

Moms in the middle

by [Margaret Bendroth](#) in the [May 31, 2003](#) issue

Appropriately Subversive: Modern Mothers in Traditional Religions.

By Tova Hartman Halbertal. Harvard University Press, 193 pp., \$29.95.

The place of honor on my office bulletin board goes to my favorite Roz Chast New Yorker cartoon, a page of "Bad Mom" trading cards. The women in this collection are hardly an edifying lot. Take, for example, the case of #61, one Deborah H.: this woman never even tried to make Play-Doh from scratch. Then there's #17, the infamous Gloria B., who promised to take her daughter to the mall after school--and then didn't. Even worse, readers may contemplate the moral depravity of #48, Suzie M., who let her kid play two hours of Nintendo just to get him out of her hair. The list goes sadly on. For a while I prided myself that I could name at least one "bad mom" transgression I hadn't fallen into--until that frazzled morning when I ran out of orange juice and found myself serving orange soda to my children instead. At that point I knew my ruin to be utter and complete.

Truly bad parenting is no joke, of course. The trading cards are amusing not because they make light of parental responsibility, but because they so cleverly expose the impossibly high standards of "good" mothering. Who among us has always been patient, always been selfless, always remembered to put up the St. Patrick's Day decorations? In real life, as countless Erma Bombeck anecdotes remind us, mothering is an art, not a science, an inelegant exercise in negotiation and compromise.

Consider then the case of women in religious traditions with little tolerance for disorder. How does one reconcile the approximate graces of motherhood with strict communal standards backed up by authoritative scripture? In her evocative and insightful study, Tova Hartman Halbertal, a lecturer in education at Hebrew University, probes this question in conversation with women from Orthodox Jewish and Roman Catholic backgrounds. Her subjects are articulate, well educated and firmly committed to faiths which make no bones about the divine origins of patriarchy. They are keenly aware of the many contradictions of their lives, situated

at the nexus of feminist ideals and traditional religious practices. Above all, they are mothers who have cast their lot with the faiths they were born into, and who are determined that their daughters will do the same.

It's not an easy task. Halbertal's subjects talk freely regarding their ambivalence about rules which require them to be separated from men at prayer or ban them from positions of leadership. Though some take an activist stance within the tradition, others confess a sense of distance from ritual observances and institutional structures that they find demeaning or outmoded. But for these women, the tradition is simply "home"; leaving it is not an option. Although the communal identity of Halbertal's Jewish subjects emerges much more clearly than it does of her Catholic ones, she gives readers a nuanced picture of women strong-minded enough to accept a certain amount of self-censorship and independent enough to make regular, small sacrifices for the sake of a greater good.

The difficulty mounts as mothers take on the task of raising daughters to be the "good girls" their traditions require. Rebellious women themselves, they must keep their equally rebellious daughters from kicking the traces, and press them to one day freely choose the faith for themselves. The task is made even more complex because all of these mothers want their daughters to be strong and self-sufficient. A meekly compliant daughter would be as much of a failure as an atheistic one.

Their solution lies in the book's title: a faithful mother must be "appropriately subversive," that is, determined to both challenge and rely upon the boundaries of her tradition. Many of the mothers interviewed were religious educators who admitted to sending their daughters to schools that were far more conservative than the ones in which they taught. The choice was not hypocritical: the idea was to let community institutions impose the rules, freeing up the mothers to become mediating voices of reason. Many simply assumed that their daughters would rebel some day, but gambled on holding them off until they became mature enough to do so wisely. As one Jewish mother explained, strict religious education would give her daughter "a true choice" as she grew older: "If you don't know anything about anything, then you don't have anything to choose from."

The idea makes sense, but living it out is obviously painful at times for all concerned. Kathleen, a Catholic mother of a headstrong college graduate, said she cried for days after her daughter Sally sent her a card with the ambiguous affirmation, "I want to be just like you." Which "you" did Sally mean to emulate,

Kathleen wondered--the supportive, generous Catholic mother, or the resentful, opinionated Catholic laywoman?

Halbertal's respectful treatment of her subjects makes it easy to recognize the universality of their concerns; these women cast into sharp relief issues that dog all kinds of parents, no matter what their religious background. Being a mother or a father always involves helping children learn to filter the good from the bad. The dilemmas faced by Halbertal's orthodox subjects are different only in degree from those of their more secular peers, who must be even more appropriately subversive within an aggressively consumerist, competitive society.

But there is also ground for optimism. The experiences Halbertal relates underline the positive role of communities, even flawed ones. If nothing else, a well-defined religious context can provide a provocative intellectual framework for the near-inevitable onset of adolescent rebellion. The process might well be painful, but at least it won't be boring.

Parents are not called to perfectly reproduce their faith in a child; the point is to make religious belief and practice somehow indispensable in later life. Wise parents give their children not a rote faith but a life project--a set of interesting questions, not a list of rules to be discarded one day; they recognize that genuine faith always holds an element of mystery. To every parent who is sometimes good, sometimes "bad" and sometimes absolutely baffled, that's an enormously comforting reminder.