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The hardback edition of Torah of the Mothers (Urim Publications, 2000) elicited lavish praise from many reviewers. Excerpts from those responses are collected on the publisher's website: www.urimpublications.com. For the most part, these comments consist of a general summary of what the book includes; though a modest number do go on to praise the contents of the volume with more specificity. What is not represented is a broader view of the character of the book with regard to gender. The Preface, by editors Ora Wiskind Elper and Susan Handelman, announces that the book consists of "the insights of many highly accomplished religious Jewish women teachers of our generation" (9). These are women who live and study in what is generally understood as the world of modern Orthodoxy. Since scholarship and publication by religious Jewish women are so recent in advent, it is only natural to approach the book with an interest in what might be noteworthy marks of Orthodoxy and of women's authorship and the extent to which the editors and authors acknowledge the issues of gender underlying their endeavors and achievement. This reader, a not-Orthodox Jewish feminist and admirer of the work of Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, was eager to discover what lay within these covers, given that the writers here represent themselves as second-generation female scholars and teachers, students of Zornberg and Nechama Leibowitz, among others.

As so many of the reviewers note, the book has four parts. Part 2 consists of seven essays on topics in Bible; Part 3, four readings of rabbinic texts. The essays in these sections range from competent to illuminating, at times elevating. Among the most striking are two based in biblical material, Erica Brown's insightful "Strange Words between Strangers: Jacob's Encounter with Pharaoh" and Judith Klitsner's "From the Earth's Hollow Space to the Stars: Two Patriarchs and Their Non-Israelite Mentors." These essays and others in the volume manifest deep, patient reading of the Hebrew Bible and of commentators ancient, medieval, and modern. All the essays emerge from close scrutiny of text; the most interesting are those that in addition manifest movement to a stance at a greater distance, one that enables the writer to respond in a more abstract, multi-faceted, and imaginative universe. None ranges as far from traditional commentary as do Zornberg's. Admittedly, Zornberg's text commentaries are all part of a single, larger inquiry into the grand meaning of the Torah as an account of the human condition.

Parts 1 and 4 of the book shine more light than do the middle sections on who the authors are and what they are about. The five essays in Part 1 are essays about teachers and teaching. Here the writers get personal. Editor Susan Handelman, for example, writes of...
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leave-taking, death, and loss, relating midrash about the death of Moses to the deaths of friends from the University of Maryland and to her relationship with, and the death of, R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, whom she regards as a major influence and personal mentor.

Part IV contains striking insights that are thematic across texts. The most personal piece in this section is the concluding essay, Esther Sha'anana's "Torah of the Mothers: Beyond the Study Hall." Sha'anana finally addresses one point that deserves more prominence in this collection: how, as Susan Handelman expresses it in her dedication, the Torah of women might be understood as teachings of kindness (hesed). Sha'anana calls for her community to put its principles and study into practice. Specifically, she points to the need for the community to be more mindful of kindness and attend to the neglected needs of the single women and single mothers in its midst.

Overall, more questions about gender are raised by this volume than are answered in it. In their Preface, Handelman and Eiper do explain the source of the phrase that serves as title of the book. They point out that the complementary masculine and feminine in holy instruction are signaled in Proverbs in parallel, paired phrases: "Listen, my son, to the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the teaching (Torah) of your mother." Handelman and Eiper highlight as feminine teaching that emphasizes what will be inspiring and life-changing, and they contrast their own volume, having these attributes, to what is implied to be a typically womanless "compilation of academic essays" (10). But surely male students and teachers of Torah would not want it said that their efforts lack concern with affective "learning." Is it only women who nourish their community from waters of "love and compassion"? The editors are content to invoke or let stand stereotypic commonplaces in designating what is feminine. They offer no comment or analysis.

Of the seven essays in Part 2, five deal with biblical women. Of these, only one addresses sociopolitical gender issues: Sarah Idit Schneider's "The Daughters of Tzlafochad: Towards a Methodology of Attitude around Women's Issues" makes the point that the daughters succeeded in claiming their property because they waited patiently for a propitious moment to ask for what they were entitled to, and they asked nicely. This essay makes for a fascinating study of one approach among Orthodox women today who subscribe to rabbinic authority yet desire to expand their opportunities.

For the volume as a whole, the large and challenging questions of gender remain: What understandings underlie "the Torah of the Mothers"? Is that province restricted to women? Is the rhetorically parallel "instruction of the Fathers" to be practiced only by men? If these are indeed separate provinces, are they separated by biology or by cultural and religious roles? Is it Jewish law that separates them?

Gilla Ratzersdorfer Rosen's "God of My Teachers: Learning with Rav Soloveitchik" expresses gratitude for the inspiration—albeit in a public forum, not a student-teacher relationship—of a male teacher. At age fifteen, in 1968, Rosen attended a public lecture in which Soloveitchik spoke of the maternal and paternal aspects of God in Judaism. The
lecture had a powerfully warming transformative effect on Rosen's schoolgirl concept of the abstract God of Maimonides. Both Maimonides and Soloveitchik, in their differing ways, both prepared Rosen to understand God as other than "He." Three years later, as Rosen tells it, as a freshman [at Barnard; 1971], she was able to dismiss the attempts of a fellow student to "convert" her to rejecting the male God of her religion (17).

Rosen's essay is either highly ingenuous or highly disingenuous. By her report, Soloveitchik expressed sensitive, open-minded and open-hearted theological views that honor the equality of male and female, views that one might easily label feminist at the core. Although neither Rosen nor any other writer in this volume will utter the "f" word—"feminism," it is clear that the "conversion" Rosen so loftily repels at age eighteen (as if the classmate were dangling an apple in front of her and hissing) relates to the beginnings of a feminist examination of Judaism.

It is one thing to reject—whether from principle or fear—an outsider's viewpoint. It is another matter when intelligent women with advanced secular education refuse to, or avoid, use of a word, particularly when the phenomenon named by that word is what has made it possible for these women to have that education and have the opportunity to make use of their intelligence as full human beings.

Traditionally, Jewish women have not been permitted to participate in advanced religious study. What changes have now made that permissible? Has female biology changed? Has the law changed? Or has the culture of modern Orthodoxy bent, without comment, under the influence of feminism in secular culture? Has that influence reached rabbinic leaders directly, or have the women stirred by its influence in turn practiced the methods of the daughters of Tzlafchad on the male authorities to achieve their ends?

Very partial answers to these questions are implied, though not stated or acknowledged, within the volume. Handelman, in an afterword to her essay on leave taking, pays tribute to Rabbi Schneerson. "I had a special relationship with [the] Rebbe," she says. "As a woman engaged in intellectual and academic work, I . . . received the greatest encouragement from the Rebbe—blessings [on my secular academic work]. I always sensed he wanted me to employ [my intellectual capacities and knowledge] to elevate this all in the service of God and Torah. He was indeed a vigorous supporter of Jewish women. . . . He encourage[d] Jewish women to perform the special mitzvot pertaining to them, and advocated depth and breadth in their Torah study" (119).

This tribute leaves much to the reader's imagination, including location of the source of R. Schneerson's validation for women's voices to be heard in print. Handelman's remarks do not prevent us from inferring that her "special relationship" to the Rebbe may be akin to that of "honorary son." As a gifted intellectual, she is "encouraged" to "elevate" her gifts in service of God and Torah. Perhaps there was a divide, for the Rebbe, between intellectual women to be encouraged in their Torah study and the others—whom he encouraged to light candles and observe ritual purity. Handelman glosses over these issues. We have no idea. We do know that Zornberg herself was taught by her father.
There is a soft-spoken, modest quality to the writing in the collection that impresses by its dignity and directness. At the same time, something is missing: the very clarity of the writers' dedication to religious values precludes important qualities and interests that may contribute color and nuance to intellectual inquiry, particularly one imbibed by concern for values. The boundary of what may be explored in the essays appears to be located so that women in this community may now write in the same way men do, whatever warmth or other mysterious feminine attributes they possibly add by virtue of their gender (or their sex). Beyond that community-defined boundary are elements of discussion of Jewish texts that include humor, irony, and questioning that might be perceived as subversive or provocative; the very same, enriching perspectives that women have been bringing abundantly to intellectual work in the secular and non-Orthodox Jewish world and that can be felt in Zornberg's writing. In brief, women's commentary here is playing very safe.

We can appreciate and savor the earnestness and positive affect, the staunch aspiration of the writers to spiritual and ethical betterment that accompanies the writers' collective faith in God and effort to serve Him in the ways of their community. It is also the case that contradictions and blind spots can jump out and reveal themselves that emotion can leak out, in the personal essays on relations with real people. The concluding essay even goes so far as to chastise the Orthodox community—scholars and all—for failing to attend to the needs of divorced mothers. The chastising is measured and constructive. Yet it is passionate, and one might be hard pressed to say it is not angry.

In all, this is a book that satisfies very well on one level but also contains silences and dark corners that have their own very loud voices. It is disappointing that these intellectually gifted, energetic women offer no recognition of what the feminist movement has made possible for them or what continues to be a demeaning legal situation in which they have so little direct say about their fate. There are, in contrast, highly educated, and "committed," Jewish women like Rachel Adler who have seceded from the male-authoritarian social structure that claims ownership of Jewish law. Adler published "The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman" in 1973. Some continue to submit to the structure while they vigorously advocate for changes in the law and for a role as law makers and deciders. The silences and, particularly, the bland expressions of gratitude and fulfillment, of the writers in Torah of the Mothers weigh in this reader's memory more heavily than the insightful commentaries. Perhaps over time the women in this community will broaden their stimulating work by learning from Klitsner's conclusion in the essay cited above: the ideas of the friendly outsider may be useful. Even the daughters of Tzlafchad could agree that fear and willful blindness are not necessarily what God wants of us.