

Do y'all know the story of the Sneetches?

[SLIDE with cover of beloved Dr. Seuss novel]

Growing up, I loved Dr. Seuss. I loved One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish. Marvin K. Mooney Will You Please Go Now. I loved 'em all. I even loved Oh The Places You'll Go, which is a heartwarming lie about what will happen to you after graduation. But the one that really sticks with me, and which I honestly think about in some fashion or another (at least weekly) is the Sneetches.

If you are unfamiliar with the story, The Sneetches follows the experiences of a group of strange bird-like creatures called Sneetches who live on a beach. Some sneetches happen to be born with stars on their bellies and some Sneetches are born without stars on their bellies. The Star Bellied Sneetches take pride in the stars on their bellies and the Plain Bellied Sneetches are isolated, they are not permitted to join in frankfurter roasts (a particularly important ritual in Sneetch life). One day, a deranged tattoo artist comes to town and offers the star-less sneetches the opportunity to have stars on their bellies and thus be indistinguishable from the sneetches with stars.

They return to their compatriots with stars and are shocked to discover that they are not welcomed. The sneetches with stars on their bellies are not only not impressed, but they are angered by this erasure of difference.

And so the sneetches who formerly were the only sneetches with stars on their bellies go themselves to the deranged tattoo artist and get their stars removed. And then they proudly proclaim that actually NOT having stars is the most important quality of being a sneetch.

The story goes on from here, and ends eventually on a happy note, borne out in part by confusion. The sneetches come to appreciate that there is no difference between stars on and stars off, mainly because they manage to erase their ability to recall that difference through going through so many transitions. There's probably a lesson there in allophilia and appreciation of the other's perspective through imaginatively putting yourself in the other's shoes.

But, at this point, I want to stop and zoom in on the social dynamics in this part of the ethnographic record of the Sneetches. Why doesn't the original stratagem of the plain bellied sneetches to put stars on their bellies work? In other words: Why don't stars permit access to frankfurter roasts?

Dr. Seuss was clearly saying something about discrimination—that the symbol of differentiation is NOT important. Symbols like stars are often “floating signifiers”. Having or not having a star is not salient in establishing the power dynamic between the astrally dimorphic Sneetches. Otherwise, the originally star-bellied Sneetches would have accepted the newly starred sneetches with open arms.

To misunderstand this, to attribute too much power to the symbol, is to make the same mistake the originally plain-bellied sneetches make, to believe that there is some power in the stars themselves and that the stars grant access to marshmallow roasts. Indeed, the difference itself

located in an origin **is** the important separation. Until the point where mixing makes it impossible for the sneetches to remember who was originally what, origins were privileged. I will return to this point at the end of my talk.

But I think there is something else going on here that we need to give some attention to. What was the motivation for the plain-bellied sneetches to attempt to get stars on their bellies in the first place?

[Audience participation: Frankfurter Roasts]

[Slide: Frankfurter roasts]

Frankfurter Roasts and Marshmallow Toasts; participation in the communal sharing of food; in a word participation in RITUAL or more broadly speaking ACTIVITY. Participation in ritual is, in Sneetch society, the deeper symbolic act, deeper even than the presence or absence of stars, that affords what the Plain-bellied sneetches were really after: social acceptance, self-esteem, values irreducible to any quantitative measurement, but which necessarily must be present in any account of human (or sneetch) flourishing. One of the important lessons of the sneetches, I would argue, is that if these deeper values of acceptance and unity are denied while symbolic referents are plastered on, the problems of discrimination do not go away.

Seuss clearly intended his story as an allegory for human behavior and particularly the all-too-common need to differentiate amongst ourselves, and in my experience Sneetch-like differentiation can be seen in many different aspects of human behavior. My particular field of expertise is the comparative study of religion, and so I approach my study of culture through the case study of human religious interactions.

Today, I want to look at one particular example in a living religious tradition that replicates the problems raised in the Sneetches. Here the point of differentiation is not the presence or absence of stars but sexual dimorphism, and I won't be looking at Sneetches, but at Chabad-Lubavitch Jews. I wish to stress at the outset that I could probably find many different examples in many different traditions of this same problem, and I have no desire to say that Orthodox Judaism is the only religious tradition that has this problem. I also do not intend my critique to be a condemnation of the religion per se nor of the ethnic group that practices this religion. I have immense respect for Judaism, especially for its willingness to engage in debate and discussion with internal and external conversation partners, and I hope that this presentation might serve as the beginnings of a real conversation, difficult as those often are.

