The Audacity of Holiness: Orthodox Women’s Theater in Israel


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Theater reflects the heart and soul of the human experience. Ancient, medieval and contemporary societies have used theater to explore elusive and fundamental ideas such as love, justice and morality. Jewish society, though a relative latecomer to the stage, has initially enjoyed theater as a form of creative expression and as an outlet for social commentary in medieval Purim-schpiels and Yiddish theatrical productions. In The Audacity of Holiness: Orthodox Women’s Theater in Israel, Reina Rutlinger-Reiner explores the relationship between theater and Judaism, and its specific implications for traditionally observant Israeli women.1

The Audacity of Holiness is an ethnographical study in which Rutlinger-Reiner gathered the bulk of her material through participant observation. While she acknowledges her personal affinity to the study group, her writing denotes an individual “voice” to each subject. Although the author draws on her knowledge and background as a drama professor at a religious all-female teachers’ college, her book remains light in analysis. The result is a wonderfully descriptive account of Orthodox Israeli women’s theater, which, while lacking in academic grounding, successfully accentuates her subjects’ unique “voices.”

Rutlinger-Reiner first describes the growth of women’s theater in Israeli Orthodox society and then details the different groups and institutions involved in these theater activities. She focuses on the National Religious community, including women who fall within a broad spectrum of observance, from liberal to conservative, as opposed to the haredi community. Rutlinger-Reiner explains that haredi theatrical activities seem amateur and lack artistic goals, while theater activity in the National Religious community seems more artistically motivated and developed.

The book focuses on the national religious camp, which is difficult to define despite many attempts to do so. The complexity stems from the fact that religious Zionism is a Theo-political philosophy that does not necessarily correlate with a sociological reality. Depicting this problem, the author describes the theatrical activities of artists who came from the secular world and chose to become observant (ba’alot thsuva). They remain on the border between the national religious camp and the haredi world (pp. 87-109).

A different chapter deals with women who are engaged in theater in the settlements, a very different sociological context that also has direct implication on the choice of topics that interest these artists (pp. 36-64). For the American reader it would seem that the best

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term to use here would be modern orthodoxy, or perhaps non-haredi would suffice. Even though the terminology is a problem, the author touches upon the sociological complexity of her research subjects. Rutlinger-Reiner describes the topics that are the focus of contemporary artists. There is distinct interest in issues that are perceived as feminine, like modesty, spousal relationship, and violence in the family; alternatively, there are plays that focus on the relationships with secular Israel (pp. 162-170) and the political arena. It is rare to encounter a right-wing ideology in the theatrical scene as these women enable a different voice to be heard. Engaging in politics resulted in some very interesting outcomes, for example as part of the protest against the disengagement women involved in theater created a performance in the streets of Jerusalem, using male actors for modesty reasons (pp. 84-86).

This volume needs to be understood on the backdrop of artistic creation within the religious society in Israel. The book serves as an important tool in the research of Israeli society; it uses a new angle to study a key section of Israeli society: the national religious society in general and the settlement movement in particular. Until now, the major focus of research in Israel and abroad was on the political ramifications concerning religious Zionism; but this movement is far more than just a political phenomenon. It is a cultural and religious movement with wide implications. The groundwork for the research of religious women in pre-state Israel only started in recent years. This book adds another perspective to developments in the post-1967 period, or more importantly the post-settlement era. Furthermore, Rutlinger-Reiner’s study gives the reader an opportunity to glimpse at the fringe of that society [in terms of the subject (women) and the object (theater)].

A common thread in the book is the subversive potential of women’s theater. The book describes several points of altercation between the religious establishment in Israel and women’s theater production. One of them is described in the fifth chapter, which deals with a drama department in a religious teachers’ college. Rutlinger-Reiner served as a professor at the all-female college Émuna (faith) that was the first to introduce a drama department. She describes several occasions when students found themselves at odds with the religious leadership of the institution because of content that was critical or offensive to the perceived role of women in the religious community (pp. 144-149). A more radical group consisting of women more lax in their observance portrayed a more critical look on the issue (pp. 193-207). When considering the bigger picture, Rutlinger-
Reiner does not find women’s theater a feminist subversive act, but an act to reinforce a specific situation (pp. 238-240). For example, in her college, a number of students found parts of the curriculum challenging and wanted to remove Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* for modesty issues (p. 116). Surprisingly, Rutlinger-Reiner does not offer an explanation for the growth in theatrical productions among the female segment of the religious population in Israel. Yet, it is feasible to assume that this form of cultural activism, which displays some radical traits, (p. 14-16) emerges from the margins wherein women function anyhow.

Another common thread is the reaction of the rabbis to the theater phenomenon. This point is discussed like other parts of the book from an ethnographical perspective. By doing so, the reader gets no appreciation of the *halachic* background of the issue. Further research that will shed light on the Jewish law perspective (*Halacha*) is needed. The major Jewish code of law, the *shulchan aruch*, does not deal directly with art and theater; but it does deal with related topics, such as modesty, and secular culture. The author dedicates an entire chapter to the role of rabbis in the religious theater movement, without any mention of the *halachic* implication (pp. 73-84).

In conclusion, *The Audacity of Holiness: Orthodox Women’s Theater in Israel* fills a void in the research of the national religious society in Israel. It also offers a fresh and intimate look into the lives of Orthodox women in Israel.

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7 Today the college continues to offer a program in theater studies that focuses on teaching drama but also on independent theatrical activity. The spiritual tension still exists and the college deals with the issue by appointing a rabbi that specifically assists the students of the theater program in spiritual issues. [http://emuna.ac.il/emuna_site/c_drama1.html](http://emuna.ac.il/emuna_site/c_drama1.html) last visited 12/30/09.

8 On the college’s website the program offers classes that are dealing with *halachic* issues relevant to theater. Rutlinger-Reiner mentions that the college published a booklet that deals with halachic questions concerning theater in 2005. (p. 80 n. 11).

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