

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND POSTMODERN CRITIQUE OF JEWISH FEMINIST THEORY¹

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Postmodern thought insists attention be paid to multiple realities that exist on the ground in time and space. Applied to Jewish feminist scholarship, it demands that we understand the relationship between Jewish-American feminism and Judaisms (even feminisms) that exist, and have existed, in history. Postmodernism requires that we make contemporary Jewish feminism an object of study and relinquish the comfort of a "God's eye view" that privileges our ideal egalitarian Judaism as morally superior. This essay examines how anthropology has been developing a postmodern social science and how anthropological methods and thought have been useful in examining Jewish gender systems and Jewish feminist theory.

Jewish Political Studies Review 6:1-2 (Spring 1994)

Introduction

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Anthropological Methods and Feminist Social Science

Anthropology offers three approaches to the study of human behavior that are useful in the pursuit of a social science that

recognizes both men's and women's roles in constructing society and culture as well as the particularism of each local culture: ethnography, holism, and reflexivity.

Ethnography. Ethnographic research documents people's lives through the use of qualitative research methods like interviews, life histories, and participation in the daily activities of informants. These methods have only recently been applied to the study of Jewish women's lives.⁴ Ethnography is an important strategy for ending the age-old "silence" of Jewish women cited in Jewish feminist literature of the 1970s.⁵ Sered's work on elderly Middle Eastern Jewish women in Jerusalem as ritual experts,⁶ Davidman's and Kaufman's work on *ba'alot t'shuva*⁷ and this author's own work on *shalach mones* exchange among modern Orthodox Jews in New Jersey⁸ are examples of the ethnography of gender. Ethnographic knowledge of Jewish women is further enhanced through ethnohistorical scholarship that employs analysis of heretofore unexamined documents to throw light on women's roles in constructing Jewish society and culture. Weissler's work on *tehines* or women's vernacular prayers of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries is a major contribution along these lines,⁹ as is Hyman and Baum's work on Jewish women in America, Berkowitz's on women's roles in the development of European Zionism,¹⁰ and Baskin's *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* along with many others. Taken together, these works document the fact that Jewish women have, over the centuries, actively constructed Jewish culture and have not simply been victims of it.

Holism. The holistic approach that anthropology takes to the study of society and culture contrasts with the strategy of many Jewish scholars interested in gender issues. Paula Hyman, at a recent American Anthropological Association meeting, noted that some Jewish scholars have jokingly referred to their own work as the study of texts addressing texts.¹¹ Anthropological holism insists that no sub-area of culture such as religion or written texts, no matter how hoary, can be isolated from any other in the pursuit of ethnographic knowledge.

From this perspective, a social scientific understanding of gender roles in the historical enterprise of Jewish culture cannot be divorced from insight into the material conditions of life, social structure, and folk culture. Textual evidence alone, whether

religious or more comprehensively historical, fails to illuminate, for anthropological purposes, the meaning of gender for Jewish men and women, nor can analysis of public religious behaviors, nor even attention to avowed values. Sanday demonstrates that understanding the meaning of gender systems from an anthropological point of view demands knowledge of the broader contexts of men's and women's social and economic lives.¹² She proposes that gender values derive from, and are symbolized by, origin myths that, in turn, are demonstrably associated with the manner in which societies make a living. Limiting inquiry to those behavior clusters commonly known as "religion" is insufficient to achieve a social scientific understanding of gender systems.

