonymous, user-based concerns filtered through editorial agendas and policies.

Because this sample contains questions related to masturbation and *Shmirat Negiah*, all of the questions analyzed are somewhat sensitive. Although some users ask general questions—such as “What is the *Torah* source prohibiting premarital sex?”—many of the questions, although anonymous, are very personal. The following questions are good examples of shared personal dilemmas:

Q: I am not promiscuous and I have never been. I really only want to have sex with the girl I love and who will be my wife when married. I love her so much and I am going to marry her (I promised this and I will keep it, and so did she). Why must I wait until the actual wedding, why can't we be intimate now? (“Why Wait,” 2017)

Q: My boyfriend just got a new job and will be moving to my city. He says that it's time we start living together. The idea seems to have advantages—shared expenses, and we can spend more time together. But I'm wondering if there is a downside to this as well? (“Living Together,” 2017)

These users are sharing intimate details about their lives. In the first example, the asker is resisting the notion of *Shmirat Negiah*, by claiming one should be able to touch the other sex before marriage. In fact, in his chat with the religious authority, he constantly pushes back against the idea of *Shmirat Negiah*, saying God knows that their love is true. The second user, on the other hand, seems to be seeking support for a more traditional life choice (not living together).

These are examples of explicit acceptance or resistance to the religious norms, but some users’ negotiations are more implicit. For example, other users present their own inability to keep the *Halachic* ruling as a struggle, problem, or “sin.” By doing so, these users implicitly accept the traditional norms and the *Halachic* rulings. For example: “My wife and I are married for about a year and a half. . . . My wife is in the beginning of her first pregnancy and the doctors forbade us from having intercourse. . . . My question is: Is there a prohibition on male masturbation during this time?” (Straus, 2014). Again, without revealing

his identity, the questioner reveals a lot about his life. It seems that one way in which the askers make their questions legitimate, necessary, and worthy of being asked is by sharing the specifics of their cases—personal demotivation or mental pain. Perhaps they are even trying to justify their actions because of their unique personal situation. That is, the askers are not necessarily trying to make claims to an overarching change in *Halachic* rulings, but to procure an exception for their particular case. By framing the topic as personal and not communal—as a change in the specific, not a change in the general norms—they can perhaps be allowed specific change in norms without claiming to disrupt the system.

Other users already accept the strict position, and frame their actions as sins. They write to the rabbis to ask for forgiveness or tips for not sinning. For example:

Masturbation is . . . a sin I've committed quite a bit! . . . :(I don't want [to do] this at all! I'm not like everyone else who does it for fun. . . . I am so sad that I killed a child! [Masturbated]. And I beg that God will forgive me—what should I do so that the *Yetzer* [desire] will leave me and God will forgive me? Fast? Give charity? (S. Eliyahu, 2013, translated from Hebrew by the author)

Here, the user is not negotiating the severity of his actions. In fact, he might even present a more severe interpretation of his actions than the rabbi (who tells him he is already on the right path and he need not feel so sad).

All the questions were coded as either accepting or resisting religious sexual norms based on assessing the style and tone of the questions users asked. For example, an “accepting” question includes phrases like “I know this is wrong,” thus asserting a *Halachic* stance as correct. A “compromising” question includes phrases like “while I know this is wrong, maybe . . . ,” thus negotiating communal norms and personal stories/practices. A neutral question would be something like, “What is the Jewish attitude toward this?”—not taking a stance. Lastly, a resisting question would include explicit statements against a practice, like “I do not think we should follow this law,” thus overtly opposing a *Halachic* stance. Of $n = 60$ questions, the negotiation of practices at the level of the question ranges from resisting ($n = 12$), to compromising norms to some degree ($n = 14$), to neutral ($n = 11$), to already supporting the practice at the level of the question ($n = 23$). As can be seen from Table 1, supporting the rabbinical stance was found to be far more common than resisting it.

Table 1. Attitudes Inherent in Questions in Three Orthodox Jewish Q&A Websites.

