Women and Judaism: New Insights and Scholarship
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Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues, Number 20, Fall 5771/2010, pp. 164-166 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press

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The field of Jewish women’s and gender studies began to develop in the 1970s. Since then, many shelves of books have been published, reflecting research in the various disciplines that make up Jewish Studies. The present, rather slim volume sets out, according to its subtitle, to document “new insights and scholarship” on women and Judaism. Offering an introduction by Judith Baskin, ten more articles grouped in the categories of “Classical Tradition,” “History,” “Contemporary Life,” and “Literature,” and an epilogue by the editor, it seems to be directed mainly at laypersons not familiar with recent developments in the field. Some of the essays are surveys of past and present research, while others are deeper case studies going into detail about a particular phenomenon.

In her introductory essay, Judith Baskin outlines four themes to consider when looking at women and the Jewish experience: (a) the lasting impact of androcentric biblical and rabbinic traditions; (b) the majority cultures of the host environments; (c) economic resources; and (d) the impact of changing technologies. It is unfortunate that the other essays in the volume don’t necessarily continue or return to these important themes, although there is a tangential reference to the issue of majority cultures in the epilogue. Other overarching issues in Jewish women’s studies are similarly neglected. Apart from a mention of Phyllis Trible, there is little reference to non-Jewish scholars and their contribution to our understanding of feminist scholarship. Esther Fuchs’s chapter on Bible scholarship includes some material on film studies, which is interesting, but there is no further discussion of the multi-disciplinary nature of the field of gender and women’s studies. Are disciplinary questions considered off-limits in a volume that seems intended mainly for laypersons?

When women’s studies, especially women’s history, were first entering the academic world as more or less respectable disciplines, a leading scholar or feminist activist—depending on whether this quote is attributed to Joan Kelly-Gadol or Charlotte Bunch—remarked: “You can’t just ‘add women and stir.’” It was hoped that a feminist or even a gender perspective would revolutionize the academic disciplines and their leading paradigms. But anyone looking in this volume for new insights into the nature and
meaning of community, leadership, spirituality, literacy, modernity and other basic terms employed in Jewish Studies may be disappointed. It seems more like an “add women and stir” approach.

Of course, the involvement of women in scholarship and the focus on women as objects of research are admirable accomplishments in and of themselves. Still, by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, we might have expected more, and this, too, is related to the volume’s limited scope. Sylvia Barack Fishman suggests in her essay, “Women’s Transformation of Contemporary Jewish Life,” that “Perhaps the most emblematic of . . . [the] intellectual challenges [posed by Jewish women’s studies] . . . have been and continue to be posed by Jewish feminist theologians and philosophers, who urge a revisioning of Jewish conceptual and religious categories” (p. 188). But the disciplines of philosophy, theology and even mysticism are missing from this volume, as are many of the social sciences, education and the arts. Even the chapter on literature omits any mention of poetry, a field in which there has been some very significant creativity in a number of Jewish communities (and which was addressed in depth in Nashim, no. 19).

But the only community that really seems to matter is the American one. Of the eleven authors, nine are based in the US, one in Canada and one in Israel. Yet, when Pamela Nadell writes in her essay on “Women and American Judaism” that “. . . women used their power to transform American Judaism” (p.156), one is hard-pressed to find concrete examples of how American Judaism has, in fact, been transformed. For instance, has the entrance of women into positions of community leadership affected more far-reaching changes in the community’s agenda, re-ordered priorities, introduced new concerns, changed the dominant professional roles, etc.? Nadell is quick to dismiss developments on the Israeli scene, an omission slightly corrected by Sylvia Barack Fishman in her contribution. Still, while Nadell makes brief mention of JOFA (the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance), both ignore Kolech, its Israeli counterpart. Similarly, in Esther Fuchs’s article on Bible scholarship, I wondered why there was a reference to Athalya Brenner’s feminist midrash, but not to midrashim by Israeli writers like Gili Zivan, Rivka Lubitsch and Tamar Biale.

I also spotted errors that an editor versed in Jewish women’s studies might have been expected to catch. Embarrassingly, the Israeli poet Yona Wollach appears in Esther Fuchs’s article as “Ona Wallach.” Fishman errs in giving ushpizot (instead of ushpizan) as the feminine form of ushpizin, the biblical “guests” —all male —traditionally invited to the table during the festival of Sukkot, and in claiming that the origins of the feminist custom of placing an orange on the Seder plate are unclear. (Interested readers can find information on this in Sonia Zylberberg’s article, “Oranges and Seders,” in Nashim, no. 5 [2002]).

However, although some aspects of the book are disappointing, others are a cause for genuine celebration. The works cited in the notes include literally hundreds of books and articles published in the last quarter of a century by both female and male scholars. This impressive corpus of research could form the basis of a more truly feminist approach to scholarship. Perhaps surprisingly, the writer who seems most
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conscious of this is the editor, Frederick Greenspahn (the only male contributor to the volume), who points in his epilogue to the impact of women and women’s studies on Jewish studies in general (“Women and Judaism: From Invisibility to Integration”).

A more expansive approach might indicate the implications of Jewish women’s studies for other fields of Jewish endeavor. I will take the opportunity to raise two such issues, relating, respectively, to education and ideology. First, Jewish educators must invest time and effort in developing strategies for dealing with the problematic texts of the classic biblical and rabbinic traditions—those that humiliate or insult women. We cannot change how Jewish women were perceived and how they lived in the past—but we must change how they will live in the future. This can be done only through contextualizing the past and giving students a way of coping with the difficulties it raises. Changing Jewish education in a direction more sensitive to feminist issues must involve the men as well as the women, the boys as well as the girls. Much more work must be done in teacher education—both pre-service and in-service training—in order to deal with this challenge. Fishman notes: “In adult Jewish educational activities, men slightly outnumber women in Orthodox settings, while, in Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and transdenominational settings, women now outnumber men two to one” (p. 187). There seems to be a clear need within the community to bring men and women into a new balance.

Second, does the impact of feminism on Jewish studies or even on Jewish life bode well for those of us who are hoping for a revolution in Judaism vis-à-vis the Other, in general? The late Israeli Bible scholar Moshe Greenberg once said: “Even the choicest vine needs seasonal pruning to ensure more fruitful growth.”1 The “pruning” Greenberg alluded to has taken place in a number of areas, including girls’ education, women’s participation in life-cycle ceremonies, women’s ordination, etc. Can it also take place in the realm of how Jews view non-Jews— for example, non-Jewish minorities within a Jewish state? Or is feminism only about the changing status of women?

Greenspahn’s book is a further step in the right direction, but it mainly points to how much more we need to do.

Note: