

## Judaism and Gender

Contemporary Jewish feminist scholarship (Hyman, Hyman and Moore, Peskowitz and Levitt, Plaskow, Alpert, Heschel, Prell, Boyarin, Baskin, Adler, Kaplan) and activism (Pogrebin, Klepfisz and Kaye/Kantrowitz, Brettschneider, Beck, Balka and Rose, Barack Fishman, Weidman Schneider) are transforming notions of Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism. Through these efforts Jewish culture, religion and history are being transformed. The simple logic of inclusion is giving way to more radical reconfigurations of the Jewish past, present, and future.

Jewish feminist activists and scholars were a part of the broader feminist movement not only in the so-called second wave of US feminist activism but even earlier efforts (Kuzmack, Hyman, Kaplan). By the 1970s they were demanding that Jewish women be included in all aspects of Jewish communal life as equals (Pogrebin).

Building on Virginia Woolf's suggestion that we add a supplement to history as a way of remedying the inequities between men and women, feminist historian Joan Scott calls our attention to the ambiguities within what she has termed 'the logic of the supplement.' As Scott explains, 'women are both added to history and they occasion its rewriting; they provide something extra and they are necessary for completion, they are superfluous and indispensable' (Scott 1993, p. 241). This contradictory logic is at the heart of what it means to think about gender, Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism in the beginning of the twenty-first century. A consideration of women much less the larger category of gender in the context of Jewish communal, religious and/or scholarly life, has resulted in a radical rethinking of the basic assumptions that have defined all dimensions of contemporary Jewish life. On the one hand, the inclusion of women within Jewish life constitutes a simple expansion of existing narratives. On the other hand, it has made clear that any overview of Jewish life without a consideration of gender would be both inaccurate and incomplete.

### 1. *Some Historical Background*

As feminist scholars have argued (Hyman 1995, Kaplan 1991, Levitt 1997), the call for inclusion has its origins in the legacy of Jewish emancipation in the West where individual middle-class Jewish men were granted rights as citizens of liberal states. They were not emancipated as Jews. By giving up various forms of Jewish communal authority, they came to see themselves reflected in the universal democratic vision of the French and American revolutions.

Although these revolutions excluded many, their universal vision offered the promise of emancipation to many who remained disenfranchised within Western culture including middle-class women. Jewish

women whose husbands, brothers, uncles, and fathers had become citizens, began to ask questions about their own status. Using the logic of these liberal revolutions, by the late nineteenth century Jewish feminists became active in larger women's movements. With other women they fought for the right to own property and the right to vote (Kaplan 1979, Kuzmack 1990, Hyman 1995) but these struggles also inspired them to challenge various inequities within Jewish communal life as well. These included the dramatic increase in the number of Jewish women attending synagogues for public worship and the opening up of once gender segregated seating (Peskowitz and Levitt 1997). By the 1970s Jewish women used notions of liberal justice and equality to demand their inclusion in all aspects of communal worship. By arguing that specific Jewish communal practices either excluded women or treated them as inferior to men, they demanded their rightful place on the *bema*, reading torah and leading prayer services. In these ways, they were able to critique the masculinist bias of traditional worship. This liberal critique has expanded to include Jewish social and communal practices from religious observance to the various fields of Jewish studies scholarship.

The increasing presence of Jewish women and attention to issues of gender have occasioned the rewriting of Jewish history and the rereading of classical Jewish texts in the various fields of Jewish Studies scholarship (religion, literature, history, sociology, political science, and language study) as well as a resurgence in Jewish cultural production including art, poetry, fiction, film, music, and dance.

### 2. *Jewish Religious and Communal Life*

In Jewish religious worship these changes have been palpable. They include a transformation in the language of prayer. Not only is there now gender inclusive language but whole new liturgies that take account of the experiences of Jewish women (Falk 1996, Adler 1998). Since the 1970s, in increasing numbers of Jewish communities, women are engaging in once restricted religious practices. They are chanting sacred texts, participating in worship services, having honors once granted only to Jewish men and they are leading communal worship as rabbis and cantors (Nadel 1998). They are also becoming presidents of congregations and Jewish religious organizations. Although many of these efforts remain contested especially among various Orthodox Jewish communities, among liberal Jews, reform, conservative, reconstructionist and renewal Jewish communities, the inclusion of women in all of these realms including their role as rabbis and cantors are now very much established practices especially in the United States. Even among certain modern orthodox communities these roles and practices are changing. The growth of orthodox Jewish

feminist prayer groups, study centers, conferences, and the creation of women rabbinic interns throughout the 1990s all attest to the growth of an Orthodox Jewish feminist movement (Greenberg 1981, Grossman and Haut 1992). Even within ultra-orthodox communities, women are reclaiming the rituals of family purity, for example, as attractive Jewish practices for women (El Or 1994, Davidman 1991, Kaufman 1991, Ochs 1990).

Jewish women are also very much a part of passing on Jewish religious traditions through the work of Jewish education. Since the nineteenth century, Jewish women have playing an ever increasing role in the education of Jewish children in what had been an exclusively male domain. Jewish women are increasingly running Jewish day schools sponsored by the various religious movements and training day school teachers and administrators in graduate programs in Jewish education. Among liberal Jews, women are playing an increasing role in the education of future rabbis and cantors. The number of women on the faculties of the conservative, reform, and reconstructionist rabbinical colleges are growing. Jewish women are also taking on leadership roles as administrators at these institutions.

In all of these realms there is a growing commitment to include women in the vital life of Jewish religious practices and Jewish communal life more broadly understood (Barack Fishman 1993, Prell 1999). Increasingly Jewish women are taking on a variety of leadership roles both in North America and in Israel, running Jewish agencies, social service organizations, and federations.

Through these efforts other changes are also being fostered. Feminist efforts have also opened up Jewish communal life to gay and lesbian Jews. Here lesbian Jewish feminists have made substantial contributions as rabbis, lay leaders, activists, and scholars (Alpert 1997, Plaskow 1990, Beck 1982, Balka and Rose 1989). They are powerfully challenging notions of family, community, and religiousness by their strong presence within and outside of organized Jewish communities. They are challenging the criteria for membership in Jewish congregations and communal organizations; constructing new rituals of recognition such as commitment ceremonies and events to celebrate 'coming out' in a Jewish context. They have also demanded that the Jewish community address homophobia and the impact of the AIDS epidemic on Jews.

### *3. Jewish Studies Scholarship*

The various fields of Jewish Studies scholarship have also seen the addition of women as a precursor to more critical transformations of scholarly practice particularly in the fields of textual study, religion, history, literature, and the various social sciences. Although Jewish women scholars were already active in the

academic study of Judaism beginning in the late nineteenth century, the most powerful and dramatic changes came with the second wave of US feminist activism. Feminist scholars have not only added women to the study of ancient Jewish text, Jewish philosophy, theology, history, literature, and social study, they have raised questions about both the content of Jewish studies courses and the ways they are being taught in colleges and universities (Peskowitz and Levitt 1997, Davidman and Tenenbaum 1994, Rudavsky 1995).

Work on classical Jewish texts, Hebrew bible (Pardes 1992) and especially rabbinic literature (Peskowitz 1997, Boyarin 1993, Hauptman 1998, Wegner 1988, Adler 1998, Biale 1984) have changed how these sources are read. Feminist scholars have not only looked at how Jewish women figure in these texts, they are increasingly raising questions about how gender (both masculinity and femininity) is produced in these texts and how these visions of gender have become normative. Here reading practices are crucial. As Miriam Peskowitz notes, such normative texts can and should be read as legal fantasies following the lead of recent scholars in critical legal theory. As Peskowitz argues, these texts tell us about the desires of those who produced them.

Jewish feminist scholars have also taken on the traditions of Jewish theology, ethics, and philosophy to offer new approaches to these various fields of Jewish religious studies scholarship (Adler 1998, Plaskow 1990, Alpert 1997, Levitt 1997, Falk 1996). These scholars not only question the gender of God but the subject of ethical discourse. Who is the person making moral choices and from what standpoint are these issues being addressed. They also challenge the mind-body dualisms that mark medieval as well as modern Jewish thought and their implications for Jewish women.

In Jewish history, feminist scholars have used the addition of women to their readings of the Jewish past to rethink some of the grand narratives that have shaped Jewish historical study. By demonstrating the role women played in emancipation and enlightenments, for example, modern Jewish historians have shown us how vital Jewish women were to these transformations in Jewish life (Hyman 1995, Kaplan 1979, 1991, Kuzmack 1990). Jewish feminist historians have also called our attention to the role of Jewish women in assimilation into America culture (Hyman and Moore 1997, Stahl Weinberg 1988, Glenn 1990, Prell 1999).

