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Young Orthodox Women in Israel (review)

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Tamar El-Or

Next Year I Will Know More: Literacy and Identity
among Young Orthodox Women in Israel

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reviewed by Judith Tydor Baumel

Several months ago I attended a discussion at my university that dealt with the education and personal identity of modern Orthodox young women in Israel. Chairing the meeting was a lecturer from the School of Education who had just completed several years of research on that topic. After briefly explaining her methodology, she shared with us her sense of surprise in discovering the low priority that her subjects—graduates of *ulpanot* (semi-private religious girls' schools that offer a more intensive religious framework than state-sponsored religious schools) who chose army service in place of women's national service—had placed on their female identity. Not having been privy to her theoretical framework, I was unsure of what she presumed this female identity was supposed to contain. However, the fact that these girls saw it as being preceded by their religious, national, and human identities did not take me by surprise. Listening to the discourse unfold, I mused upon whether the girls' national-religious education did not, in fact, merge their female and religious identities into one entity, thus actually placing what this educator would consider to be their sense of womanhood at the top of their list.

I was reminded of this discussion while reading Tamar El-Or's book, *Next Year I Will Know More*, which deals with literacy and identity among young Orthodox women in Israel. El-Or's study focuses upon one aspect of the quiet revolution taking place among certain groups of modern Orthodox women during the past few years—the development of educational establishments offering intensive Judaic studies for women. Often using texts that were previously made available for women to study, classes in these

midrashot—post-secondary women’s study frameworks—are usually attended by young women in their late teens and early twenties. El-Or concentrates in particular upon the concepts of literacy and identity of women students at Bar-Ilan University’s *Midrashah* in the mid-1990s, whom she observed in classes and interviewed over a course of three years.

Each of the book’s four sections focuses upon a different aspect of El-Or’s research. The first, entitled “The Research Site and Methods,” explains the educational and social backdrop to the growth of the various *midrashot* in Israel and the book’s methodology. The second section presents a “literacy biography” of a number of the interviewees, expressed in their own words and followed by the author’s analysis. The third section, “Dialogues on Torah Study and the Constitution of Identity,” describes and analyzes dialogues that took place in two of the *Midrashah*’s classes, on *Aggadah* (narrative sections of the Talmud) and on Jewish philosophy. The final section, entitled “Anthropology and Literacy—From Critique to Participation,” focuses upon a tension evidencing itself more and more in the Orthodox world, arising from a shifting boundary in religious praxis. El-Or presents Orthodox women’s new religious literacy, gained through study in *midrashot*, as a form of participation in a previously male-dominated Orthodox religious sphere. For certain groups of women, this literacy is not only an end in itself but also an empowering tool enabling them to demand greater participation in religious praxis. In this final section, El-Or concentrates upon a number of these groups and the ways they express their desire to integrate into what have traditionally been considered normative male religious activities and frameworks.

Unlike those anthropologists who examine communities without being aware of the significance of their subtle codes, El-Or has done her homework well. Throughout the book, she exhibits an easy familiarity with the written and unwritten linguistic, dress, and behavioral codes of the modern Orthodox Jewish world, as well as with those common only to its female branch in Israel. Distinguishing her subjects from the ultra-Orthodox women who were the focus of her previous book, she shows how certain modern Orthodox women are challenging the very foundations upon which the male citadels of religious Jewish knowledge rest. One dialogue that she cites is extremely illuminating in this respect. El-Or confronts the director of the *Midrashah* with her conclusion that modern Orthodox women want to use their studies to bring about changes in the application of Jewish law. In an attempt to show her that she is mistaken, he invites a student who is also

a rabbi's wife into his office and asks her whether this is true. To his great surprise, the student answers in the affirmative. The director and his assistant ask her, "How far can it go?" At this, she turns to El-Or and comments: "You see, they are scared, they are simply scared" (p. 69), accentuating one of the central points upon which El-Or focuses: the dichotomy between the worldview of the Orthodox establishment and the desires of the modern Orthodox female rank-and-file.

El-Or's interviews give us insight into the lives and backgrounds of *Midrashah* students that negate any stereotype of blind obedience to rabbinic dicta or uniformity of thought. Her subjects present a wide gamut of young women within what is known in Israel as "religious Zionism." Some studied in all-female elite high school frameworks, while others are graduates of the co-educational state religious school system. Most abide by a dress code that does not include wearing pants outdoors, but even here El-Or finds an exception. The married students cover their hair, but their choices of head-covering and the amount of hair they expose vary greatly. Politically and territorially, almost all her subjects could be placed right of center, yet many were far from the stereotype of the nationalist settler woman.

Apart her principal topic of women's Jewish literacy, the issue of nationalism plays a prominent role in El-Or's study. When discussing the students' biographical narratives or analyzing the lessons that she attended at the *Midrashah*, El-Or returns time and again to the concepts of nation and nationalism among contemporary religious Zionists. It is true that these concepts have received a large amount of attention from religious Zionist educators during the past decades, particularly in high school frameworks, as exemplified by the educational survey with which I began. Indeed, the definition of nationalism given by more than one educator in these educational institutions is not a territorial one, but rather an all-encompassing definition of identity, thus absorbing the subject's masculinity or femininity. This explains the educational survey's results while showing how the nationalism that one person defines geographically may have an entirely different meaning to another sector of the population.

