

REZENSION

Rachel Elior: The Unknown History of Jewish Women through the Ages: On Learning and Illiteracy: On Slavery and Liberty

Rachel Elior: The Unknown History of Jewish Women through the Ages: On Learning and Illiteracy: On Slavery and Liberty, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2023, 793p., ISBN: 978-3111042770, EUR 138,95.

Reviewed by Sarah Wobick-Segev.

Since the late nineteenth century, at the very latest, various authors have penned books, essays, and even newspaper articles that aimed at telling the oft-forgotten stories of Jewish women.¹ Despite the different perspectives taken by each author, the motivation has generally remained the same: to record the histories of important Jewish women, reclaim their legacies, and in so doing, offer contemporary readerships stories of inspiring female role models. Yet, the repeated process of discovery and rediscovery of remarkable Jewish women that is common to these various publications over the years seems also to confirm one of the central claims made by Professor Rachel Elior in her new book: namely, that the long history of Jewish women has been plagued with repeated bouts of amnesia.² And to be clear, amnesia not by accident, but by design.

Elior's latest book, *The Unknown History of Jewish Women Through the Ages: On Learning and Illiteracy: On Slavery and Liberty*, pulls no punches. Her work often reads like an unqualified condemnation of the rabbinic tradition's androcentricity, if not downright misogyny. Over the course of more than 700 hundred pages, Elior tells the long story of what she describes as a sexist legacy that not only prevented women from reaching the seats of religious and cultural power within Judaism, but that prevented them from gaining basic access to education or enjoying anything approaching equal rights (or, before the modern era, comparable privileges). It is a legacy, as Elior writes, that not only "othered" women, but could, and repeatedly did, lead to the violent oppression of women (e.g., child marriage and marital rape). Central to Elior's overall argument, as she stresses repeatedly, is that this long-standing oppression of women was neither random nor specific to one historical era or place. Instead, it was the consequence of a religious

¹ In the German-speaking world alone, we can point to works by Lina Morgenstern, *Die Frauen des 19. Jahrhunderts, biographische und kulturhistorische Zeit- und Charaktergemälde*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Deutsche Hausfrauenzeitung, 1888); Mayer Kayserling, *Die jüdischen Frauen in der Geschichte, Literatur und Kunst* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1879); Else Dormitzer, *Berühmte jüdische Frauen in der Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Berlin: Philo, 1925); Selma Stern, "Die Entwicklung des jüdischen Frauentypus seit dem Mittelalter," *Der Morgen* (August 1925): 324–37; (October 1925): 496–516; and (February 1926): 648–657. In her halakhic thesis, Regina Jonas's made ample use of historical precedents and examples to prove why women could and should take up more positions. See Regina Jonas, "Kann die Frau das rabbinische Amt bekleiden? Halachische Arbeit," in *Fraülein Rabbiner Jonas: Kann die Frau das rabbinische Amt bekleiden?*, ed. Elisa Klapheck (Teetz: Hentrich & Hentrich, 1999), 1–88. In the English-speaking world, perhaps no example is as famous as Grace Aguilar's seminal *Women of Israel* (1845). Other examples include, Elma Ehrlich Levinger, *Great Jewish Women* (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1940); Mamie Goldsmith Gamoran, *The New Jewish History*, 3 vols. (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1953–1957).

² See Elior's chapter 16 in particular.

system that from its first days and at its core aimed at completely excluding Jewish women. Much of the first section of the work, indeed the better part of the first five hundred pages, is thus dedicated to citing examples from a wide array of biblical, Mishnaic, Talmudic, and halakhic texts that advanced and maintained the exclusion of women from religious learning and all the power this could entail. The second section of the book reflects Elior's endeavor to tell the history of Jewish women who despite this exclusion made remarkable contributions to Jewish history and beyond. To these ends, Elior presents case studies of individuals or groups of Jewish women who in one way or another defied these conventions by gaining learning and, over time, were able to become leading voices in their communities. These include women who worked as copyists and scholars (chapter 27), famous early modern women such as Rebecca bat Meir Tiktiner (educator and author of the ethical text *Meneket Rivkah* [*Rebecca's Nursemaid*]) and Glickl of Hameln (famous for her erudite memoirs, the only such document written by a Jewish woman before the modern era), and also a few examples of women from the Muslim world, like the poet Freha bat Abraham bar Adiba (chapter 30).