Broader works on twentieth-century Jewish history have also been transformed by accounts of gender. Included in this scholarship are powerful accounts of Zionism as a masculinist national movement (Berkowitz 1993, Boyarin 1997, D. Biale 1992) as well as a growing body of literature about the role of women in the devastation of the holocaust (Ofer and Weitzman 1998, Rittner and Roth 1993). As Daniel Boyarin

points out, Zionism was a way of remasculinizing the Jewish people. On the other hand, feminist scholars have begun to examine how the experience of genocide was gendered. They point to how and in what ways pregnancy, menarche, menstruation, and motherhood marked Jewish women in the holocaust. They also address the particular devastation of sexual assault in this context. Finally, women's historians have called attention to the various roles of Jewish women in the ancient past. Not only were they wives, daughter, and mothers, they were also workers. They were dyers and weavers, spinners and crafts-people alongside men (Peskowitz 1997, Meyer 1988) and, in some instances, they were also communal leaders (Kraemer 1992, Brooten 1982). The work of feminist scholars has offered us new evidence of the lives of Jewish women in the past. In the fields of the social sciences, feminist scholars have called our attention to the role of Jewish women in Jewish communal and political life including their role in the process of Jewish assimilation. How did they dress themselves and their families or decorate their homes? What did they serve their families for dinner? These are all crucial questions for feminist ethnographers who are re-examining American Jewish assimilation (Prell 1999, Barack Fishman 1993, Davidman and Tenenbaum 1994).

The work in Jewish literature is massive and complex. Feminist scholars have not only discovered heretofore forgotten or unknown texts by Jewish women in various languages including Hebrew, Ladino, Yiddish, and English (Alcalay 1996), they have also offered new accounts of more well-known texts (Fuchs 1987, Seidman 1997). Scholars like Naomi Seidman have also asked us to reconsider the relationship between Jewish languages and how gender is used to naturalize the privileging of Hebrew over Yiddish. As she explains, like the relationship between husband and wife, Yiddish, the language of daily life was subservient to Hebrew, the masculine language of prayer and traditional Jewish study.

#### 4. Jewish Cultural Production

Recent works of feminist art and literature have not only built on the work of Jewish scholars in a variety of fields, they have also used popular and material culture to offer critical perspectives on Jewishness as a cultural and ethnic as well as a religious identity. Some works highlight the absence of Jewish women from certain forms of religious or cultural production like the reading and writing of sacred texts in Helene Aylon's work (Kleeblatt 1996). Others have used these artifacts including texts to create new theatrical or cinematic productions on or about Jewish women.

Since the 1970s there has been a growing body of Jewish feminist literature especially by lesbian Jewish feminists (Alpert 1997, Beck 1982, Klepfisz and Kaye/Kantrowitz 1986). These writers often focus on Jewishness as a cultural and political and not a

religious practice. More recent efforts have included the reclaiming of Klezmer music and the resources of Yiddish film for new cultural production (Fox 1999).

In the arts the inclusion of women has expanded the realm of Jewish cultural production in the United States as well as Israel. Increasingly Jewish women are playing an active role in these efforts by creating new works, sponsoring exhibits, and participating in various forums to present feminist artistic works to a broader audience (Kleeblatt 1996, Pellegrini 1997, Antler 1998, Prell 1999). Here Jewish museums have become a crucial site for new forms of Jewish feminist cultural production.

#### 5. Future Prospects

Although Jewish women are, now more than ever, a part of Jewish communal life, there is much more work to be done. Efforts to make explicit the inequities at the heart of many Jewish communal practices much less the exclusion of women from sacred texts and the problematic roles they do have when they are included in these texts all demand ongoing critical examination. Among Jewish feminists the idea of giving up these traditions is too simple. Although they are critical of these texts, they continue to claim them and try to find ways of forging new and more powerful relationships with these legacies. Jewish women are doing this labor as university scholars, day school teachers and administrators, as cantors and rabbis, and as poets and artists.

*See also:* Accidents, Normal; Anti-Semitism; Buddhism and Gender; Catholicism and Gender; Feminist Theology; Feminist Theory; Historiography and Historical Thought; Jewish Tradition; Holocaust, The; Islam and Gender; Jewish Law; Judaism; Nazi Law; Protestantism and Gender; Religion and Gender; Religion, Sociology of; Women's Religiosity; Zionism, History of

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L. Levitt

## Judges

A judge is a public officer appointed to administer the law in a Court of Justice impartially and independently. Judicial independence is instrumental to judicial impartiality, since only an independent judge can be expected to be fully impartial: hence 'his and it