The Role of Religious Education in the Integral Formation of Women in Higher Education

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Abstract– This study adopts a quantitative, descriptive, non-experimental, and cross-sectional research design to examine the impact of Jewish religious education on the holistic formation of female university students within a gender-specific, faith-based academic setting. The analysis focuses on six interrelated dimensions: spiritual development, identity construction, religious formation, personal growth, academic performance, and community engagement. Data were collected through a survey that measured students' self-perceived growth in each dimension. The findings reveal consistently high evaluations in the spiritual and religious dimensions, while academic performance tends to decline in the later years of study. These results suggest that the relationship between religiosity and academic achievement is complex, and that external factors, such as personal circumstances and varying levels of institutional engagement, may play a significant role in shaping students' academic outcomes.

Keywords-- Higher education, religious education, holistic education, cultural identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Jewish education, particularly in all-women institutions, plays a distinctive role in shaping not only religious identity but also the holistic development of students. Rooted in centuries-old traditions and community values, Jewish religious instruction provides a framework for nurturing ethical behavior, spiritual depth, academic commitment, and civic responsibility. This vision aligns with contemporary educational paradigms that emphasize the full development of the human person, as highlighted by scholars such as Fitzgerald [1], Olivares [2], and Quaintance [3], who argue that education must encompass cognitive, emotional, social, and moral dimensions.

According to Peter Berger [4], religious educational institutions serve as transmitters of a "sacred canopy", a symbolic structure that gives meaning to reality. In the case of Orthodox Jewish communities, schools and universities do not merely deliver academic content but reproduce a framework of belonging rooted in transcendent beliefs. This role becomes especially meaningful in cultural contexts where religious identity is deeply intertwined with daily life and gendered experiences.

Comparative research by Stopler [5] on the ultra-Orthodox education system in Israel demonstrates how state-supported religious models can successfully integrate rigorous faith-based instruction with academic excellence. Similarly, Arweck's [6] mixed-methods study of British adolescents shows that religious education is more positively received when it aligns with students' cultural identities, an insight that resonates in evaluating the role of Jewish studies in women's higher education.

In Latin America, Jewish educational institutions have long served as key spaces for intergenerational identity transmission and community resilience. As Liwerant [7] notes, these schools often strive to harmonize professional development with spiritual formation, particularly in multicultural societies where modern demands may challenge religious continuity. In this regard, the Panamanian context is particularly relevant: while Jewish primary and secondary schools exist, only one higher education institution currently offers university-level professional education tailored for Orthodox Jewish women.

The inclusion of women in these educational spaces has transformative potential. Studies by Amzalag and Gross[8] and Taylor-Guthartz [9] show how Orthodox Jewish women use education as a platform for empowerment, leadership, and community participation, even within traditionally conservative frameworks. Similarly, the ethnographic work of Dayan and Roitman [10] highlights the strength of Jewish communal networks in Mexico, where education is central to preserving collective identity and fostering strong internal cohesion.

Beyond doctrinal transmission, scholars such as Lindholm & Astin [11] and also Díaz [12] emphasize that religious education, when designed with reflection and inclusion, can foster empathy, social engagement, and personal meaning. Their work suggests that integrating spiritual development within higher education should not be seen as contradictory to academic excellence, but rather as a powerful complement.

Despite the richness of these perspectives, empirical research on the impact of Jewish religious education in Panama, particularly among young women at the university level, remains limited. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how structured religious education influences the spiritual, personal, and academic development of Orthodox Jewish women in a faith-based institution in Panama. It offers insights into how such educational models can support women in embracing both professional aspirations and religious identity within a coherent, value-driven framework.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. *Holistic Student Development*

Integral education in higher education is understood as a process that aims to develop the full human potential, academically, personally, spiritually, and socially. Guerrero

and Ruíz [13] argue that this approach goes beyond the mere transmission of technical knowledge, recognizing each student as a unique and transcendent individual. Universities, therefore, must create conditions for intellectual, emotional, and spiritual flourishing, guiding students not only toward competence but also toward meaning. The key dimensions of holistic formation include:

- Academic development, focusing on disciplinary knowledge and critical thinking.
- Personal development, involving self-awareness and autonomy.
- Spiritual and ethical formation, which fosters connection to transcendent values and responsible decision-making.
- Social and community engagement, which encourages a commitment to the common good.