El-Or's choice on many occasions to single out the nationalist issue from the numerous topics that were discussed in the classes she attended has a double significance. The scholarly significance is reflected in the amount of time that was devoted to the issue in various lessons. However, there is also a second, more personal significance, which only comes to light with

the sudden appearance of a vehement discourse in the middle of the book, on the connection between religious Zionism, Bar-Ilan University, and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Throughout the study, El-Or employs an interesting—albeit unorthodox—literary technique of interweaving her personal experiences during her work on the book with her scholarly narrative. Here, she intersperses a very personal narrative about her sabbatical in Philadelphia, during which she wrote the book, with a discussion of where she was that year when learning of Rabin's assassination. In the feminist tradition of viewing the personal as political, she immediately moves into a discussion of what she sees as the complicity of Bar-Ilan University and the religious Zionist establishment in Rabin's tragic murder. She states this almost matter-of-factly, stressing that the assassin had studied at the university and had been enrolled in the *Machon Hagavoha Letorah*, the male equivalent of the *Midrashah*. Such statements suddenly overshadow any attempt at scholarly discourse, creating a rather out-of-context digression in a smoothly progressing narrative. This may have indeed been her intention: to show how Rabin's death created an out-of-context interlude that irrevocably changed the course of her life—a common feeling at that time among various sectors of the Israeli public and particularly the Zionist left. However, the juxtaposition of this discourse with her emphasis on the role of nation and nationalism in the *Midrashah*'s teachings leads the reader to wonder whether they do not, in fact, allude to her own personal agenda or stereotype, at least as much as they do to the discourse that actually took place in class.

Almost every book loses something in translation, and this book is not an exception to that rule. The problem begins with the title. Focusing upon knowledge, the book's English title does not convey the added significance of the title of the Hebrew volume, *Bapesah haba* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1998)—“Next Passover”—which locates literacy within the Orthodox woman's concept of identity. Identity, social scientists tell us, develops at the crossroads of space and time, and the time expressed in El-Or's original title is the cycle of religious holidays, in which the Orthodox Jewish woman traditionally was responsible for the household-related tasks carried out in preparation for each feast or fast. Haim Watzman's English translation of the Hebrew manuscript has ensured a seamless transition from El-Or's erudite Hebrew prose into extremely readable English. Yet, although a literal translation of the Hebrew title would have conveyed little to an English-speaking audience, the choice of the English title locates the study within a different framework,

depriving readers of the added associative dimension that characterizes El-Or's research and writing.

Another difficulty in translation lies in the choice of the word "Orthodoxy" and not "modern Orthodoxy" to render the term *Tzionut datit* (religious Zionism). While "Orthodox" is today the accepted English equivalent of the original German *gezetztgetreuer Judentum* (Torah-true Jewry), the clarifying adjective—modern, ultra—enables one to differentiate between the various elements existing among those who fall under the colloquial umbrella heading of "religious Jews."¹ By using this term, the English edition of El-Or's book mistakenly creates the impression that the processes she is describing characterize a large proportion of all Orthodox Jewish women in Israel, which at present is not true. El-Or does accurately describe an educational trend within religious Zionist circles in Israel, but it is limited to very specific sectors of modern Orthodox Jews. Furthermore, while the expansion of religious literacy is characteristic of growing numbers of modern Orthodox young women, the demand for change in religious praxis is still quite limited in scope.

One of the fascinating techniques that El-Or uses in this book is to describe and analyze lectures delivered at the Bar-Ilan *Midrashah* on various occasions. Apart from the two courses from which she quotes at length, she also attended other classes, including special late-summer sessions during the month of *Elul*, which she describes and analyzes in detail. Here we encounter a clash between minimalist and maximalist scholarly techniques. Although anthropologists can limit themselves to the description and analysis of observed phenomena, they may also provide background information on their subjects. In her previous study of ultra-Orthodox women in the Ger hasidic community, El-Or did just that, giving us fascinating information about the major educational figures whom she encountered. It is therefore a shame that she decided in this book to delve into the background of the students but not of the teachers, which might have deepened her study and enriched our understanding of their methodology and *weltanschauung*. An example is her references to Rebbetzin Esther Lior of Kiryat Arba, who taught one of these late summer sessions and whose multifaceted personal history belies the radicalized character emerging from El-Or's two-dimensional description of her.

These points aside, *Next Year I Will Know More* is a fascinating exploration of the intellectual world of young modern Orthodox women, one of the

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changing facets of modern Orthodox life today. It will be interesting to re-read this book in ten or fifteen years, when the daughters of this quiet revolution will be middle-aged members of the organized Jewish community. The form that this community will take, and the impact that the new religious women's literacy will have on it, will determine whether these women will carry out the traditional communal tasks of their mothers, their fathers, or possibly both.

Note

1. I discussed this phenomenon over a decade ago in my article, "Orthodoxy: A Guided Tour Through a Changing World," *Gesher*, 121 (Summer 1990), pp. 62–78 (Hebrew).