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Rachel Elior’s slim volume *Dybbuks and Jewish Women in Social History, Mysticism and Folklore* loosely connects two essays that were translated from Hebrew. Elior, professor of Jewish philosophy and Jewish mystical thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, discusses the phenomenon of the *dybbuk* (the possession of a living body by the soul of a deceased person) as a manifestation of patriarchal silencing of women.

The first essay in the volume is a jeremiad against Jewish patriarchal society – though sometimes it appears that the author can’t decide whether she wants to criticize the Jewish patriarchal order specifically or patriarchal society in general. She reminds us (p. 36) that the name of the allegedly female ailment of “hysteria” is related to “hystera”, Greek for “uterus”, but that “life-sustaining feminine values such as compassion … seem to be situated at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy of values.” But the Hebrew word for “uterus” is *rehem*, from the same root as the word *rahamim* – compassion – one of the attributes of God that all Jews, male and female, are expected to imitate as part of the obligation of *imitatio Dei*, thus clearly not on a low rung. The word “hysteria” has no bearing on the Jewish patriarchy. Elior wishes to demonstrate that, though there were in every generation and every location by fortune of their family a few women who had a degree of freedom, by and large, regardless of place or time, most women suffered lives of “coercion and misery, of limited possibilities, constrained initiative, silenced voices and attenuated free will” (14-15). Further, this suffering was the result of the coercion and discrimination of the men in their families and their communities, by use of ancient laws and ancestral customs or by governmental decrees.

The essay consists of quotations and citations, mostly form Jewish sources, but also from ancient Greek sources and early Christian sources, stitched together with her commentary on them, a running diatribe, all in a trajectory towards condemnation of the patriarchy, in particular, the Jewish patriarchy. Thus, the words of “the Jewish Pharisee Saul of Tarsus”, known, of course, as “Paul”, from Timothy 2:11-15, are used to describe the patriarchal order under which all Jewish communities lived until the twentieth century. This in itself is odd, given the wealth of Jewish sources – equally condemning, and many of which Elior cites - that we could in all honesty say Jews have read and studied generation after generation, and thus have influenced and shaped their thinking and behavior. On the other hand, is Timothy, which modern scholars doubt was written by Paul, and so, perhaps is not even representative of Pharisee thinking, the literature that would be best selected to represent the thought process of the Jewish patriarchy?

Elior traces the origin of the negative portrayal of women – as “inferior, impure, sinful, guilty and punished, ignorant, and subjugated to their fathers and husbands” (16) – to the stories of Eve in Genesis, and claims that it is the linking of this mythological sin to concrete punishments “that gave rise to the conventional social order” (17). Were women not subjugated by men prior to composition of the book of Genesis? Are the stories of Genesis not reflective of existing cultural norms at the
time of its composition, so that Genesis is representative of an attitude rather than defining the attitude?

That patriarchal society has been and still is oppressive towards women can be demonstrated amply enough without distortion of citations from the Talmud and other rabbinic literature, which Elior frequently does by presenting partial information or plainly incorrect information, thereby reducing the credibility of the just feminist cause. Jewish feminists will likely seize upon this book for its critique of the patriarchy. But nearly every citation that Elior cites has a counter-example, every negative quotation has opposing opinions, as the corpus of halakhic literature is vast and variegated.

Space permits me to briefly give but several of literally dozens of examples, my first of which is actually not from rabbinic literature, but from the Torah. Elior states (33): “No one in the traditional world – in which writing was the exclusive preserve of men – ever asked why the incest prohibitions listed in Leviticus do not expressly forbid sexual relations between a father and a daughter.” I presume that this is because it was obvious to all those men in the traditional world that the prohibition of Leviticus 18:17 for a man to have sexual relations with “a woman and her daughter” includes his daughter born to a woman with whom he had sexual relations. That’s not “expressly” enough?

