

# **A strike against me**

## **It is not easy, but I am an empowered Orthodox Jew living in the 21st century, and I make my voice heard**

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I am an empowered Orthodox Jewess living in the 21st century.

And that's no easy feat.

It's a balance of maintaining my standards of modesty while giving voice to my thoughts and opinions. It's representing the Orthodox community while pushing boundaries and challenging the status quo. It's embracing my role as a Jewish woman while recognizing my potential as an individual living in a modern world.

There is no contradiction within any of these functions, but as I said, keeping all parts of me aligned is no easy feat.

And sometimes I wonder where exactly I fit in...

I was wearing my Bais Yaakov High School uniform the first time someone thanked me for not shaking his hand. "I apologize, but I don't shake for religious reasons," 10th-grade me confidently stated with a smile, as he put out his hand for mine. "Oh, I'm so sorry," he instantly replied. And before I had a chance to respond, his expression became thoughtful. "You know what? I'm not sorry. I just learned something new. Thank you for teaching me that."

I still have no problem not shaking hands. I can be warm and friendly while still maintaining the standards that I value.

And for the most part, I garner respect for it.

I say for the most part, because it's among my own people that I find the most hostility.

I like people. I trust people. I admire people.

I may not always agree with their values and life choices, but that doesn't mean they're not deserving of my respect.

Yet, when I look inward at the wide Jewish community, I struggle to see that respect reciprocated.

I can accept an individual without accepting an approach to Torah that is inconsistent with my understanding of it. And I can accept their relationship to Judaism without accepting that I believe it to be a healthy one.

And I'm okay with knowing that others will disagree with me on that thought as well.

But I'm not okay with not being respected as a person, as a woman, as an Orthodox Jew.

And it's hard for me when I see how that plays out in the Jewish world of entrepreneurship.

I'm a fitness coach, and I empower women through exercise. I believe in helping every woman find the joy in movement, independent of dress size, and I do so from a weight-neutral perspective.

Time and again I am turned away from amazing resources that can help me as an individual, as an entrepreneur, as a change-maker, and as a body positive activist simply because I openly identify as Orthodox, and that reality bothers me.

When applying for various programs and fellowships in the secular world, I'm welcomed as a minority and embraced as a social innovator, but when I do the same within the Jewish world, I'm shunned as old school and pushed away as an extremist.

When I walk into any situation where there is a diverse group of Jews, I feel that I already have a strike against me just for being a right-leaning individual.

So, when I found a platform on which to potentially share my Orthodox perspective on a societal issue, I found myself involuntarily preparing for rejection before I even applied.

Despite my desire to share my passion of body positive fitness with my community and despite knowing that there are thousands of women ready to receive its message, I wasn't willing to go through an application process without being sure that there was a place for me and my kind of Judaism, in this case in the ELI Talks community.

I was pretty straightforward in my discussion with Mary, the Program Director at ELI Talks at the time. "Do I have a chance of being accepted?" I asked. "I'm an Orthodox Jew and I'm out and loud and proud about it. Is that going to be used against me in this space?"

And her response filled me with warmth, joy and hope. Because not only did she tell me that it was worth the time and effort it would take for me to apply, she also told me that there was a large number of ELI Talks already in existence given by Jews of all types and stripes.

From Hareidi male rabbis to female Reform rabbis and everyone in between and outside of those parameters. And throughout their process of developing and giving their talk, each respected the other.

The response we received for, “The Eleventh Commandment: Thou Must Diet,” an ELI Talk that I gave in collaboration with Tzivie Pill of NourishKeit was overwhelmingly positive, and the feedback came from women of all ages and from all across the spectrum of Judaism.

I am an empowered Orthodox Jewess living in the 21st century, and my voice can be heard.

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*Sara Kupfer is the founder of Fit Jewess. To join her as the next ELI Talks speaker, apply here by February 26th.*