According to Astin and Lindholm [11], [14], transformative education must "cultivate the spirit," creating learning experiences that affect students' inner lives and their relationships with others. Morin's [15] pedagogy of complexity emphasizes the integration of knowledge and life, calling for educational approaches that address the whole person and reject fragmented, reductionist models. Educators in this view act as facilitators, linking academic content with students' lived experience through active, interdisciplinary, and humanistic methodologies.

Lindholm and Astin [11]also highlight the spiritual and ethical dimensions of teaching, noting that educators who value spirituality tend to create empathetic, purpose-driven learning environments, even when such goals are not formally part of the curriculum. Finally, holistic formation requires culturally and religiously responsive education. López [16] emphasizes that quality education in Latin America must adapt to students' specific socio-cultural contexts. In Orthodox Jewish communities, this means designing programs that integrate academic learning with religious tradition, respecting gender roles while ensuring access to rigorous professional training.

B. Cultural and Religious Identity in Orthodox Jewish Contexts

Orthodox Jewish identity is shaped by the Torah, strict adherence to halakha (Jewish law), and communal structures with defined gender roles. In this context, the role of women is often linked to preserving the Jewish home, transmitting values, and maintaining religious life. Women serve as cultural and spiritual anchors, responsible for modesty, early childhood education, and daily rituals, roles that are central, though often non-public. Education plays a critical role in identity formation. Pomson and Deitcher [17], [18] note that Orthodox Jewish schools cultivate a strong collective identity through intensive religious study, liturgical Hebrew, and shared historical narratives. This identity is not only cognitive but experiential, shaped through daily communal and ritual practices.

The relationship between religion and gender in these communities is complex. While traditional norms may appear restrictive, many women find spiritual empowerment and purpose through religious observance. Davidman [19] shows that for baalei teshuva (women who return to Orthodox Judaism), religious life offers not oppression but clarity, meaning, and a profound sense of belonging. In these contexts, religion becomes not merely a mandate but a chosen path that structures personal and communal life. These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for understanding how religious education, particularly in all-female Orthodox settings, can foster identity, purpose, and personal development, core elements of holistic student formation.

C. Identity and University Participation

Beyond cultural and religious identity, higher education literature highlights the importance of student participation as a key component of identity construction and belonging. Astin's Theory of Student Involvement [20] emphasizes that students learn and develop in proportion to the quality and quantity of their involvement in academic and co-curricular activities. Participation is not limited to classroom performance but extends to interactions with peers, faculty, and institutional structures, which together shape identity and engagement [21]

Similarly, Tinto [22] argues that integration into both the academic and social systems of the university is crucial for persistence and success. Students who feel a sense of belonging and purpose are more likely to commit to their studies and to perceive their education as transformative. For women in faith-based institutions, participation often intertwines with spiritual identity, as engagement in community activities, rituals, and peer networks reinforces both religious and academic trajectories.

In the case of Orthodox Jewish women, university participation must be understood as a dual process: on one hand, integrating into the institutional academic culture; on the other, reaffirming religious and gender-specific identities within their community frameworks. This intersection creates unique patterns of involvement, where engagement in learning is simultaneously intellectual, spiritual, and relational. A recent study by Binhas [23] explored how Haredi women in higher education maintain and negotiate their religious identity while simultaneously developing an academic identity. Their adaptation strategies include adjusting expectations, managing tensions between religious and academic demands, and relying on institutional networks that respect their cultural context.

