Book Review


Reviewed by Heidi M. Szpek

“The coming of women to the public sphere of the synagogue had redeemed neither the synagogue nor Judaism.” (164). In tracing women’s place in American Jewry, Goldman admirably demonstrates that this new found place in the public sphere was initially repressive to women’s role in both the public and private spheres of Judaism. Drawing on revealing records found in 19th and early 20th century journals, newspapers, synagogue newsletters and letters, Goldman has pieced together the challenges and changes with which Jewish women, the synagogue proper, and Reform Judaism were faced with during this period. The synagogue becomes the main avenue through which Goldman examines these reforms in respect to gender dynamics that would ultimately be critical to the formation of American Judaism. Just as with the exploration of gender in the Hebrew Bible, Goldman acknowledges the drawback of such research – the synagogue is a historically male-dominated institution and ‘unavoidably’ those who considered, pondered, commented on or wrote about the changes within the synagogue were men. Thus it is most often that we hear men’s voices (and perspectives) about the reforms involving women and any subsequent implications. Women, as one reads on, though eventually removed from the sequestered gallery or synagogue screen, might now be seen but not yet heard.

Most insightful is Goldman’s discovery for the impetus to bring Jewish women out of the synagogue gallery. As she writes, “posttraditional Jewish communities in both the Old and New Worlds were challenged to formulate religious identities for women that would meet the expectations of the non-Jewish societies in which they lived. Women’s marginalization within public worship constituted one of the most obvious manifestations of Judaism’s resistance to such expectations in both American and European synagogues …. Jews felt more pressure to respond to modernity’s implicit critique of traditional Jewish constraints on women’s religious expression. It was thus in the United States that the need to address the question of appropriate roles for Jewish women resulted in the structural reconfiguration of the synagogue, remaining a constant dynamic in the evolution of American Judaism” (36). In particular, the concern to be perceived of as an acculturated American religion mirroring, in particular the presence of Protestant women at worship, prompted initial reforms such as women’s location from the gallery or behind the screen to mixed seating, family pews and even mixed choirs. By the 1840s to 1850s these reforms along with the introduction of organ music, sermons in German and English, and the removal of hats for men at service “were introduced to bring greater respectability to how the public viewed Jewish expression of worship” (99). Yet caution was also extended to protect the Jewish image at worship from the physically energetic and vocally ecstatic Protestant revival movement bursting onto the American religious
scene in the mid-19th century. For Jews the concern was present that ‘chaotic behavior and swaying movements’ characteristic of the synagogue might be interpreted as kindred expressions. Thus, a rational approach to worship, mirroring Protestant mainstream elements, with a prominent presence of women would mark American Judaism by the 1880s.

Ironically, the very changes which from a visual perspective seemed to elevate women’s presence in the synagogue and at prayer, rather created a worship environment in which leadership was entirely in front of the synagogue. The congregation became an audience, with male along with female voices falling silent (133-134). Furthermore, with women’s presence prominent in the synagogue came a new challenge from the Protestant front – women’s involvement in outside church activities. Protestant women’s effort were focused on missionary work and the temperance movement, both were contrary to Judaism. In addition, those benevolent activities Jewish women had been involved with were now initiated and overseen by Jewish men who had lost their voice in the synagogue. With such activities as fund-raising, women were now subject to the direction of men. As the 19th century drew to a close it would seem that the very reforms which sought to acculturate Judaism to America had resulted in a loss of identity for Jewish women and men.

Goldman relates that while Reform Judaism had become a viable option for Jews beyond the ghetto walls, lightening the burden of Mosaic Law, reconciling modern life with Judaism, the synagogues stood empty. Reform Judaism had lost the Jewish pathos. Moreover, the 1880s brought the first massive waves of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to America. Now Reform Judaism would have to defend its reforms, which the Orthodox ‘barely recognized as Judaism’ (159). The greatest mistake, noted Kaufmann Kohler, was that in an attempt to reform the synagogue, the greater need to ‘reconsecrate homelife’ was overlooked. (161)

Goldman’s chapter on Kaufmann Kohler and the Ideal Jewish Woman is particularly superb, recognizing his rich insights into the ‘nostalgic memories of a purer world’ – the traditional past in contrast with the current Judaism attempting to acculturate to American ways. Kohler emphasized the distinct Jewish essence linked to the past, the past figures of Jewish women, both biblical and familial. He spoke of ‘inconsistent’ goals for Jewish women, such as “if the modern age had granted her spiritual freedom for the first time, why were her traditional virtues now so sorely missed?” (154). “What gave the Sabbath and festivals, the home life, the table, the entire private and social life of the Jew their particular character? He asked. “It seems to me that these points have never been carefully considered in connection with my theme: Woman” (154). Through the darkest times of Jewish history, family ethics as taught by and revealed in woman had preserved what was truly special about Jewish existence. “Although Reform Judaism sought to meet the modern needs of both men and women, the only vital future Kohler could envision for Judaism was one in which women would continue to embody and sustain the Jewish past” (171)
The nineteenth century dynamic of women’s every increasing presence in the synagogue helped to transform their communities and was replicated in the 20th century (213). However, the words of Isaac M. Wise, at the turn of the century, served to acknowledge that it was women’s essence that was vital to the future of American Judaism: “She must be a member, she must have a voice and a vote in your assemblies … We must have women among the Boards for the sake of principle … We must have woman’s influence in every department of the congregation, in order to infuse life into the dead bones” (181).

Karla Goldman’s exceptional research, weaving of resources from often ignored and/or rare archives, has resulted in an exceptionally insightful study of women’s voices (through men’s voices) in American Jewry of the 19th into the 20th centuries. Goldman’s work, along side such recent works as Jonathan Sarna’s American Judaism: A History and Marc Lee Raphael’s Judaism in America, provide the reader with much needed resources in the history of American Judaism.

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