Reflexivity. Furthermore, anthropological reflexivity, or critical anthropology, meshes with other postmodern lines of inquiry such as feminist criticism, that question the nature of how we know what we know. This line of thinking criticizes the notion that researchers, laden as we are by both our enculturated and gendered views of what positivists presume to be "reality," can possibly be "objective" in our assessment of observed phenomena. Young-Eisendrath notes that the biased nature of the gendered researcher as data collector requires "constant examination of assumptions and motivations."¹³

During the 1970s a genre of feminist ethnography appeared that questioned and contradicted the texts as established by male anthropologists and women influenced and trained in the male manner of generating and questioning ethnographic data.¹⁴ The very existence of this feminist discourse required a reexamination of the assumptions upon which the discipline of anthropology was based, and a literature addressing these issues was soon forthcoming.¹⁵

Freed from positivism, one of the contributions anthropologists have made to gender studies is the exploration of the possibility that, in some cultures, men and women have different cognitive maps of the reality in which they both live as bearers of a single culture. Ardener, in what in 1975 was groundbreaking work, suggested that we need to question the very idea that social discourse is monological, that there is one "truth" that can be elicited from any member of a culture regardless of gender.

The concept that there could be different gendered realities in one socio-cultural system was being explored, at the same time, by French feminist thinkers Helene Cixoux and Luce Irigaray. Working from Lacan, they proposed that the very discourse of Western culture that seeks to determine who is dominant, who subordinate, is male-centered. These notions of relative power relations have been developed mostly by male thinkers. Deconstruction of these male concepts, then, opens the way for the demystification of patriarchy and legitimizes serious investigation of a female way of being.

In the mid-1980s Elaine Showalter, a literary critic, followed up on this line of thinking by proposing a "female" phase of women's writing that frees itself of "both imitation [of] and protest [against male discourse] — two forms of dependency — and turn[s] instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art."¹⁶

Chava Weissler suggests that pursuing the concept of an independent female mode of experiencing Judaism can "transform" our understanding of Judaism by bringing to the fore women's experiences and relegating men's Judaism to the background. Recently, Susan Sered has proposed that female Judaisms, non-literate and undocumented, have survived through the ages and that to understand the true balance of power in Jewish gender systems we must learn to value women's folk Judaism equally with male-dominated formal Judaism. In this author's field work among Turkish Muslims and Orthodox American Jews we corroborated the presence in these cultures of a shared female experience that does not support the common-knowledge belief in clear-cut female subordination and male dominance. To our knowledge few Jewish feminist scholars have been investigating the constructed nature of our own feminist beliefs.

The Concept of Power in Feminist Discourse

Anthropologists have contributed to the debate on the nature of power that is central to feminist concerns about gender relationships. Scholars like Annette Weiner, Beverly Chinas, and Jane Goodale examine different definitions of power and

look at patriarchal cultures from a female point of view.¹⁷ Weiner argues that women's power can be experienced only when the concept "power" is defined to include women's influential behavior in reproducing the relationships that constitute society.¹⁸ This aspect of "power" is not usually included in the modern Western concept, and is generally ignored by Jewish feminists.

Weiner also argues that women's material wealth often goes unrecognized by Western researchers because we value men's wealth more. A major goal of American feminism is to acquire equal access for women to material wealth. Jewish feminists have, among other concerns, the exclusion of women from professional Jewish opportunities, especially those offering the highest remuneration. However, in Jewish culture women have often been the breadwinners of the family or, if not, the purse-keepers. Jewish women's over-representation in the American feminist movement could be related to the fact that they have the cultural expectation that women *will* be engaged in the marketplace and have material power. Could the fact that the American feminist movement has moved resolutely in the direction of women's equal access to the marketplace and public statuses, rather than in the direction of establishing support for women's traditional activities as have third-world feminisms, be related to the Jewish women's economic position in Eastern European *shtetlach*?

