In the last essay of Tova Hartman’s *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism*, Hartman utilizes an analogy that describes gates and sentries that protect the tradition of Judaism. It is these gates and sentries, rather than Judaism itself, which attempt to keep feminism from breaching the walls of traditional Judaism – that is, it is not within halakhah that the problem lies, but in its so-called protectors. This analogy, while certainly useful in the last essay, is descriptive of the entire book. The book’s seven essays each explore a different topic relating feminism to modern Orthodox Judaism. Each essay could easily be said to explore the gates and sentries, along with the actual halakhah “hidden” behind them.

Hartman begins the book by discussing her personal experiences as a woman and a religious Jew, two “somewhat disparate identities” (1) that eventually led her to explore the intersection of modern Orthodoxy and feminism. Within this book, Hartman searches for the “nexus points … the places and the ways in which feminism and Modern Orthodoxy encounter each other” (2). She does this in a variety of ways, which is one of the novelties of the book: Hartman’s approach to each essay varies as she attempts to explore each topic using the most appropriate lens from which to view the situation. This creates a collection of essays that can be read individually or together, but the text also can be approached by a reader who is less than fluent in feminist theory (although a familiarity with Judaism is essential, even though she provides a glossary of terms at the back of the book).

In the second essay Hartman explores what she defines as the three ways that the Jewish canon – in which few women’s voices are heard – can be approached by feminists: through reaffirmation, reinterpretation/revisionist, or through the rejection model. These models are cleverly described through the ways “that women scholars of psychology have applied to the canon of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis” (21). Only after describing these approaches to Freud’s work does Hartman apply them to the Jewish canon. She does this successfully using the example of Beruriah, a learned woman described in the Talmud. Hartman herself holds on to the reinterpretation/revisionist approach, which confirms the integrity of the canon while still challenging “its adherents to be in a constant state of engaging and reengaging with the tradition texts” (43), as opposed to the reaffirmation model which places any disagreement with the text solely on the reader’s shoulders (i.e. if you don’t like it, it is because there is something wrong with you) or the rejection model, which simply rejects the entire canon.

Hartman explores some of the common arguments against feminism through specific examples in her essay titled “Roles, Rules and Responsa: the Backlash against Feminism.” Here, adherents to modern Orthodoxy may be surprised to find that her
examples include Rav Kook and Rabbi Twersky, among others. The goal of this chapter is not to cast dubious shadows on influential leaders within modern Orthodoxy, but instead to show that their arguments against feminism contain instead specific tropes, what Hartman calls “metahalakhic” arguments – arguments that are outside the realm of halakah, but appeal to a “common” understanding of Judaism and the world. For instance, Hartman explores the case of women reading wedding documents (c. 2004), against which there is no halakhic framework. Instead, Rabbi Schachter, who first notes that there is nothing wrong with the practice, says, “Yes, even if a parrot or monkey would read the ketubah, the marriage would be one hundred percent valid” (114). This striking comment contains an obvious, if not explicitly stated, analogy comparing a woman to a monkey or parrot, and is certainly a deterrent – after all, who would want to associate themselves with such animals in this way? The argument here is coarse, but effective within many traditional communities, and is just one example that Hartman provides.

Of particular note is Hartman’s essay on niddah, the laws of ritual purity surrounding a woman’s menstrual cycle and sexual relations with her husband. Hartman begins with comments on what she considers a “glaring omission” within feminism – the voice of traditional women. Feminist theory becomes so enamoured of itself and its ethical purpose that “anyone who adheres to the strictures of a patriarchal worldview must inherently be oppressed – regardless of the life experiences of the women living within these cultures” (81). To begin correcting this oversight, Hartman conducts ethnographic research within the Orthodox community, exploring questions of niddah with the women who adhere to it. Her results are interesting. Although the women follow the laws of family purity, there are various ways in which these women view the actual laws, including using it as a power hold over a woman’s own family planning when the rabbinic system has failed her. The various responses Hartman records run the gamut of positive and negative, but one item remains consistent: the actual observance, and the understanding that niddah gives these women a voice within their sexual relationships.

The book is framed by the founding of the author’s shul in Jerusalem, Shirah Hadashah, a minyan that strives for women’s public participation in ritual within the confines of halakah. The book, like the minyan, does not seek to change Jewish law, but instead provides points of contact between feminism and Orthodoxy. Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism is successful in creating a dialogue that continues to open up the door toward equal participation of women within Orthodoxy, and does so in a manner that is approachable by all.