Another example is Elior’s statement (16) that “Women, meanwhile, occupied a secondary position – socially inferior, denied a public voice, excluded from the circle of scholars, maintained in ignorance, and legally discriminated against – for they were regarded as periodically impure by reason of their menstrual cycles, which excluded them from holiness and study.” Indeed, all the symptoms of exclusion cannot be denied, but the reason for this exclusion is not correct. In Masekhet B’rakhot (22b) we learn that “words of Torah are not susceptible to become ritually impure”, and Maimonides (Laws of T’filin, M’zuzah, and Torah Scrolls 10:8) rules: “All the ritually impure, even menstruants and even non-Jews, are permitted to hold a Torah scroll and to read from it, because ‘words of Torah are not susceptible to become ritually impure’.” It is much more likely that women were excluded because of their lowly social status, similar to that of slaves, who were also excluded, for reasons having nothing to do with ritual impurity.

Elior frequently blames halakhah, Jewish codified law, for the lowly status of women, and indeed, halakhah is (still) patriarchal, and it is not difficult to find many disturbing legalities in Jewish law, but not only with regard to the status of women; rather also, for example, with regard to the status of slaves. However, through Elior’s criticism of halakhah, her lack of a good grasp of halakhah and its process becomes apparent. On p. 19 she cites a mishnah (Horayot 3:7), where it states that “a man has precedence over a woman with respect to saving a life”, and refers to it as the halakhah. However, anyone who understands the halakhic process knows that the Mishnah does not define halakhah. (See, for example, Rashi Niddah 7:2 s.v. ha kamashma lan and Rashba”m Baba Batra 130:2 s.v. ad sheyom’ru lo halakhah l’ma’aseh, and see Baba Batra 130:2 in the ms. Vatican Ebr. 115). In Sotah 22a it states that those who learn halakhah from the mishnayot destroy the world!

In fact, though Maimonides explains the cited mishnah in Horayot by stating that because men are obligated in more commandments than women, men are more sanctified, he does not codify what is stated in that mishnah as halakhah, nor does R. Joseph Karo in the Shulhan Arukh. Rabbi Moses Isserles, in his glosses to the Shulhan

Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal Spring 2009 Volume 6 Number 1
ISSN 1209-9392
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Arukh Yoreh De’ah 252:8, which states there that a woman is redeemed from captivity before a man, unless the captors regularly engage in homosexual relations, adds a somewhat ambiguous law that states, according to the interpretation there of a student of Rabbi Isserles in the L’vush, that if a man and a woman want to drown themselves in a river – rather than to be raped - then the man is saved first. This interpretation of the words of Rabbi Isserles puts his words in the context of the paragraph there in the Shulhan Arukh and does not rely on Maimonides’ explanation of the mishnah, as do some other glosses. (See, for example, Turei Zahav, there.) However one understands the ruling of Rabbi Isserles, technically speaking, this is the Ashkenazi ruling, but not the Sephardic ruling. When discussing this material at lectures, I have stated, tongue in cheek, that if I am ever in the emergency room, I hope that the attending doctor will be Sephardic and not Ashkenazi. However, removing the tongue from the cheek, reading a responsum (Tzitz Eliezer 18:1) of one of the great twentieth century rabbinical adjudicators Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, who was the adjudicator for Shaarei Tzedek Hospital in Jerusalem for decades, we can see how a modern (Ashkenazi) halakhist, who had to deal with emergency room situations, grapples with this statement of Rabbi Isserles and teaches us why it is not relevant to such situations.

I wrote a bit at length here – and, believe me, this is only a bit, because I did not do this topic justice and it cannot be dealt justice without a serious study of all the laws of precedence in life and an examination of how the rabbinical decisors have understood these laws – to make a point. And that point is that indeed many halakhot are based on patriarchal attitudes towards women and on derogatory conceptions of women, but a critic must have greater depth of knowledge to give serious and intellectually honest critique. On a last note on this matter, to balance the picture, the law following the above citation in the Shulhan Arukh states that if a man, his father, and his rabbi are in captivity, he redeems himself first, then his rabbi, and then his father – but his mother precedes them all. Portnoy, take note!