Similarly, Orr [24] shows that ultra-Orthodox students in Israel who enter university act as agents of social change, navigating spaces where they must negotiate religious identity, community expectations, and academic norms. Therefore, identity and participation are not merely accessory dimensions but rather fundamental mediators between religious education,

academic performance, and long-term life commitment, particularly in women's faith-based educational settings

III. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In Panama, Orthodox Jewish women have limited opportunities to pursue professional education within a religiously aligned environment. Although Jewish education is available at the primary and secondary levels, university options tailored to preserve their religious identity while pursuing academic goals are nearly nonexistent. There is also a lack of research evaluating how religious curricula impact women's identity, academic engagement, and community participation in higher education.

This article contributes to the growing field of comparative religious education by providing data from a rarely studied context, Panama, while also centering the experiences of Orthodox Jewish women. It underscores the potential of faith-based higher education to align religious identity with academic excellence and community leadership.

A. Educational Model Grounded in Jewish Logic

The institution studied implements a model called Logical-Inductive Reasoning grounded in Judaism, which integrates Torah-based ethics with academic content. The model emphasizes the uniqueness of each student, promotes ethical reasoning, and fosters identity rooted in Jewish spirituality. Key features include:

- Active, constructivist, and competency-based methodologies.
- Academic freedom aligned with religious principles: teaching, research, and learning are all guided by Jewish ethical thought.
- Curricular offerings that combine professional formation (e.g., business, education, design) with Torah study.
- A strong emphasis on ethical decision-making, leadership, and meaningful action.

This model affirms that religion is a valid framework for ethical discourse and seeks to harmonize knowledge and spirituality for societal impact.

B. Measuring Holistic Student Development

Holistic education encompasses academic, personal, spiritual, and ethical dimensions, each of which plays a vital role in shaping students' development. Olivares et al. [2] emphasize identity construction as a process that is nurtured through institutional guidance, while Fitzgerald [1] views professional identity as an integration of competencies and ethical values. Quaintance et al. [3] underscore the importance of emotional well-being and the perception of mattering as key factors in student learning. Similarly, Sternszus et al. [25]define professional identity through the dimensions of being, becoming, and belonging, highlighting the need for authenticity and equity in educational spaces. Díaz [26] advocates for religious education as a context that fosters inclusion, respect, and personal growth. Collectively, these perspectives support the inclusion of religious development as a meaningful component in evaluating the quality and impact of higher education.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a quantitative, descriptive, non-experimental, and cross-sectional research design. From a quantitative perspective, the aim is to analyse and measure students' self-perceptions through the collection of numerical data using structured instruments, such as Likert-scale surveys.

According to Valenzuela and Flores [27], quantitative research aims to objectively examine and clarify the relationships between variables by using data collection instruments whose results are analyzed through statistical methods. In this sense, an online survey offers the advantage of gathering information regardless of the student's location. The design is non-experimental because variables are not manipulated but rather observed in their natural context. It is cross-sectional, as data were collected only once, specifically in July 2025, thus providing a snapshot of the phenomenon under investigation.

B. Population and Sampling

The target population consists of female students enrolled during the May–August 2025 academic term in undergraduate programs in graphic design, interior design, interior architecture, commercial engineering, primary and preschool education, education for learning difficulties, kosher gastronomy, and Judaic education at a faith-based university in Panama. These students belong to the Orthodox Jewish community and pursue professional degrees in conjunction with religious studies.

Due to the small size of the total population, a non-probability convenience sampling method was used. This technique was chosen to ensure accessibility and voluntary participation while maintaining cultural sensitivity. The total population consisted of 58 female students enrolled in selected academic programs during the study period. A non-probability convenience sample of 33 participants was used, representing over 56% of the population. Based on this sample size and assuming maximum variability (p = 0.5), the estimated margin of error is approximately ±8% at a 90% confidence level. This level of representativeness provides sufficient reliability for exploratory and descriptive analysis in small, culturally specific academic settings.

