Book Review


Reviewed by Chana R. Kotzin

**Gender and the Jewish Past: New Questions and Interpretations**

In her introductory essay to this assorted collection of essays on the theme of gender in Jewish Studies, historian Pamela Nadell argues that gender as a category of analysis, as well as the feminist critique of Jewish Studies, have radically revised our understanding of Jewish history and Jewish Studies in critical ways that are still ongoing.[1] Eight essays in this slim yet dense volume give a sample of the range of work that such approaches have brought to topics such as blood, conversion, marriage and divorce, Zionism, professionalism, biblical interpretation, translation and self-government. Three are works of history, one is a work of feminist theory, another is an essay on biblical studies. There are also articles on literary theory and criticism, feminist translation theory, and cultural studies to complete the assortment. Together they build on more than two decades or so of work utilizing feminist critique and gender studies as a tool through which to review, rework, revise and reinvent our understandings of Jewish studies and Jewish history. I will analyze four essays to give readers a view of what “gendering the Jewish past” looks like from these varied perspectives. For a challenging yet rewarding read, I encourage readers to delve into this book for these and the other essays.

Todd Endelman’s article on “Gender and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History” investigates conversion to Christianity during the 18th and 19th centuries, and the charge that Jewish women, in response to modernity, were more responsible for rising numbers of intermarriages and conversion, due to their inherent weak nature. In this thoughtful essay, Endelman suggests that our pre-World War II understanding of this subject was skewed by the work of historians such as Simon Dubnow, Raphael Mahler and Heinrich Graetz, who based their conclusions less on actual evidence and more on their own attitudes to women of their own time. Dispelling their essentialist, impressionistic (and ultimately erroneous) conclusions, Endelman takes their conclusions and turns them into a research agenda. “Did gender structure radical assimilation in any way?” Also, did Jewish women convert in greater numbers than men and, if they did, under what circumstances? (p.27) Was the salon Jewish women the “typical” intermarried convert as was the oft depicted image?

Using conversion statistics from Berlin, Vienna, Warsaw and Krakow covering periods within the years 1770 to 1910, Endelman reveals that men and women’s conversion patterns varied over time and were complicated by age, social status, economic well being and area of domicile. For example, during the period 1770 to 1830 men’s conversion rate was higher than women’s. Men’s reasons for conversion were tied to work opportunities. As Jewish men sought to participate in the professions, the civil service and the universities, their access to these areas in the German states was only possible with a baptismal certificate. Motives for female conversions, on the other hand, included escaping “the stigma of Jewishness, to improve their
social status and to marry non-Jews.” (p. 29) Employment, in this period at least, was rarely the motive for women. Over time, however, as women began working outside the home, they met the same problems of “social contempt” that their male counterparts experienced. In addition, by the late 1870s, antisemitism had increased and the pressure to convert was therefore greater. In this period, female conversions rose. Ultimately it was out-marriages by female “Jewish clerks and typists” that were far more common than “well-dowered Jewish daughters.” Indeed, “economic status better insulated young Jewish women from intermarriage” than any other factor (p. 31). Two Polish examples give quite divergent results. In Warsaw “women were much less likely than men to leave Judaism” despite the fact that most were working outside of the home. Here domicile was the crucial factor. Jews were generally less integrated into Polish society than in German states, so that while Jewish women in Poland worked in greater numbers than their Viennese or Berlin equivalent, “crucially, their employers and co-workers were more likely to be Jews than was the case in the west.” (p. 33-34) In stark contrast, Krakow between 1887 to 1902 saw more than twice as many women convert to Christianity than men. Challenging Paula Hyman’s corrective study on gender and assimilation in Jewish history, that suggested that Jewish women, denied Jewish education but having access to secular education, converted because they did not have the Jewish education to strengthen their own faith and identity, Endelman suggests that rather than education, the pressure of improving one’s economic position was a more likely reason most Jewish women converted. For a “penniless women with no dowry, marrying a peasant or a soldier, for which baptism was a requirement, was often more attractive than remaining destitute, unmarried and social marginal.” (p. 35-36) [2]

Within Endelman’s conclusion, there is passing reference to new ideas about gender roles emerging in the modern period. He suggests that their impact was felt by middle class Jewish women rather than those of more modest means who were more concerned about surviving the quotidian than experimenting with new social ideas and behaviors. ChaeRan Y. Freeze’s essay “Gendering Marital Conflict and Divorce among Jews in Tsarist Russia” suggests that these new ideas and expectations about gender roles actually had far more impact on relations among Jewish men and women across the economic spectrum than Endelman allows. Her research looks at marital conflict and divorce and conceptions of gender, over a similar period, namely the 1870s to 1910s in Tsarist Russia. In this fascinating essay, Freeze utilizes court records, lawsuits to the Rabbinical Commission and imperial petitions to uncover the reasons for marital discord and divorce, and in the course of her essay deflates the notion of the browbeaten husband and sharp-tongued wife, so popularized in Yiddish literature.

Increasingly popular in this period was the new ideal of a companionate marriage, one that was based on “mutual respect, emotional and intellectual compatibility, and affect.” These conceptions, along with changing gender roles and responsibilities led both men and particularly women to question what constituted acceptable behaviors within the marital bond. Adultery obviously fell foul of not only companionate marriages but also ideals about marriage unions more generally. When this infidelity was combined with issues of sexually transmitted disease carried by errant husbands, petitions by affected wives were likely to be successful. Other cases framed by the conception of the companionate marriage ideal, however, had less guaranteed outcomes. For example, lawsuits between significantly older men and much younger women who felt unable to continue with conjugal relations produced mixed results for the women involved. And where issues of “physical revulsion” were concerned, women were sometimes on
still shakier ground. Sara Shternfe’ld of Kovno was unable to win her case in which she complained of a foul smelling husband. Despite marshalling distinguished community witness to her defence she lost her case in 1881. (p. 62) It would be intriguing to know how a foul smelling wife might have fared in the courts!