Elior's book stands at the crossroads between polemic and scholarship. Her text is clearly inspired by the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor; Elior's book is in many ways a dissertation on liberty and choice, on the power of education and self-improvement, just as it is a ringing condemnation of obscurantism and oppression. Elior's book is also deeply colored by more recent political developments and debates in Israel, especially as they pertain to the power and political authority of the rabbinate. What the reader can also clearly detect, though, is that Elior understands feminism and progress to be intrinsically secular concepts. Furthermore, secularism and all things secular are by definition positive phenomena (references to Joan Wallach Scott's recent work that would suggest the contrary are not to be found³). The Enlightenment, understood as a secular project, marks the beginning, even if slow-going, of a process of (intellectual) liberation and freedom; religion is always depicted as being essentially negative and obscurantist. The two – secularism and religion – are regularly positioned as opposite poles of a *Kulturkampf*; she writes, "It is no coincidence when conservative, religious society, then and now, resorts to restricting the freedom of knowledge, in order to prevent critical thought, questions, and doubts liable to undermine the foundations of faith and subvert the authority of religious sages. Nor is it a coincidence that secularism, which focuses on the sovereignty, freedom of choice and knowledge, is perceived as a threat to traditional society." (p. 402)

Elior's politics are her own; one does not have to agree or disagree with them to find value in her book. Yet, at times a nuanced analysis of the sources is overshadowed. Much of the first section of the book is based on an extended analysis of *prescriptive* texts written by male elites. To suggest that their rulings were not critical to the treatment of Jewish women for the better part of the last 2000 years would be nothing less than foolish. Yet, we must remember that these same rulings did not always or solely determine the course of women's lives as they lived them. Certainly, historians have repeatedly faced challenges when assessing normative, prescriptive texts and trying to fathom to what extent the latter reflected everyday practice. This is particularly difficult

³ Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex & Secularism* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018).

when ego-documents that speak to everyday practice are fewer in number. Nonetheless, there is a truly excellent corpus of social and cultural histories that have nuanced our understanding of non-elite actors, both male and female. Elior cites many of these works in her footnotes (including the research of Judith Baskin, Elisheva Baumgarten, Nathaniel Deutsch, Chava Weissler, and others). Yet, one wishes that Elior would have given a bit more space in the first section of her book to exploring how women negotiated their own agency within a patriarchal system. After all, many of her examples suggest that Jewish women did indeed find ways to navigate the obstacles placed before them. For instance, Elior repeatedly provides examples of women who were evidently quite learned, but she does not attempt to answer just how it was that these women gained their education to begin with (see her discussion of Glickl of Hameln and Rebecca bat Meir Tikliner, pp. 658–663). These examples further demonstrate that education was not always denied to women, especially those fortunate enough to be born into rabbinic and/or elite families. In one case, Elior cites a remarkable poem written by Hai Gaon who stated that one should “buy books” and “appoint teachers” for sons *and* daughters (p. 613). Such an early example has the potential to, if not undermine, at least unsettle some of the assumptions the author makes about the thoroughgoing nature of the ban on female education that stands at the heart of her book. Elior also does not attempt to square a circle of her own making: how do we make sense of the fact that many of these women believed strongly in the same religious system that purportedly only oppressed and disadvantaged them?

We also have to admit that not all Jewish men were learned. Although they typically benefited from the androcentric system, they did not all gain the level of education that Elior suggests was categorically denied to women. While phrases such as “men who are like women” (i.e., those not literate in Hebrew; phrasing that can be found in certain early modern Yiddish publications) do offer a degree of proof to Elior’s assertions of a sexist tradition vis a vis women’s education, it also highlights the inequalities in access to education among Jewish men. It would thus be instructive to consider how class influenced access to education among Jews, male and female; to understand how and why exceptions were made and on what grounds. Furthermore, more comparisons to non-Jewish society would also help understand to what extent Jewish women were more or less constrained by their religious traditions than Christian or Muslim women.

Elior’s goal of returning Jewish women to the forefront of historical study is to be applauded, as is her goal of bringing together the history of Jewish women from many corners of the world. The sheer scale of her work and the encyclopedic breadth of her research, not to mention her bibliography, are staggering. The reader will find countless sources and material with which to continue Elior’s project of recovering Jewish women’s history.

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