The selection criteria were based in:

- Active enrollment in one of the designated academic programs.
- Have completed at least part of the religious coursework offered by the institution, regardless of whether they had fulfilled the full religious studies curriculum.
- Informed consent to participate voluntarily in the study.

This sampling method was appropriate for a small, culturally homogeneous population and ensures sufficient representation of the study population with 90% confidence.

C. Variables and Dimensions

To evaluate the impact of religious education on students' holistic development, the study was structured around three core variables, each comprising two analytical dimensions. These variables were derived from the theoretical framework and designed to capture the multidimensional effects of faith-based instruction within a higher education context:

- Variable 1: Impact of Religious Courses on Personal and Spiritual Life
  This variable includes two dimensions:
  o *Personal Development*, referring to aspects such as self-image, emotional growth, and self-esteem.
  o *Spiritual Development*, addressing students' connection to faith, religious practices, and transcendence.

- Variable 2: Religious Formation and Academic Performance
  This variable evaluates the extent to which religious education supports academic engagement. It includes:

  o *Religious Formation*, defined as the internalization of religious teachings and values.
  o *Academic Performance*, which assesses motivation, study habits, and students' perception of their academic progress.

- Variable 3: Identity Construction and Community Role
  This variable explores how students define themselves within their cultural-religious framework and how they perceive their role in the community. It includes:

  o *Identity Construction*, focused on cultural-religious identity and gender roles.
  o *Community Role*, reflecting students' sense of belonging, active participation, and readiness to assume leadership positions.

D. Instrument and Data Collection

Data were collected using a Likert-scale survey specifically developed to measure students' perceptions in relation to the three variables mentioned above. The instrument consisted of multiple statements rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *"strongly disagree"* to *"strongly agree"*.

This structure allowed for the quantification of perceptions in areas such as personal development, spiritual growth, ethical orientation, academic motivation, identity formation, and community engagement. The design ensured a comprehensive view of how students experience the integration of religious education within their academic and personal lives.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are presented in two main sections. First, a demographic overview of the participating students is provided to contextualize the sample and highlight relevant characteristics across academic levels. This includes data on age, marital status, parenthood, and prior exposure to religious education before entering university. To ensure the reliability of the instrument, internal consistency was measured, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of .98, which demonstrates a high level of reliability and supports the validity of the survey responses.

Academic year

9% · 24% · 24% · 43%

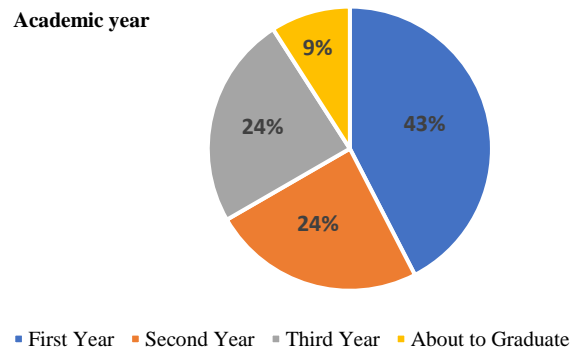■ First Year ■ Second Year ■ Third Year ■ About to Graduate

Figure 1. Distribution of Participants by Academic Year

As shown in Figure 1, the majority of participants (43%) were enrolled in their first year of university, followed by students in their second and third years (24% each). Only 9% of the respondents were in the final stage of their degree program (*about to graduate*). This lower proportion of graduating students may be explained by a common life dynamic within the community: many students temporarily withdraw from university to marry and raise children, often returning later to complete their degrees. While this reflects a strong commitment to both family and education, it also results in a smaller number of students reaching graduation within the traditional academic timeline.

This distribution is relevant for interpreting developmental trends, as it highlights how educational trajectories may be shaped by cultural and religious priorities in faith-based, gender-specific institutions.