Further, in Jewish feminist discourse, women's material wealth in the form of ritual objects, heirlooms, even control over daily expenses and food has often been overlooked as a source of power. If women control domestic culture, then, according to Jenna Joselit, they "have exerted a powerful influence on the way American Jews lived their lives, not only guiding their consumption of food and uses of space but also shaping their relationship to the larger society and to one another."¹⁹

Joselit also shows that women have even been instrumental in inventing the ceremonies that take place within the home, like the American Hanukkah, a response to the American Christmas for Jewish children attending secular schools with their Christian counterparts, the likes of which does not exist in other Judaisms.²⁰ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett analyses the role of women in creating Jewish American cuisine, and concludes that American Jewish women, through their cook books and shared

gastronomical experiences, invented American Jews who, ultimately, *are what they eat*.²¹ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's paper on Torah binders is another exception to the general dearth of acknowledgements of women's construction of Jewish culture.²²

Power and the Private-Public Debate

Another aspect of feminist discourse that has not been adequately explored by Jewish feminists is the public-private dimension of power. It is assumed by many American feminists that public power is superior to power in the private sphere and therefore if women are barred from participation in public statuses, then they must be inferior in value in a society. Some Jewish feminists have only recently discovered the work of the anthropologist, Michele Rosaldo, published in 1974, in which she examined the public/private concept and reached precisely this conclusion.²³ However, anthropologists have come to question the utility of the public/private construct, and its applicability cross-culturally. Again, by defining the private as inferior, and somehow not organically necessary to the functioning of the public spheres, Western thinkers are able to conceptually disempower women by devaluing precisely what they do.

Beverly Chinas, in the 1970s, did some important work on the power inherent in "private" sphere, feminine, functions. In her work on the Isthmus Zapotecs, a patriarchal culture in Mexico, Chinas observed that women frequently controlled men, but there were no formal, publically and openly named status-roles that acknowledged the behaviors involved. Women, in roles as "peace keepers," might physically steer a drunk and potentially violent man to a safe place to dry out, for example. Because they could freely visit neighbors or kin, women were capable of gathering information unavailable to men, who could be blocked from social intercourse with certain households because of publicly known animosities to which women did not have to defer. In these roles of "peace keeper" or "information gatherer" women limited or influenced men's decisions and actions, but were not acknowledged by status-names.²⁴ Likewise, in Jewish culture, there are no named statuses for "reproducer of social relations" or "inventor of folk (unofficial) ritual"

or “mediator between Jewish and secular culture,” or even “manager of major traditional rituals” such as bar mitzvah,²⁵ the Passover seder, or the Shabbos meal. Because men’s statuses are named openly, like “rabbi,” “scholar,” “member of the minyan,” these statuses appear to receive more value. Little work has been done, after Chinas, on the role of “covert” statuses in social organization, and understanding of Jewish women’s culture has suffered from this omission as well as that of women in other cultures.

Anthropologists have pointed out that, in fact, domestic behaviors have great bearing on public institutions and the behaviors of men in public places. Joselit’s observation that domestic culture determines not only the daily content of Jewish lives, but also *shapes Jews’ relationships to the larger society and to one another*, is an insight along these lines. This author’s own fieldwork revealed that modern Orthodox women in New Jersey are extremely conscious of their roles in building the very communities that supported the institutions in which they are supposedly subordinated.²⁶

Contemporary American Jewish Feminism in Context

In contemporary America, Jewish women are among the most educated, most likely to be in responsible and well-paid positions in the marketplace, latest to marry and least likely to have many children.²⁷ With a life expectancy of nearly fourscore years, Jewish American women are devoting less time to domestic responsibilities than ever before; many remain single for significant portions of their lives. Those wishing to live lives in which Judaism has great significance are almost forced to look to Jewish professions or to performance of public ritual roles if they reject the alternative of the Orthodoxies that support separate male and female gender roles. As women used to being educated with men, getting into the best secular colleges, achieving in publically acknowledged statuses, these women have experienced exclusion from what they perceive to be the seats of power and personal satisfaction in Judaism: the synagogue, the house of learning, and the professional Jewish power structure. Jewish feminist scholars and writers, being high achievers, are

probably more likely than other professional women to be uncomfortable about traditional Jewish gender roles. Being published, with or without sanction of a Ph.D., gives us an aura of knowledgeable and "objectivity" in the minds of students and readers that, from the point of view of reflexivity, is unwarranted. Far from being "scientific," our work is colored by our own subjective experience. This experience is shaped as much by American feminist discourse as it is by the nature of gendered Judaism. It is, for example, our Western experience and not our Jewish experience that rejects domesticity as an equally highly valued sub-culture as the cultures of the synagogue, the Seminary, or Federation. It is our eighty-year life expectancy, coupled with our penchant for having no more than 1.8 children, that causes our lives to loom bereft of Jewish focus unless we find roles for ourselves in worship services or Jewish professionalism.

