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Gender and American Jews

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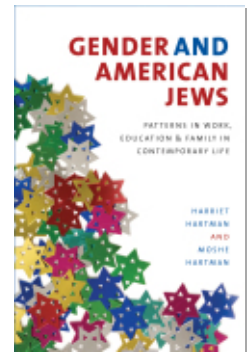
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P R E F A C E

Many observers have assumed that gender is no longer a major factor in American Jewish life, but—according to this carefully argued, brilliantly documented analysis of male and female life cycles, roles, behaviors, and values—gender is more important than ever. Working from the two most comprehensive recent national surveys of American Jews, Harriet and Moshe Hartman examine the similarities and differences in men’s and women’s lives, compared both to each other and to men and women in the past. Their findings are critical to an understanding of how American Jews function as individuals, in families, and in societies. The Hartmans prove that scholars and policy planners alike ignore gender at their own peril.

American Jewish men and women continue to be much more highly educated than the American population in general. In the single decade from 1990 to 2000, Jewish women in particular showed significant progress in terms of their educational and occupational achievements. Today, more than one in five Jewish women who earn graduate degrees go beyond the master’s degree. Although Jewish men continue to exhibit higher educational levels than women, the gap is decreasing. Those gender differences that persist are greatest for Jews over age 45. Indeed, among men and women ages 35 to 44 who earn graduate degrees, a larger proportion of Jewish women than men earn them in the professions—a statistical snapshot, perhaps, of the return of Jewish men to the business world and their declining attraction to professional life.

The Hartmans show us that highly educated American Jews continue to have strong biases toward both married life and work outside the home. Jewish women who earn higher degrees get married later and have fewer children than their less educated sisters, but they are “more likely to be married, less likely to be divorced, [and] less likely to be married more than once” than other women. In contrast, less educated Jewish men are more likely than their highly educated brothers to be divorced, and to remain unmarried after divorce. Strikingly, married American Jewish men and women are typically educated at similar levels. This educational homogamy is especially common among younger American Jews and Orthodox Jews.

Despite the much-publicized putative trend of young women to cease working outside the home and reclaim homemaker roles, the Hartmans show that more than 80 percent of Jewish women with bachelor’s or

master's degrees—and more than 90 percent of Jewish women with doctoral or professional degrees—are in fact employed. The Hartmans compare these and related data, including male and female earning power, to other non-Hispanic white Americans and to Jews in the past, creating a well-rounded and fascinating portrait.

Defining “Jewishness” is a complicated enterprise. When the Hartmans analyze gender differences in Jewishness, they allow various categories of behaviors, beliefs, and values to speak for themselves, subjecting the data to statistical tests in order to include several possible prisms of interpretation. They show that branches of Judaism still matter—despite post-denominational claims to the contrary—in the way American Jews act and think. Orthodox men and women have few significant gender differences in levels of Jewish involvement. However, women who identify with the Conservative or the Reform/Reconstructionist branches of Judaism are more engaged and active than similarly identified men.

Age matters as well—in sometimes surprising patterns that challenge expectations. For example, while older American Jews are more likely to see Judaism as a moral guide, younger American Jews are more likely to observe religious rituals. The Hartmans show that, overall, women are significantly more strongly identified in almost all Jewish expressions, “even when age, education, and denomination are controlled.” However, these gender differences are reduced when Jews receive extended years of formal Jewish education, and when they marry Jews.

From simple bar graphs to complicated regression analyses, the Hartmans present their data in ways that are suitable for the interested public as well as for students and scholars. Like other volumes in the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute Series on Jewish Women, this important study takes a fresh approach to the interface between gender and Jewishness. By providing the definitive analysis of the impact of gender on American Jewish societies today, the Hartmans will change the way American Jewish life is understood.

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