Table I and II summarize the demographic distribution of students at the University according to age range. The majority of the student body (82%) falls within the 18–30 age bracket, and nearly half of them are married (45%), reflecting traditional life-cycle norms in the Orthodox Jewish community. In this group, 36% already have children and 100% report having received religious education prior to entering university.

This distribution illustrates how many students begin higher education early, but often interrupt their studies due to marriage and motherhood, factors that influence the low percentage of students nearing graduation. Nonetheless, many return later to complete their degrees, demonstrating a long-term commitment to both faith and education.

TABLE I
STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE BY AGE RANGE

Age rage	% Of students
18-30	82%
31-40	18%
>40	9%

TABLE II.
MARITAL STATUS

Marital Status	% Of students	Have kids?	% Of students
Married	45%	Yes	36%
Single	48%	No	64%
Other	6%		

Following the demographic overview, the analysis focused on students' responses to survey items grouped into three core variables: (1) the impact of religious courses on personal and spiritual life, (2) the relationship between religious formation and academic performance, and (3) the construction of identity and community role. The results are shown in table III.

TABLE III
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS BY VARIABLE AND ACADEMIC YEAR

Dimensions	Overall Mean	Std. Dev.	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Final Year
Personal Development	4.2	1.0	4.2	4.5	3.9	3.9
Spiritual Development	4.4	0.9	4.4	4.6	4.4	4.4
Religious Formation	4.3	1.1	4.4	4.6	4.2	3.8
Academic Performance	4.1	1.1	4.4	4.4	3.7	3.3
Identity Construction	4.4	1.0	4.5	4.5	4.5	3.7
Community Role Engagement	4.4	1.0	4.5	4.5	4.4	3.1

The analysis of the survey responses revealed meaningful differences across academic years in students' perceptions of how religious education contributes to their holistic formation. In the dimension of *Personal Development*, students in their first and second years reported higher levels of perceived growth (M = 4.2 and 4.5, respectively), while scores decreased among students in their third year and those nearing graduation (M = 3.9 for both). A similar trend was observed in *Spiritual Development*, where the highest average score (M = 4.6) was found in the second year, with consistent perceptions in other years (M = 4.4).

For *Religious Formation*, students in the second year reported the highest impact (M = 4.6), followed by first-year students (M = 4.4). The score dropped in the third year (M = 4.2) and was lowest among students in their final academic stage (M = 3.8). This pattern suggests that the perceived influence of religious courses may diminish as students approach graduation, potentially due to shifts in academic focus or external responsibilities.

Regarding *Academic Performance*, first- and second-year students again showed higher agreement (M = 4.4), while perceptions declined in the third year (M = 3.7) and were lowest among final-year students (M = 3.3). These findings may reflect a perceived distancing between religious content and final-year academic challenges.

In the *Identity Construction and Community Role* Engagement dimensions, students in their first three years consistently reported high levels of agreement (M = 4.4–4.5). However, among students close to graduation, these values decreased noticeably—particularly in community engagement (M = 3.1). This result may point to reduced participation in communal spaces or a redefinition of community roles as students transition into the workforce.

The findings of this study contribute to broader debates on women's education and empowerment by showing how religious education can serve as both a source of identity formation and a means of strengthening resilience in female students. Consistent with existing scholarship, which highlights the role of faith-based curricula in shaping women's cultural identities and providing ethical frameworks, the data suggest that structured religious instruction nurtures students' sense of belonging and spiritual grounding. In contexts where women often face competing demands of academic study, family responsibilities, and community roles, these elements can become powerful sources of empowerment by reinforcing self-worth and continuity of values.

At the same time, the results also expose a critical challenge: declining motivation and reduced engagement as students approach graduation. The drop in perceived academic performance and community role participation among final-year students reflects a transitional period where professional

internships, marriage, or motherhood often compete with academic demands. This tension resonates with wider debates about how to sustain women's academic trajectories in higher education, particularly in gender-specific or culturally conservative contexts, where life transitions may intersect strongly with academic continuity.