	Kipa	Aish	AskMoses	Total
Accepting	14	2	7	23
Neutral	4	2	5	11
Compromising	6	4	4	14
Resisting	4	2	6	12

Answers

When it comes to the answers given by rabbis, the negotiation of the religious norms is far less complicated. All of the rabbis answering (more than $n = 24$ different rabbis) are of the opinion that masturbation is forbidden, and *Shmirat Negiah* should be kept. However, the reasoning for their answers and the enforcement of the prohibitions varies among the rabbis' responses. One tactic is to encourage/impart a spiritual meaning to the prohibitions—for example, Rabbi Sherlow (2015) provides the following answer:

I understand well what you describe in your letter. You do not need to apologize for it. . . . What is holiness? Holiness, in its essence, is about taking a step back from the great abundance that life gives us, in order to be elevated. . . . For this reason, we separate from any physical touch between the sexes that is not in the frame of family purity. . . . The essence [of this practice] is moving toward holiness and purity. (Translated from Hebrew by the author)

In this answer, Sherlow provides a theological, spiritual explanation. He starts by acknowledging the writer's perspective ("you don't need to apologize"). He then avoids detailing the *Halachic* practices, but instead provides a positive aspiration—holiness. By doing so, he provides some room for conversation and discussion. Although he is quite clear about the need to remain modest, this theological approach allows the reader to debate with themselves. This style of answering might mask legality (in this case, *Shmirat Negiah*) with theology (holiness), thus making traditional regulation into a supposedly well-thought-out personal decision. Other rabbis take a more direct approach. Rabbi Dani Argaman (2015), for example, when asked, "Why do we keep *Shmirat Negiah*," answers:

Because God wants it and he told you to do so. [Provides sources] Touch has a powerful force to unite, and this force should be used when it is allowed and not used when it is not allowed; after the wedding you need this touch. It connects and builds [the relationship]. (Translated from Hebrew by the author)

Although Rabbi Argaman does supply sources, his answer is short, straightforward, and explicit. This answer leaves very little room for debate. Other rabbis on Kipa, Aish, and in AskMoses answer in this style, usually when answering a short, nonpersonal question.

Generally, two types of discursive styles can be pointed out. Whereas some rabbis advise the person to "make their own decision," others more explicitly reinforce the rules. Those who explicitly reinforce the religious practices about sexuality tend to do so using religious sources or, more commonly, a monosemic and simplistic approach to religion ("God wants it"). This is different from traditional *Responsa*, which tends to be long, interpretive, and complex (Gottesman, 2009). Rabbis taking an implicit approach, convincing the users to regulate themselves, use various tactics to achieve this goal, like attaching spiritual meaning ("holiness"), or using common sense. Mrs. Shafer, one of AskMoses's prolific authors, tries in her chats to convince users to follow *Halacha* by using metaphors or common-sense arguments. For example, when asked about the prohibition against premarital sex, she leads the users into a thought experiment of

the type “Would you take a ring without paying?” and concludes that you need to commit (in this example, money for goods; in the case of premarital sex, marriage for intimacy) (Premarital sex, 2016).

As can be seen from these examples, the style of the answers varies, suggesting different strategies of enforcing authority and norms. The variation in style is related to the personality of the rabbi or the context of the question. However, Internet culture or media logic might also play a role here, and rabbis might fear that their answers are too long to read and therefore answer instead in a short and simplistic fashion. Regardless of style, one of the consistent similarities among rabbis’ answers throughout the websites is that they all present a strict, and usually simplistic, approach toward sexuality. These answers then become fossilized and serve as online sources for understanding the (ideal) norms of sexual behavior. In that way, the changes to the practice of the discourse (the fact that it is online) changes the norms of this discourse (the rabbis answer in a monosemic and simplistic fashion). As a result, the concepts themselves (e.g., masturbation) are debated in a one-dimensional way, which strips some of the theological and *Halachic* complexities. The last section of this article explores reactions to the answers, where users negotiate the practices proscribed.

