
Reviewed by Ilan Fuchs, Tulane University, Jewish Studies Program, New Orleans LA

This is not your typical book review because the original monograph was published in Hebrew in 1998, translated into English in 2002, and vastly reviewed when it first came out. Nevertheless, the review will survey some of the studies that proceeded El-Or’s book, and describe scholarly attempts to learn more about the national-religious culture in Israel.

Tamar El-Or’s book deals with what is defined by many as the most significant change in the status of women in the Jewish religious population -- women’s torah study. It is an analysis of the changing paradigm in literacy among observant Jewish women. From an anthropological point of view, gaining literacy is seen as having several functions, one of which enables people to fulfill tasks in their traditional societal roles; another assist people to enter segments of society that were inaccessible to them previously. El-Or is interested in religious literacy that might allow Jewish women to improve their position in the traditional hierarchy (pp. 263-292).

Until the twentieth century, women were excluded from learning the canonical texts of Judaism. The origins of this approach could be traced to the Mishnah, Seder Nashim, Tractate Sotah, Chapter 3:3, where Rabbi Eliezer and Ben Azzai disagree on the question of women’s Torah study. The Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 21b concludes that there is a general prohibition barring women from Torah study. Women were only permitted to study the basic Jewish law that was needed for daily life. This reality limited Jewish

---

women’s access to religious learning and they were taught just enough to properly fulfill their roles as wives or mothers. In an earlier work that focused on Haredi women, Tamar El-Or described this situation as ‘educated and ignorant.’ She was referring to a conscious effort to keep women outside the realm of Jewish learning, preventing them from challenging accepted norms.

As secularization and acculturation began to infiltrate traditional Jewish communities, Jewish women, uneducated in their own religious identity, were especially vulnerable to assimilation. In time, and often with great struggle against the rabbinic establishment, which feared modernity and secularism, women initiated Torah study that would strengthen their identity.

This book deals with women’s advanced Torah study in the late 1980s in Israel and tries to explore the motivation of young women from the religious Zionist movement who wanted to acquire further study. It provides a rudimentary survey of the different institutions that were available for women’s higher Torah study in the 1980s, known as Midrashot (p. 31-51). As an ethnographical study, the book displays the advantages and disadvantages of its own methodology (p. 70). El-Or’s research draws on extensive interviews and she frequently quotes from them (pp. 136-145). She warns her readers about her personal biases, and the way a variety of political and cultural views influenced her research and the conversations with her subjects. Completing her fieldwork in the early 1990s, she was well aware of the atmosphere that led to the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin, and the way it affected her (pp. 72-82).

---

2 Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Talmud Torah 1:13; Shulhan Arukh, YD 246:6. Maimonides distinguishes between the written Torah, which should not be studied, but if it is studied this is not a transgression, and oral Torah, which should not be studied by women in any case. The Shulhan Arukh accepted his opinion.

3 Tamar El-Or Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish women and Their World (Boulder 1994)

4 Ilan Fuchs, The Role of Women as Functionaries in the Halachic-Legal System: A Historical and Judicial Analysis, PhD. Dissertation Bar Ilan University 2009 (Hebrew)
Next Year I Will Know More: Literacy and Identity Among Young Women in Israel

touches on many issues of historical and political nature, presumably because this study is ethnographical, sources are often not cited.

Furthermore, the book uncovers several matters that are at the core of the religious Zionist identity. The reader becomes acquainted with topics like the different levels of observance in this group, various school systems, and many issues that concern women’s roles in the religious Zionist community. There are discussions on women’s attire and hair covering, National Service (a system in which religious women are exempted from military service but choose to volunteer in civil institutions, such as schools, hospitals, police etc., pp. 134-137), and secularization (pp. 120-130)–all form an important introduction to the religious Zionist culture. Yet, the book’s over-encompassing tendency results in a situation wherein topics that can be discussed at length are summarized in a few lines. (For the convenience of the reader, the English translator of the text added a glossary with basic ‘vocabulary’ of the indigenous terms, pp. 9-14).

This work, as stated earlier, addresses a variety of issues and discusses the main topic of women’s literacy using a very broad definition. El-Or emphasizes the study of philosophical and non-halachic texts, (pp. 152-154, 219-222) and observes that not all women’s classes are necessarily advanced. (pp. 198-205). In filling the gap since this work was published, it is fitted to mention that the author of this review studied extensively the rabbinical responses to the changes in women’s religious education: I surveyed texts from the mid-19th century until today, and offered explanations to why rabbinic leaders changed their views on this issue. In the area of women learning

5 On issues that have to do with modesty and hair covering see: Ilan Fuchs, “Single Women’s Hair covering in the Opinions of the Sephardic Decisors,” in To Be A Jewish Woman, vol. 4, Tova Cohen (ed.), Jerusalem 2007, pp. 93-118 [Hebrew].


7 Fuchs, supra note 4.

Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal Spring 2010 Volume 7 Number 1
ISSN 1209-9392
© 2010 Women in Judaism, Inc.

All material in the journal is subject to copyright; copyright is held by the journal except where otherwise indicated. There is to be no reproduction or distribution of contents by any means without prior permission. Contents do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors.
Talmud, there has also been some progress. In a recent dissertation, Esti Bar-El discusses the way women in the *Midrashot* study Talmud, pointing out how their study differ from the way Talmud is taught in *Yeshivot* (male-only schools). She also notes the existence of a unique feminine voice in Torah study.\(^8\) Another dissertation, currently being written by Ruth Fochtvaynger Segal, describes women who teach Talmud in the *Midrashot*. In an article that portrays the characteristics of the *Midrashot*, Tamar Ross outlines different models of *Midrashot* and female-based methodology of studying canonical texts.\(^9\)

In conclusion, this book provides not only an analysis of literacy among religious Zionist women; it also provides important information on the religious milieu that is not widely available to both Hebrew and English readers. Even though new studies on the Religious Zionist community have increased in number, El-Or’s work continues to serve as an essential resource for anyone interested in the topic.

---

8 Esti Bar-El, *Vtalmud Torah keneged Kulan: Torah study in women’s Batei Midrash: a gendered perspective*, PhD. Dissertation Bar Ilan University 2009 (Hebrew)