The Chabad-Lubavitcher sect is unique amongst Orthodox Jewish sects in that it has a semi-missionizing aim. The Lubavitchers have the goal of re-converting lapsed Jews (whom they see as victims of the common secularizing tendencies of modernity) to Judaism. There are religious rationales for this mission. In the apocalyptic vision of the Lubavitcher sect, the Messianic Age will come about when all Jews everywhere are fully-engaged in the practice of Judaism. There is, thus, a great deal of pressure on the Chabad-Lubavitcher sect to re-convert Jews.

Many members of that community, the Jewish people, have since the horrors of the Holocaust abandoned their religious tradition, many have in fact abandoned ALL religious traditions, in

vast numbers, which has effectively cut out the Lubavitcher's work for them. In the midst of the social pressures of both soft and hard persecution to assimilate to other religions or abandon religion entirely, one of the particularly prevalent criticisms made against Orthodox Judaism and thus one of the arguments that Chabad proselytizers need to contend with is that Judaism and especially Orthodox Judaism is an inherently patriarchal and sexist religion.

Images are commonly raised of the *Mechitza*, the boundary between men and women in prayer services. Critics note the fact that menstruation and pregnancy seen as sources of ritual pollution in the Jewish religion, requiring both purification through ritual bathing and separation from ordinary acts. In Israel today there are many examples of de facto discrimination in Orthodox spaces against women on buses, in divorce trials, and in alimony proceedings.

There are also many important ritual practices in Judaism that men are obligated to perform but which women are not. Men are for instance obligated to recite certain prayers, to wear Tefillin, to participate in certain male-centric rituals. There is an interesting question, which in Jewish texts continually raise about whether the absence of an obligation is equivalent to a prohibition.

In the most extreme ultra-orthodox versions of Judaism, male centric rituals are forbidden to women and there are recorded moments where women trying to participate in male spaces were violently accosted.

#### [Slide of violence at the wailing wall]

Chabad in modernity is placed in a unique position amongst Jewish sects. In its desire to reconvert Jews it must confront the modern criticisms leveled at Judaism and some of those criticisms come from the camp of Jewish feminists. Indeed its very choice of subjects on the "Women" tab of the Chabad.org website<sup>1</sup> reveals an emphasis on confronting modernity's outcry that Judaism is chauvinistic, typically by emphasizing the value and worth of the Jewish woman within the bounds of Orthodox Judaism.

Many of these articles can be boiled down to the following three part rhetorical formula:

- 1) Acknowledging apparent misogyny: I understand that there are things that may seem to outsiders to be an example of misogyny or gender-based injustice in my religious tradition
- 2) Embracing power through differentiation: I have many sources in my religious tradition that show the power of femininity
- 3) Embracing power through identity acceptance: after all my religion says this is my place and so I rejoice in it."

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<sup>1</sup> A brief, selective list of titles will suffice: "Catalysts of Change: The Power of the Jewish Woman," "[A Daughter of Zelophehad Speaks](#): The First Feminist Movement," "Chassidic Feminist," "Why I Don't Put on Tefillin," "The Back of the Synagogue is Not the Back of the Bus," "Feminism and Orthodoxy," etc. ("Celebrating Jewish Womanhood," Undated. List of articles. *Chabad.org*. Last accessed 21 January 2011. <[http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article\\_cdo/aid/545905/jewish/Celebrating-Jewish-Womanhood.htm](http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/545905/jewish/Celebrating-Jewish-Womanhood.htm)>.

Circa 9 MINUTES

The content on the Chabad website directed at Jewish women does not actively challenge many of the accepted practices of differentiation in Judaism, and instead, I would argue, “leans in” to the criticism and reinterprets it as strength. The problem with lean-in feminism, is, as Susan Faludi notes in her criticism of the popular best-selling book, when your strategy to transform a situation involves supporting the powers that be in this case consumer-capitalism, you are not engaged in transformation, you are engaged in bad-faith and self-oppression. If the solution to economic disenfranchisement is “work harder”---the revolution has already failed.