Comments

The comments section is the last element in the Q&A webpage in which practices are negotiated. For the $n = 60$ Q&A selected for this sample, there is a total of $n = 81$ comments. Some of the comments have rabbis reacting to them, but those reactions were not counted as additional comments. Comments were divided into three categories: (a) explicitly supportive of a strict approach ($n = 46$); (b) asking further questions, which tended to implicitly support the rabbis/strict approach ($n = 20$); or (c) explicitly resisting the rabbi’s answer ($n = 17$). Only 20.4% of the comments are categorized as resisting, and 79.6% are implicitly or explicitly supportive.

The following example, although long, exemplifies the various comments. The comments in this example are reacting to a question regarding female masturbation. The question itself details nine different inquiries about female masturbation, including issues like Is it common?; Is it bad?; What are the physical results?; Is it a sin?; and Should she tell her boyfriend? The asker is clearly embarrassed and apologetic for asking such a taboo question. She says, “I apologize in advance for this question. . . . I could not ask it in the past out of shame . . . thank you for letting me ask this here!” (U. Eliyahu, 2004). The rabbi answering, Uziel Eliyahu, begins by providing online Q&A sources (perhaps to show that others have asked this as well) and then continues on to say that this is a big issue nowadays, and that while it is not *Halachically* forbidden, “it is clearly a bad phenomenon and a surrender to your lust” (U. Eliyahu, 2004). Eliyahu also supplies some spiritual reasons for avoiding masturbation and details how surrendering to lust can lead to bigger sins (like adultery). He concludes by saying that “the *Torah* sees a high value in controlling your lust . . . not oppressing it or crushing it” (U. Eliyahu, 2004). After this answer, there are $n = 16$ comments reacting to this Q&A. The following excerpt provides a few of these comments to showcase the different reactions (boldface text signifies titles given by users). As is the nature with online comment sections, there is a need to interpret with special attention to contextual clues and signals. As such, I provided this context in square brackets to facilitate reading by non-Hebrew speakers:

Comment 1 [12/26/2004]: **Reinforcement.** This is so strengthening and true all the things the rabbi says! Thank you so much!

Comment 2 [1/9/2005]: **Problem with trying to repent.** But what if it is really very hard to quit it—what do you do then, is it not allowed, for example, just once a week?

Comment 4 [7/21/2005]: **Wow, thank you so much.** For a long time, I'm feeling bad about [doing it]. I've experienced this phenomenon and didn't know what was the Torah ruling on it. I didn't dare tell someone or ask since I didn't know there were more like me! Thank you so much!!! You helped me a lot.

Comment 5 [6/5/2006]: **No way!** I've discovered [how to masturbate] by accident at a young age and for years my conscience was killing me. I tormented myself long and hard to stop, and I almost succeeded. I thought to myself, when I get married this will stop by itself. Today I am married, and I am so not sorry for my experience with this because this is how I've learned what feels good for me and could reach pleasure also with my partner. I hear about married women that do not enjoy [intercourse] and don't know how to have fun with their husbands. And both sides are then frustrated. I'm not saying you must, but if you have this experience, it is for sure not bad. I think for girls it comes from a different [need] than for boys.

Rabbi's response: From a Jewish point of view this is not good because then a person is only concentrated on himself. It's not good for the individual and not good for the relationship and not good for the soul.

Comment 6 [2006/10/11]: **Are you not ashamed?** [in response to comment 5] Who gave [you] the authority [to say this]??? Imagine that I will allow [wearing] pants and some other woman will allow something else and the Torah will become a breached thing, God forbid! So maybe there is no explicit prohibition . . . you indeed know very well in [your] mind [that this is prohibited]!!! That God does not want you to do this because it is unholy! It's surrendering to your sexual needs! And God did not create us for that. . . . I am sure your husband would not react as positively as you do!!

Comment 7 [5/7/2009]: **[If you read Commenter 5 carefully] you might notice.** I actually understand what the married woman [Commenter 5] is saying; there is some truth in it. And she wasn't talking about legally ratifying [female masturbation] because there isn't a *Halachic* ban here. She pointed at the advantages as they are expressed in a pure marriage relationship. Try to understand a bit of subtext—in her answer and, of course, in the rabbi's answer.