Elior makes a common error when citing (21) Maimonides, Hilkhot Ishut (the Laws of Personal Status) 21:10 (Elior’s book has 21:1) as stating “Any woman who declines to perform any of the labors that she is obligated to do is compelled to do so, even with the rod.” Indeed, there are those, including some rabbis, who understood Maimonides to mean that the husband may beat his wife if she does not do her assigned chores. However, the actual words state, in the plural “they force her, even with a whip”. The “they” refers to the court. The woman has another option – to be a rebellious wife and to be divorced (without receiving the usual monetary payment upon divorce). Compare this to the man who refuses to give his wife a divorce when the court determines that he should be forced to give a divorce (which, according to Maimonides, includes the case of a woman who says her husband disgusts her [Hilkhot Ishut 14:8]): “Whomever the law rules that they force him to divorce his wife, but he does not want to divorce, a Jewish court, in every place and in every time, beats him until he says ‘I want’”. Or to the man whose wife is not able to bear children but he refuses to either take another wife or to divorce her: “… they force him and beat him with a whip” (Hilkhot Ishut 15:7). When studying all the marriage and divorce laws in Maimonides, it becomes clear that both the man and the woman have their obligations – quite traditional roles, as expected of the time – but each is subject to corporal punishment by the court if he or she does not abide by the court’s ruling.
Elior’s misreading of Maimonides led to her reiterating her implication of him, once again, on p. 22, claiming that Maimonides’ law is suggestive of permitting a master to employ force, “including flogging, to compel obedience” of his property, the woman. But we can see that Maimonides does not view a wife as her husband’s property, when he states that if a woman says she is disgusted by her husband and that she cannot have sexual relations with him of her own free will, he is forced to divorce her immediately, because “she is not in captivity to be [forced to] have sexual intercourse with one that she hates” (Hilkhot Ishut 14:8). Further, a man is warned “not to force her or to have intercourse with her against her will, but rather with her will and out of [kind] conversation and happiness” (Hilkhot Ishut 15:17). Along with the very patriarchal requirements that Maimonides obligates women with regard to their husbands, he also states that “Likewise, the Sages commanded that a man should respect his wife more than himself and love her as himself. If he has money, he should be generous with her according to his pocket. He should not put excessive fear upon her, and he should talk with her pleasantly and not be irritated or angry.” Patriarchal, yes, subordinating, yes, but she is not property nor is the husband himself permitted to use force to compel his wife – at least not according to Maimonides. It is indeed unfair that she loses her divorce payment if she chooses to be a rebellious wife and be divorced (though there are halakhic ways for a woman to avoid such a consequence, too complex to discuss herein).

Elior tells us (24) that the principles of halakhah were established, without exception, by men. Though there are actually a few cases cited in the Talmud of the Sages consulting with women on women’s issues (Judith Abrams’ The Women of the Talmud contains some interesting anecdotes presented for a lay audience), Elior’s claim is, of course, true. But her explanation is misleading, because she states that men “possessed exclusive intellectual authority, inasmuch as they were holier by reason of being obligated in the commandments”. Men did (and largely still do) possess exclusive intellectual authority, but a reader might be misled to think that women are not obligated in the commandments. In fact, women are obligated in all commandments with a relatively small number of exceptions. They are obligated in almost all negative commandments, exceptions being prohibitions like shaving one’s beard with a razor. And in Maimonides’ enumeration of the 248 positive commandments, he enumerates sixty commandments that are necessary for a typical man, and out of them, he states that forty-six are obligatory upon women. It is in fact the eleventh positive commandment, according to Maimonides’ count – the commandment to teach and to learn Torah – that is the clincher when it comes to men possessing exclusive intellectual authority. This is a severely problematic differentiation between the genders, and it is the challenge to women to overcome this by becoming erudite in the fine points of Jewish law so as to break that exclusivity, something that will not happen by employing Elior’s techniques. There is more than sufficient cause for complaint against the halakhah and those who define it without resorting to half-truths and distortions.

Elior ends her first essay by posing seven questions to which clearly her answer is “yes” in all cases – some are accusatory questions about the reasons for denying women access to knowledge and literacy, some are questions challenging the influence of the traditional society and halakhah, and the political power of the Haredi parties on Israeli society today, some are questions that challenge society to
change. All are thought-provoking and, whether or not you agree with her implied answers, are full of passion and fury.