Our personal needs to construct lives that are Jewishly meaningful drive some of us to participate in the Havurah movement, an egalitarian and informal alternative to organized Jewish practice that brings worship into the home, or at least into a milieu that more resembles the extended families of our cultural imagination than do our real families, rent by divorces or scattered all over the country.

Egalitarian Judaism, from this point of view, is not an evolutionary progression to a superior form of Judaism, but an adaptation to the specific needs experienced by a particular class of Jewish American women of a certain age who have had common life experiences. As such, it is not different in kind from other Jewish adaptations to historical circumstances. Support for this interpretation may be derived from the evidence that American-style egalitarian Judaism has not caught on in other contemporary world Jewrys.

It is important to understand that a postmodern reading of contemporary American Jewish feminism does not in any way diminish the meaning egalitarian Judaism has for many American woman. It meets our needs for individual expression as scholars, professional Jews and religious Jews. This is a very personal experience, however, not based on scientific facts or a generalizable moral superiority. Postmodern scholars wishing to contribute to a Jewish social science need increasingly to make

the distinction between our personal perceptions and our subjective selves, on the one hand, and our Judaism as an object of our inquiry, on the other. In this way we can distinguish *our* Judaism from other Judaisms such as Orthodox Judaisms, which answer to the needs of other people, and are equally valid and moral forms of Jewish practice from postmodern and anthropological perspectives.

In Jewish studies, both in the humanities and social sciences, scholarship has been used to support political positions, especially those espousing a morally superior "egalitarian" Judaism, without much thought having been given to the subjectivity of the scholars themselves. Political correctness, in the context of the American academy, calls for belief in the moral superiority of an androgenous gender system in which equality is equated with identity: differences between men and women are minimized as much as possible. Little reflection has been given to the fact that the Jewish feminist agenda for achieving an egalitarian and thus morally superior Judaism is based on a theory of gender constructed within the context of the American feminist movement of the 1970s. This theory is ahistorical, assuming a generalized and timeless subordination of women to men in a Judaism that is captured in the written texts, public behaviors, and openly avowed values of a hypothetical Jewish culture that embraces and represents all Jewish cultures that have actually existed in specific times and places. In short, this theory recapitulates the nomothetic concerns of the enlightenment and subsequent modern thought, but does not transcend them.

In conclusion, a Jewish social science that strives to understand what motivates persons who identify themselves as Jews to behave in certain ways, could not limit itself to the study of religion, but must examine the broader contexts of Jewish cultures, even the contexts of wider socio-cultural systems in which Jews live. From this perspective it is more useful to consider contemporary American Jewish feminist scholarship, as well as Jewish feminist political action, as aspects of late twentieth-century Jewish-American culture themselves, rather than to take at face value feminist discourse concerning the nature of "Judaism" and its gender hierarchy. A Jewish social science must deconstruct the manner in which the American feminist discourse has influenced perceptions of gender in Judaism be-

fore it can provide a *rational*, as opposed to mainly emotional, basis for an agenda of social action.