Comment 8 [10/24/2010]: First of all, it is important for me to mention that I am so happy that there is someone to talk about this with because obviously this is a topic that you can't discuss openly, so a great thank you for the rabbi, and I'm sorry we include you in this undignified discussion.

Comment 9 [2/1/2012]: **You girls are kind of overdoing it with these questions.** I think the rabbi answered enough of our questions. . . . If one of you needs more help, maybe you should go to therapy or a gynecologist.

Comment 10 [6/22/2014]: **To Commenter 9: I disagree.** A psychiatrist or gynecologist will approach this from a medical perspective. According to them, there is no problem with

masturbation, and therefore they are not the right people to answer this. The only way to stop this habit is through spiritual reinforcement! That is why addressing the rabbi is the best channel for a religious girl. (U. Eliyahu, 2004, translated from Hebrew by the author)

Of the total $n = 16$ comments to this Q&A, $n = 12$ either support the rabbi's answer completely (like Comments 1 and 4) or ask further questions that indicate support (like Comments 2 and 8). They seem to support both the need to ask (e.g., thanking the questioner in Comment 4, or asserting in Comment 10 that "addressing the rabbi is the best channel for a religious girl") and the need to accept the rabbi's response. Furthermore, it is clear that the online Q&A allow an avenue for speaking about taboo topics. The users are explicit about how grateful they are to be able to talk about it with someone. Online anonymity and direct access to a rabbi allow users to explore and discuss sexual practices they could not discuss elsewhere. However, many of the users support a strict practice of banning masturbation—thus, they are not using discourse to resist norms. Although quite a few of the comments seem to suggest that female masturbation is a widespread practice, many of them frame it as a problem. In this way, these users affirm the strict religious view of this sexual practice as forbidden.

Only two of the 16 users resist this prohibition by offering ways in which masturbation can be thought of in positive religious terminology—for example, preventing fractures within marriages: "Today I am **married** and I am so not sorry. . . . I hear about married women that do not enjoy [intercourse]. . . . And both sides are then *frustrated*" (Comment 5, emphasis added), and, "She pointed at the advantages as they are expressed in a *pure marriage relationship*" (Comment 7, emphasis added). These women are allowing for female masturbation because it supports the religious value of keeping marriages intact, functioning, and happy. This is a resistance that does not reject the Jewish religious worldview, but instead uses some values (like marriage) to make sexual norms more flexible and less strict. The second user (Comment 7) even goes so far as to indicate that the rabbi's subtext also supports a flexible attitude toward female masturbation. While this is an interesting negotiation that would probably not be possible outside the digital discourse (or at least would not be made public), most of the comments indicate a construction of the practice as forbidden and the discussion of the topic as challenging, thus supporting traditional or even fundamental, strict, attitudes toward masturbation.

As can be seen from this analysis, although the technological affordances of the comment sections enabled users to resist, this discursive space was mostly used by people who empowered the rabbis and their religious approach. In contrast to a strict top-down show of force, where the rabbi simply chastises women respondents for their views or responses, the discourse in these comments reveals a tendency of users to deploy strategies of peer-regulation toward one another.

In summary, the negotiation of practices analyzed in these Q&A have a few common elements. By offering users the ability to ask questions about explicit sexual topics, these websites enable a discourse on taboo matters and practices that is not always possible off-line. This allows users to voice their concerns, disagreements, and hardships regarding traditional religious sexual norms. The rabbis' answers, most of the time, are nonnegotiable—that is, they take a strict approach. However, this analysis points to a change in the norms of *Responsa*. A more monosemic, simplistic approach is taken by the rabbis in comparison to off-line *Responsa* style. Lastly, the comment section, where one might expect the more explicit pushback, is

largely in support of the rabbis' positions. The ability to participate in the discourse offered by digital media is exercised, but users use this participatory aspect of the online discourse not to resist the established practices, but rather to support them.