Elior’s second essay is the more interesting one. She begins by presenting background about kabbalistic activity and the kabbalistic literature of the early modern period. She then presents societal background for the phenomenon of the *dybbuk* in the Jewish traditional world of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. It is in this section that she begins to develop her hypothesis that the majority of recorded cases of *dybbuks* were cases of possessed women and that this was the “only way to escape the yoke of that coercion” (73) – said coercion being forced marriages, sexual coercion, and similar demands of the patriarchal order. This hypothesis is further developed in her discussion of contexts for the *dybbuk*, and the relevant section is quite reminiscent of the first essay in the book – so that once again we are told about the connection between the word “hysteria” and the Greek “hystera” (67) and we are reminded of it again on p. 71, as if – by some *dybbuk* – the Greek word for “womb” can have some impact on the *dybbuk*’s connection with hysteria. Elior’s prose is infused with the same rhetoric that we find in the first essay, as we learn about the psychology of one possessed by a *dybbuk* and comparisons between witchcraft, demonic possession, and possession by a *dybbuk*. Her description of the exorcism ceremony is fascinating, as is the kabbalistic background. However, Elior’s attempt to find parallels between the exorcism and the Jewish wedding ceremony lack credibility, especially because some of her statements about the wedding ceremony are not accurate or are figments of her creativity – “The ring that adorns the bride’s finger symbolizes the transition from individual to member of a couple.” Where is that from? The ring that is used in a wedding ceremony once could have been anything of value of at least a *p’rutah* (a small coin), used for “acquisition” of the bride, which Elior refers to frequently enough in these two essays. The questions of veracity in the section on these parallels introduced skepticism in my mind about that which I know less about. Elior ends her essay with a discussion of S. An-sky’s well-known play “The *Dybbuk*”.

Like the opening essay, this essay suffers from zealotry in her attempts to prove her hypothesis. In the first essay, Elior sets us up to understand that female victims of *dybbuks* are victims of this abhorrent patriarchy. In the second essay, it is not Elior’s hypothesis that is particularly interesting – her hypothesis is “not all that distant from Freud’s original definition of the factors that cause hysteria”, as Elior points out herself (72), and therefore is not epiphanous. Rather, it is the discussion of the phenomenon of *dybbuks*, the exorcism ceremony, the kabbalistic background, the tangential information on such topics as witchcraft, and the useful bibliographical references in the footnotes that held this reader’s interest (though quite a few statements sorely lack references, a criticism I have of the first essay, as well).

One example of what I consider zealotry in the second essay is the sexual connotation that is attributed to the word “*dybbuk*” from the Hebrew root d-b-k, citing the verse in Genesis 2:24 in which the root first occurs in the Bible. The word *ve-davak* is typically translated there as “shall cling”, but Elior makes a leap and groundlessly connects this to the root b-‘-l, which is used both to signify ownership and sexual intercourse and then concludes (65) that “That conventional order, within the limits defined by taboos, is described in biblical Hebrew by two verbs – b-‘-l and d-b-k.” Except that nowhere in biblical Hebrew do we find that d-b-k refers to sexual intercourse. To cite just a few examples: “lest the disaster overtake me (*tidbakeni*) and I die” (Genesis 19:19); “the Israelites must remain bound (*yidb’ku*) each to the
ancestral portion of his tribe” (Numbers 36:7); “you who held fast (d’vekim) to the
Lord your God are all alive today” (Deuteronomy 4:4); “let my tongue stick (tidbak)
to my palate” (Psalms 137:6). Even with Sh’hem, who raped Dinah, and of whom it is
written “Being strongly drawn (va-tidbak nafsho) to Dinah daughter of Jacob, and in
love with the maiden”, it cannot be said that the root d-b-k refers to sexual
intercourse; the rape is reported in the previous verse. Elior’s hypothesis is credible
enough without the distortion or fabrication of evidence.
I am not one to easily defend the patriarchy, nor to write apologetics for present-day
halakhic claims that limit women’s intellectual or practical engagement with Jewish
law, or that limit women’s ritual activity. I maintain that halakhah is developed by a
never-ending dialectic continuum that must and does reflect changes in norms, in
spite of the segments of Jewish society who resist such change. Elior’s book did not
satisfy me as a contribution to effect such change. I was not bored - it kept my blood
pressure raised, as, on one hand I identify with so much of her passion, and yet on the
other, debated with her almost line-by-line. I would hesitate to recommend that
someone who is not well-versed in Talmud and halakhah should read this volume,
lest they come away with a compendium of misconceptions about Judaism and
halakhah, patriarchal as they are. Or, take a heavy dose of skepticism before sitting
down with Elior’s dybbuks.