I think by the way, there’s an important lesson that any commentator on feminism should learn here. Women expressing opinions is not feminism. Feminism is the belief that men and women should occupy equal levels of power in all realms of human interaction: financial, intellectual, emotional, psychological, religious. If women express power in terms that are inherently oppressive and moreover serve the traditional power structures that have given birth to inequalities in the past, they are not expressing feminism.

But perhaps I, and feminist criticism in general, am just making mountains out of molehills? Perhaps this revalorization of women within the bounds of orthodox Judaism is enough?

I don’t think so, and I believe I can make my point clear through the main case-study of this presentation: a close reading of a sermon delivered by the Chabad rabbi Mendel Kaplan. The sermon is entitled “The Kabbalah on Female Superiority” It lasts for an hour and seven minutes, so I obviously can’t reproduce it in its entirety here.

The rabbi plays on exactly the same strategy expressed in the articles on the Chabad website authored by women (or at least attributed to women). [RETURN TO PREVIOUS SLIDE]  
But I think we can see in this sermon even more clearly than in the articles on Chabad the tension in the Chabad world-view.

In the case of the rabbi’s sermon the sources of revalorization stem from the Torah, the Talmud, and the esoteric tradition of Kabbalah.

The Rabbi’s Sermon (make slides for this)

Thesis: Is Judaism Chauvinistic?

He admits that on the outside, it may seem chauvinistic, but he argues things are not always what they seem to be.

Taking some of his points out of order, the rabbi raises towards the middle of the sermon one of the main points of contention that he seems to think his congregation will relate to:

So we have this concept now that women don't have to do certain mitzvot (commandments). Men are obligated; women are not obligated. Some kind of Chuzpa! I want an Aliyah, he won't give me an Aliyah! Where's equality today? I want to put on my Tefillin! I want to do all these Mitzvas. They say "No, no, this is only for the men. Oh here we go again, the chauvinistic rabbi and religion---they don't let their women do the mitzvahs."

A word of explanation: An Aliyah is a traditional honor given to Jewish men in the Shabbat Torah service. Three men are called up to the Torah scroll and recite a blessing and read a portion of the text. The literal meaning of Aliyah is "to go up" or elevation, hence the innuendo of my title.

Clearly the rabbi is addressing here the concerns of his audience that Judaism is chauvinistic because it bars women from rituals.

The rabbi says Judaism is not chauvinistic and he argues this on the following lines

1) Women are superior to men and thus don't need access to the rituals

Textual Evidence:

Women didn't commit idolatry in the episode of the golden calf

Woman (Eve) was the last thing created by God and thus the first thing he planned to create; thus women are perfect

3) Men need rituals because they are metaphysically attention deficit (opposite corollary from 1)

4) According to the Zohar, the Messianic Age will be an age of feminine superiority.

Therefore: Judaism is not chauvinistic because a deeper interpretation of Judaism available in the texts reveals that Women are inherently perfect, the final outcome of God's plan

Therefore:

Perfect Women don't need to practice male centered rituals which are aimed at fixing imperfection

One can detect in Rabbi Kaplan's sermon a subtle nuance. He moves from the question of addressing whether or not Judaism is a chauvinistic religion (that is whether men and women are unequal in Jewish thought) to addressing whether women are inferior beings in Judaism.

His conclusion then circles back to the question of ritual again, at the end:

"So next time the ladies in the crowd want an Aliyah, stop yourself. Why go there? Why become somebody you aren't? By going against the grain you get scratched. The guy needs the Aliyah because he lacks stability. The gentlemen needs Tefillin because he is off kilter. You have that holiness that he has on Shabbas on a Wednesday. There's a reason that Torah gives us direction, there's a reason that Torah that gives us mitzvahs to certain people at certain times. It's not [inaudible] chauvinistic. It's not a question of

inequality. It's not a question of men or women being looked with disparity. It's a question of everyone living the way God intended them to."

There's something not quite kosher (pun intended) about Rabbi Kaplan's argument. If he truly believes that separate is not unequal, and that the division of the genders is according to plan, he doesn't need to invoke the authorities which elevate women to a higher status. So, why does he? Answer: He does so to advertise Judaism to lapsed Jewish women. He knows that invoking pure tradition will not satisfy his audience and so he offers them an interpretation of the text which essentially deifies them: Women are inherently, essentially holy and do not need to practice the onerous rituals of male-centered Judaism, women are the final aim of God's plan. The Messianic age is feminine. Sarah is superior to Abraham.