Notes

1. This paper has evolved over a period of years. Acknowledgment is due to many colleagues who have discussed these ideas with me including Neil Gillman and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and scholars such as Paula Hyman, Ellen Umansky and Riv-Ellen Prell, who have responded to different versions. Montclair State College gave me released time during two different semesters to work on these ideas. Parts of this paper will appear in the introduction to my book, *Women in Jewish Culture: Active Voices* forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press.
2. L.J. Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1990), p. 5.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. To date most ethnographies of Jewish communities concentrate on male institutions or ignore gender issues entirely. For example, see F.K. Furman, *Beyond Yiddishkeit: The Struggle for Jewish Identity in a Reform Synagogue* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987); S.C. Heilman, *Synagogue Life: A Study in Symbolic Interaction* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1973); and W. Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class: Portland Jewry over Four Generations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993). An exception would be R-E. Prell, *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).
5. See R. Adler, "The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halakah and the Jewish Woman," in S. Heschel, ed., *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983); P. Hyman, "The Other Half: Women in Jewish Tradition," in E. Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976); P. Hyman, "Lilith Interview: After a Decade of Jewish Feminism the Jewry is Still Out," *Lilith*, 11 (1983):20-24.
6. Susan Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
7. L. Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); D.R. Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

8. M. Sacks, "Computing Community at Purim," *Journal of American Folklore*, 102 (405) (1989):276-291.
9. C. Weissler, "Prayers in Yiddish and the Religious World of Ashkenazic Women," in J. Baskin, ed., *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991); "'For Women and for Men Who are Like Women': The Construction of Gender in Yiddish Devotional Literature," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 5(2) (1989); "The Religion of Traditional Ashkenazic Women: Some Methodological Issues," *AJS Review*, 12:1 (1987).
10. C. Baum, P. Hyman, and S. Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: Dial Press 1976); M. Berkowitz, "Transcending 'Tsimmes and Sweetness': Recovering the History of Zionist Women in Central and Western Europe, 1897-1933," in M. Sacks, *Women in Jewish Culture: Active Voices* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press) (forthcoming).
11. Paula Hyman, comments on panel "Jewish Women: Spirituality, Politics and Identity," at the American Anthropological Association meetings in San Francisco, December 1992.
12. P. Sanday, *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
13. P. Young-Eisendrath, "The Female Person and How We Talk about Her," in M.M. Gergen, *Feminist Thought and the Structure of Knowledge* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), p. 155.
14. See, for example, A. Weiner, *Women of Value, Men of Renown: New Perspectives in Trobriand Exchange* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976); J. Goodale, *Tiwi Wives* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981); B. Chinas, *The Isthmus Zapotecs: Women's Roles in Cultural Context* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1973).
15. S. Ardener, *Perceiving Women* (New York: Halstead Press, 1975); R. Reiter, *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975); M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974); and Sanday, *op. cit.*
16. E. Showalter, *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women's Literature and Theory* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), pp. 137-138 (brackets added).
17. Weiner, Goodale, and Chinas; see note 14.
18. A. Weiner, "Trobriand Kinship from Another View: The Reproductive Power of Women and Men," *Man* (N.S.) 14 (1979):159-181.

19. J. Joselit, "'A Set Table': Jewish Domestic Culture in the New World, 1880-1950," in S. Braunstein and J.W. Joselit, eds., *Getting Comfortable in New York: The American Jewish Home, 1880-1950* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1992).
20. *Ibid.*
21. B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Kitchen Judaism," in Braunstein and Joselit, *op. cit.*
22. B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "The Cut that Binds: The Western Ashkenazi Torah Binder as Nexus Between Circumcision and Torah," in V. Turner, ed., *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual* (Washington, D.C., 1982), pp. 136-146.
23. Rosaldo and Lamphere, *op. cit.*
24. Chinas, *op. cit.*
25. J. Davis, "The Bar Mitzvah Balabusta: Mother's Role in the Family's Rite of Passage," in M. Sacks, *op. cit.* (forthcoming).
26. Sacks (1989), *op. cit.*
27. S. Cohen, J. Woocher, and B. Phillips, *Perspectives in Jewish Population Research* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984); S.B. Fishman, *A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community* (New York: Free Press, 1983); S. Goldstein and C. Goldscheider, *Jewish Americans: Three Generations in a Jewish Community* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985); C. Waxman, *America's Jews in Transition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983).