The effort to develop feminist accounts of good sex within the context of patriarchal religious traditions raises a host of methodological problems. The very formulation of the project recognizes the tensions between feminism as a social movement committed to the liberation of women from all forms of oppression, and the direction and intention of traditions that have contributed directly and indirectly to women's subordination and marginalization in religion and society. The Good Sex project begins from the reality that women have rarely participated in the formulation of sexual norms and values in the major world religions, and that religious sexual values have seldom been conducive to the health or well-being of women. In bringing together a group of women connected to different traditions, the project seeks to create a space in which the participants can “think new thoughts,” reflecting on sexuality from the perspective of the concerns and experiences of women in our cultures. But at the same time, it assumes that these new thoughts will somehow remain in relation to the religions being transformed and will possibly authenticate themselves through connection to neglected or dissident strands within those religions. The project thus immediately becomes entangled in fundamental questions about how feminists argue for and make change, especially when the changes envisioned may radically challenge central elements of tradition.

Defining the Questions

My interest in this chapter is not so much in defining good sex from a Jewish feminist perspective as in thinking about how to think about the

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2 Ibid., 97.
issue. As a Jewish feminist theologian, I find that the task of transforming Jewish sexual norms raises questions about authority that I must sort out before I can begin to think substantively about the characteristics of good sex. The Jewish feminist movement in the United States has flourished in the context of a decentralized, remarkably diverse Jewish community, in which there are many competing visions of the nature of Judaism and many opportunities to shape Jewish life in new directions. In a situation in which the great majority of U.S. Jews have rejected or are redefining elements of traditional Jewish belief and practice, the issue of authority is crucial and has implications well beyond the area of sexuality. The question of how to ground and argue for criticisms or constructive reworkings of religious tradition is pressing for any theology or group that does not simply assume the validity of traditional sources of authority, such as Scripture, revelation, or centralized religious leadership. Yet, because sexual control of women is such a key element in broader patriarchal control, the topic of sexuality raises the issue of authority with particular vividness and urgency. On what basis can feminists advocate particular visions of sexuality in ways that will prove intelligible and convincing to others?

The problem of authority arises for feminists as soon as we begin to challenge any aspect of the status and role of women. Once we acknowledge the possibility of deeply questioning any element of tradition, we seem to undermine the hope of religious certainty at a level that goes far beyond the specific issue at hand. However narrow the grounds for a particular criticism—and feminist criticisms of the treatment of women and religious sexual values are in fact deep and wide-ranging—rejecting any element of tradition throws all the rest into question. This is because, however much feminists still may value certain insights and perspectives we glean from our traditions, we no longer value them simply because they are there. Rather, we are confronted with having to self-consciously appropriate and reappropriate from the conflicted strands within each tradition those that make sense and bear fruit in our own lives, finding ways to explain our choices that make sense both to ourselves and to others. Logically, we cannot have it both ways. We cannot both deny the authority of religious

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3 Only 50 percent of U.S. Jews are affiliated with any particular religious movement within Judaism. Of that 50 percent, 80 percent are non-Orthodox. This means that, to varying degrees, they accept the notion of Judaism as an evolving tradition that must adapt itself to changing historical and social circumstances.