In addition to cases relating to intimate relations, child rearing and family finances, cultural compatibility formed a large proportion of petitions brought by women. Freeze’s conclusions on the later refute Endleman’s assessments. Quite categorically she states that there was a tendency “to make mutual affection central to the definition of a successful, “happy” marriage.” (p. 73) This expectation was held by “ordinary Jewish women”, not just a small minority. Different values, secular or religious and differing levels and types of education all contributed to marriage breakdown. In conclusion, companionate marriage ideals affected Jews, particularly women, at all levels of society, dramatically transforming family life.

Both traditional Jewish and contemporary anthropological understandings of the differences ascribed to male and female blood - female blood being menstruation and childbirth, male blood as the blood of circumcision and animal sacrifice - are revisited in David Biale’s eloquently written essay, “Does Blood Have Gender in Jewish Culture?” Reviewing scholars such as Nancy Jay, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, Leonie Archer and Lawrence Hoffmann, he questions the consensus their work has produced on the subject; that is, that “the blood of men establishes covenant, purity and patriarchy, while the uncontrolled bleeding of women threatens this order and is relegated to the realm of impurity.” (p. 7) Biale argues that these works suffer from having absorbed Sherry Ortner’s nature-culture (female-male) dichotomy and suggests that the gendered nature of blood needs “considerable modification and nuancing.” Utilizing a late thirteenth century text that challenges assumptions that female blood is polluting and gives it the same power as the blood of circumcision, Biale re-reads sources within biblical law, rabbinic midrash, medieval /early modern Kabbalah and medieval polemics, to reject both Ortner’s syllogism and the idea that female blood is always polluting. He concludes that blood “certainly had gendered meaning” but these meaning were “more complicated and unexpected” than current anthropological theories allowed. (p. 20)

Laura Levitt’s polemical essay appears out of sync with the other essays in this work with her authorial “I” center stage. Using the terms “labor” and “remembrance” and their multiple meanings, as applied to the Jewish Studies profession and feminist theory, she criticizes Jewish scholars for both marginalizing (critical and feminist) theory and women in their work. Arguing that Jewish Studies is resistant to change in this area and that it remains structurally dominated by “masculinism” and the Enlightenment, Levitt states that only by rethinking what constitutes acceptable Jewish knowledge and what counts as Jewish Studies scholarship will the profession move forward. Her program for progress - to “undo what we think we know” and to critique current “reified practices” provides only the vaguest plan of action. Reiterating repeatedly that Jewish studies needs to be rethought through the utilization of feminist practice does not, in my opinion, “make explicit how academic practices can be changed” (p. 103), rather it results in confusion and frustration! Levitt’s disappointment at how her own work has been received, and the negative reception of approaches that she favors (such as critical theory, deconstruction, and postmodern criticism) by other academics, displace the reader’s concentration on some of the more interesting comments that she makes about the professional lives of women in the
academy. As I read Levitt’s article, I am reminded of Rebecca Alpert’s response to Levitt in *Judaism since Gender* (the very book that Levitt bemoans as not having received enough attention). In this equally strong worded piece, Alpert expresses her concerns at Levitt’s approach. Ruminating of the meanings of specific words, Alpert states, runs the risk of research topics becoming a debate about words only, clouding the very clarity Levitt’s seeks to bring to her arguments.[3] Lastly Levitt’s observation that the integration of feminist scholarship and gender studies remains limited within Jewish Studies is well-taken, but not new.

The remaining four essays all seek in some way to re-think previous assumptions or findings about their chosen subjects, and are mentioned briefly here. Yael Feldman’s essay on “The Jacob Complex and Zionist Masculinism in the work of A.B. Yehoshua” leads her to consider the representation of masculinity and its relation to Zionism in her study of A. B. Yehoshua’s novel Mr Mani. Naomi Seidman’s dense essay “Immaculate Translation: Sexual Fidelity, Textual transmission and Jewish-Christian Difference in the Virgin Birth” demonstrates the gendered nature of Christian versus Jewish translations of Isaiah 7:14 and highlights the alma versus parthenos (young woman versus virgin debate). Continuing the biblical theme, Alan T. Levenson highlights how the feminist endeavor has radically affected bible scholarship in his essay “Jewish and Jewish-Feminist Tendencies in Modern Bible Scholarship” to suggest that while it would seem to threaten such studies, there are parallels within both Jewish and Jewish-feminist approaches that may produce meeting points. The concluding essay is written by Stephanie Siegmund. A work of comparative religious history, Siegmund studies the way in which the development of Jewish self-government paralleled confessionalization and statebuilding in early modern Christian Europe and ultimately resulted in a loss of political status for Jewish women.

My main criticism of this book is the lack of a concluding essay that would look at the places and spaces of possible concordance between the authors of these eight individual essays (I’m thinking in particular of Endelman’s and Freeze’s articles). While I learned much from my reading of each, I do not come away with a synthesized understanding of what is means to gender the Jewish past as a program of change, except that it is currently a piecemeal undertaking and still underway - but perhaps that is the point. To echo Levitt’s hope/critique for work that is more in “conversation” with each other, it would have been fascinating to see whether some of the authors could have entered into a dialogue with each other’s work and where their own work fitted into the bigger picture of *Gendering the Jewish Past*.