I see little difference between Rabbi Mendel's symbolically driven "elevation" of women to demi-goddess-hood and the stars on the sneetches. In both cases, the symbols are red herrings, distractions from the real issue at hand. Stars, which are in Sneetch culture the symbols of acceptance are misunderstood to be equivalent to acceptance itself. Sneetch society might have been better served if a Sneetch observed that the real source of acceptance was participation in frankfurter roasts. So too, in Chabad-Lubavitch Judaism worldly values of acceptance and autonomy are replaced by a reinvigorated ontological status.

And some women see through the shell game. An anonymous respondent to the lecture writes in the comment section on the site:

[Regarding f]emale superiority and putting women on a pedestal[:] Women are not perfection. Women are not more spiritual than men. **This is just a diplomatic way of keeping us subservient. Saying women are already perfect is rationalization to keep us out of Torah and Service. Such exclusion steals our ability to perfect ourselves.** Males please don't make another idol -- masculinity! Let's not worship gender and give women an equal chance at service to Hashem. (emphasis and edits mine)

The strategy observed by the anonymous commentator can also be found in the work of feminist thinker Donna Haraway especially in her Cyborg Manifesto In this work she writes:

Every story that begins with original innocence and privileges the return to wholeness imagines the drama of life to be individuation, separation, the birth of the self, the tragedy of autonomy, .... [is] fueled by a reproductive politics—rebirth without flaw, perfection, abstraction. **In this plot women are imagined either better or worse off**, but all agree they **have less selfhood, weaker individuation...** But there is another route to having less at stake in masculine autonomy, a route that does not pass through Woman, Primitive, Zero, the Mirror Stage and its imaginary. It passes through women and other present-tense, illegitimate cyborgs, not of Woman born, who refuse the ideological resources of victimization so as to have a real life. These are the women who refuse to disappear on cue...

I think it's interesting how she observes and critiques (in different words) the same kind of strategy which I've been trying to point here. Any narrative that seeks meaning in origin, in essence, inherently constructs binaries and oppositions. The star-bellied sneetches when confronted by illegitimate starred

sneetches are not impressed, they in fact return to a myth of origins. We, the originally star bellied sneetches will continue to differentiate ourselves by removing our own stars.

Similarly, says Haraway, women, if they are included in these origin stories, are EITHER (binary) “Better” or “Worse”. These seems to be a feature of the very system of explaining origins. She notes, as I have shown, that the solution often provided by men to the binary opposition and the removal of autonomy from women is the return to origins, to some Deified Understanding of Femininity; Haraway signals this with her capitalizations of Woman. Rabbi Kaplan offers such a return in his retelling of various origin stories: the Golden Calf, the cosmic Abraham and Sarah, and the explanation of Shabbat and Positive and Negative Commandments).

The Rabbi, in his mission to placate modernist women, still relies on the traditionalist conceptual framework of origins and binaries. The place of power of men is reconceived in the lens of textual reinterpretation available in the Jewish mystical tradition as a position of weakness. Women are reimagined as strong.

The strategy, as the anonymous respondent, Haraway and I are noting, is too easy. [return to slide with quote from respondent] Placing women on a pedestal solves the ultimate problem of differentiation about as well Seuss’s tattoo artist solves the problem of stars.

Haraway advocates, instead, a different response.

MAYBE, she suggests, women are not required to take the status of better or worse, maybe women and Sneetches, and by extension all humans don’t need to accept the presence or absence of some arbitrary signifier determined at origin and genesis as the end-all-be-all of identity (gender or otherwise) or of power in this world or the next. Haraway notes this when she says she’d rather be a cyborg than a goddess. She’d rather have her existence enmeshed in the mess of reality than partitioned off in some idealistic world.

Maybe we should embrace the messiness of Sneetches, Genders, Ethnicities, and Sexualities and recognize that deep down as eternally progressing and self-manufacturing individuals we are all desperate to belong and participate equally in the various equivalents of Frankfurter Roasts present in our lives.