This trend is further illustrated in Figure 2, which shows the average scores across six key dimensions by academic year. Students in their first and second years reported higher levels of personal growth, spiritual development, academic engagement, and identity formation. In contrast, students who were about to graduate reported noticeably lower scores, particularly in Academic Performance (3.3) and Community Role (3.1). This decline appears to be associated not with a loss of religious commitment, but with external pressures such as the demands of professional internships, increasing family responsibilities, and limited time to engage in communal life. As students transition into the workforce and adult roles, many express feeling less available to participate actively in their community, despite maintaining strong internal spiritual convictions.

Despite these challenges, scores in Spiritual Development remained stable across all academic years, indicating the lasting impact of religious instruction on students' inner lives and values. These findings underscore the need for continued spiritual support and identity-affirming strategies, particularly for students in advanced stages of their academic path, to ensure a consistent and holistic educational experience.

Figure 2. Average Scores by Academic Year and Dimension

V. CONCLUSIONS

Within the limits of the data analyzed, three preliminary conclusions can be drawn:

1. Strong influence on spiritual and identity development. Across academic years, students consistently reported high levels of spiritual growth and identity construction, confirming the central role of religious education in reinforcing values, purpose, and cultural identity.

2. Gradual decline in academic motivation and formation. While first- and second-year students perceived strong academic benefits, those nearing graduation reported lower levels of academic engagement and religious formation. This decline appears linked to external pressures and life transitions rather than to diminished religious conviction.

3. Enduring impact on identity despite contextual challenges. Even as community engagement and academic performance perceptions decrease in later stages, identity formation remains strong, underscoring the resilience of faith-based education in shaping women's personal and social development.

Overall, these results suggest that religious education supports the empowerment of women by fostering inner strength, spiritual resilience, and cultural identity. However, the data also highlight challenges in sustaining academic motivation as students approach graduation. Addressing these challenges requires institutional strategies that accompany women through transitional stages, ensuring that they complete their academic journey with a reinforced sense of purpose and belonging.

Finally, it must be emphasized that this article represents work in progress. The conclusions presented are provisional and limited to the scope of the quantitative survey data. Further validation through qualitative approaches (e.g., interviews, focus groups) and expanded quantitative analysis is required to strengthen the evidence base and provide more definitive insights into the complex relationship between women's education, empowerment, and religious formation.
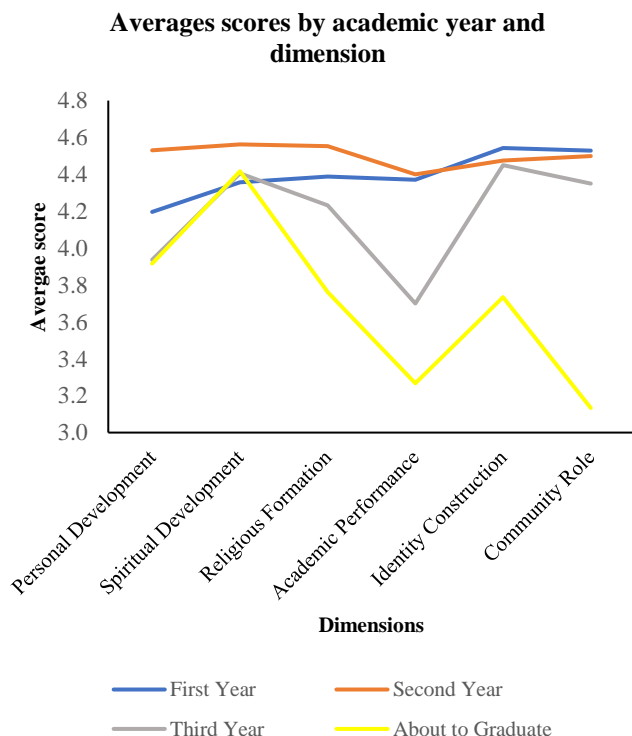
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