Book Review


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Rarely do we find an academic study that brings to light untouched, untreated and groundbreaking historical accounts. In her 2005 book, *Princess or Prisoner? Jewish Women in Jerusalem, 1840-1914,* Margalit Shilo, a history professor at Bar-Ilan University, accomplished this stature. Relying on primary sources and documents from public archives and private collections, memoirs, journals, letters, as well as the press of the period, Shilo succeeds in exposing the inconceivable realities of Jewish women who lived in Jerusalem at the turn of the nineteenth century. Shilo’s study explores the lives of these women through a spectrum of social paradigms and divides the population of the Jerusalem women into three main groups: 1) the mythical Jerusalem woman who was more spiritual than the local rabbi; 2) The Ashkenazi woman who was basically the self-denying one; and 3) The Sephardic woman who was illiterate or uneducated but sensual and alluring. Overall, Shilo describes the typical Jerusalem Jewish woman of the late Ottoman period as “self-denying to the point of suppressing her own person.” (p. XVII) Through these women’s experiences, Shilo wants to “reveal the hidden face” of the general Jewish society and “uncover the diverse layers and characteristics of attitudes to Jewish women” in the Holy City. (p. XVIII)

The fact that thousands of Jewish women immigrated to the Holy Land in the second half of the nineteenth century is little known. This wave of immigration to Eretz Israel was not only fueled by religious and ideological motives, but also by the wish to escape and find refuge from the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) movement and the growing secularization of Judaism in Europe. Entire families immigrated, but single, mostly widowed, women immigrated in very large numbers. According to the Montifiore’s censuses, single women immigrants outnumbered single men. Interestingly, the mission of these female settlers was enhanced by romantic notions and self-identification with biblical figures.

In Chapter One, “The Female Experience of Immigration,” Shilo examines the inspiration behind the female immigration to Eretz-Israel from 1840 to 1914. Pilgrimages based on a spiritual, individual or collective pursue were quite popular. Shilo observes that male initiative for immigration stemmed from a sort of monastic experience, self-sacrifice or strong affinity to the general “Jewish historical experience.” *Hilulot* (festivities) at gravesites of saints on Lag ba’Omer were passionately conducted. In the case of female pilgrimages, a visit to Rachel’s tomb was the climax of the event. Yet despite those exhilarating moments, the real complexity of this new Jewish immigration surfaced often; Eretz Israel was under the constricting thumb of the Ottoman rule; physical danger and insecurity loomed at every crossroads.
In Chapter Two, “Princess of Prisoner? Marriage as a Female Experience,” Shilo focuses on the nature and character of the newly formed marriages in Jerusalem. Her aim is to study “the myth of the strength of the traditional Jewish family, and the realization of its central place in Jewish life…” (p. 35) on the basis of the unique situation in Jerusalem, a city where Takanot (Jerusalem Regulations) encompassing the entire Jewish community were issued in 1842, but not always enforced. (The Bachelor’s Regulation for men ages twenty to sixty required every unattached Jewish man to get married within six months of his arrival at the city.) Shilo continues to describe in great detail the customs and rituals of matchmaking, intercommunal marriages, the dowry, the engagement ceremony, and the wedding celebrations. However, she fails to revisit her initial aim, and the questions posed at the beginning of the chapter are left unanswered. In the last section of this chapter, “Captive under the Wedding Canopy,” the author tries to assess the specific bride’s feelings in a little more than a printed page – but again, her conclusion about the captivity aspect of the ceremony is left undeveloped and prematurely ascertained. Nearly all of the sources used in this chapter were written by men. Supporting evidence from women’s memoirs and letters is deficient. Furthermore, basing anthropological and historical arguments on mere depictions of wedding rituals in the late nineteenth century has, in this particular instance, compromised the critical elements of the analysis.

In Chapter Three, “Women at Home,” Shilo investigates the home life of the Jewish women in Jerusalem. She observes that a distinction between home life and public life is artificial “since each intrudes on the other.” (p. 69) Her survey of the domestic domain reveals that new Western ways of life caught up with the Jewish residents of Jerusalem. This important chapter is replete with data from authentic women’s writings and sheds light on issues such as, marital relations, childrearing and divorce.

Chapter Four, “Women in the Public Sphere: Religious, Economic, and Philanthropic Involvement,” depicts the social life of the more affluent Jerusalem women. The religious, economic and philanthropic involvement of Jewish women in Jerusalem is aptly portrayed. It seems that the roles women played in the synagogue and other public institutions were similar to those played by Jewish women in the Diaspora. Noteworthy though is the initiative of several Ashkenazi women entrepreneurs who managed their own businesses.

In Chapter Five, the author discusses “Scholarship, Illiteracy, and Educational Revolution.” She notices, as expected, that “the Jerusalem community, which had invested in the education of its sons, showed little interest in educating its daughters.” (p. 143) In a general Jewish population of 70,000, not more than thirty women were literate and only three had published their writings. For the most part, Jerusalem women and girls had no formal education; nor were they offered the opportunity to learn and study Hebrew. The few educated Jerusalem women were self-taught and organized home study to teach others. Fortunately, “the Rothschilds of France and the Montefiores of England saw women’s education in the Land of Israel as one of their primary goals.” (p. 152) Thus, the first girls’ school in Jerusalem was founded by the Rothschilds in 1854 and the Montefiores followed suit a year later. This chapter is particularly illuminating since it outlines the development of girls’ schools in Jerusalem despite “the basic perception of the superiority of male society [that] was axiomatic” at the time. (p. 180)
In the sixth and last chapter, “On the Margins of Society: Poverty, Widowhood, Husband Desertion, Prostitution, Missionary Efforts,” Shilo concentrates on the less-publicized hardship and tragic circumstances of many Jerusalem women. The growth of the Jewish population in the Holy City and the fact that women and their children outnumbered the male population caused marginal elements of the society, such as scarcity and poverty, to prevail. “Begging Letters” to the Jewish communities in the Diaspora were the typical form of seeking support. Shilo concludes that these letters “attest to the depth of poverty and destitution in Jerusalem, and the widows, who were surely the weakest of the women, account for the largest number.” (p. 186) (Widows comprised 22.8 percent of the general Jewish population of the city.) The harsh and unbearable conditions led to prostitution and conversion. Shilo offers biblical connotations and images of the Holy City as predictions of these social calamities. Nonetheless, the secular reader cannot find solace therein.

In the short Epilogue “The Female Experience in Jerusalem: Honing Historical-Cultural Insights,” Shilo reiterates the main premise of the book in seven pages and attempts to situate the work as part of a general portrayal of the Old and New Yishuv in Eretz Israel. She pertinently construes that the experience of the Jerusalem woman was rather bleak and heartbreaking.