Conclusion: Practicing a Discourse

Analyzing discourses related to practices in online religious Q&A highlights the ways online communication contribute to our understandings of social norms. This article focuses on the construction and negotiation in Orthodox Jewish digital discourse and the strategies used to promote or resist a strict approach to sexual norms. The analysis shows how, generally speaking, online Jewish Orthodox Q&A enable a participatory discourse that tends to strengthen traditional religious patriarchal norms. Using a Foucauldian framework when theorizing power and discourse, this article argues that in online Orthodox Jewish discourse, the ability to discuss taboo issues does not result in the breaking of these taboos. In fact, the findings show that online discourse represents and supports traditional and fundamentalist views. That is, while some technological affordances, like anonymity, support the ability to even ask these questions (which was not possible before), the discursive norms, which are affected by online and off-line norms, create a discourse that supports traditional views. We arrive at this conclusion, then, by combining analysis of the medium and the message—separately, and as they are brought together to create a discourse.

An examination of the technological affordances highlights how these create a digital discourse with varying degrees of interactivity. They promote a participatory discourse through anonymity, access, and sharing. It can be argued that though it is the rabbis who operate as the authority in this discourse by supplying the answers, the users contribute in a grassroots fashion by raising the taboo topics and through commenting. Furthermore, the technological affordances also allow for anonymity, which in turn lets users more freely participate and express their opinions.

The analysis of the textual material, however, shows how this participatory discourse is used to reinforce rabbinical authority and support conservative interpretations of the religious–legal discourse. The more extreme interpretations are normalized in this discourse. How? First, users bring their religious and gendered worldview with them to their Internet use. Then, instead of debate, the logic of digital media promotes quantifiable affirmations (“get more likes”), and thus, if more users are supportive of a strict position, it becomes normalized. Furthermore, the digital milieu gives the mistaken feeling that one is asking an individual question, when in fact these Q&A influence a public discourse, as argued elsewhere: “While we use digital media *individually*, we are taking part in a *social space*” (Tsuria, 2018, para. 2, emphasis in original).

Changes in the practices of the discourse are made to fit an online discourse. Rabbis' answers are short and easy to follow, a quick read. This differs from traditional *Responsa*, which tended to seek legal or theological explanations, be lengthy and complicated, and were a part of elite discourse. By moving the discourse from elite to open, it seems that some of the complexity is lost, and, instead, rabbis submit simplistic or neoliberal answers that harden a flexible discourse. Changes in the tools and norms of the discourse itself—being online, open, accessible, and participatory—change the discourse about these lived

practices from a textually supported, openly debated, complex issue with multiple interpretations to a simplistic, monosemic, and strict discourse (Gottesman, 2009; Steinitz, 2011).

Lastly, the comment sections work to enforce the power of “everybody” to regulate. Users’ resistance to the rabbis’ answers is minimal compared with users’ acceptance of rabbinical attitudes, and users acting as peer regulators. That is, the more common discursive strategies found in the comment sections are to both thank the rabbi and strengthen the rabbi’s position, or to act as peer regulators and correct other users. Again, the participatory elements of the digital discourse seem to work to strengthen conservative authority and opinions.

The analysis of Jewish online Q&A showcased how the Internet shifts practices of discourse, and in turn, discourses of practice. This online discourse promotes a strict approach to the sexual practices of masturbation and *Shmirat Negiah*. Although the technological affordances allow for a participatory discourse, the religious worldview enacted in this discourse is monosemic and narrow. Through various discursive strategies, both religious authorities and users utilize the Internet’s democratic/participatory abilities to promote traditional and even fundamental religious practices. This case study shows how digital culture itself reinforces conservative and extreme positions (Schradie, 2019). Further research might explore how new practices of discourse online shift discourses about practices in other cultures (such as in Islam or Hinduism) or other practices (such as medical or parental behaviors). This can help communication scholars better understand practices of discourse and the complex relationship between discourse and practice.

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