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Kerry Wallach
Gettysburg College

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Gender and Jewish History

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Gender and Jewish History

MARION A. KAPLAN AND DEBORAH DASH MOORE (EDS)

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011

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Today's scholarly projects in gender studies are wide-ranging and by nature interdisciplinary, much like the essays collected in Marion A. Kaplan and Deborah Dash Moore's impressive edited volume *Gender and Jewish History*. By means of a transnational approach spanning several centuries, this collection sheds light on many new research perspectives of gender and Jewish studies. Owing to the caliber of its scholarship and the fact that it brings together important work by scholars of European and American Jewish history, literature, culture, religious studies, and Holocaust studies, this book is unquestionably the most significant volume on the topic to appear in English in over a decade.

To the extent that they situate their inquiry with respect to Jewish history and not Judaism, Kaplan and Moore demonstrate the need to consider the past (and Jewishness) without being limited to religious lines of inquiry, thereby affirming the interdisciplinary directions of Jewish gender studies. In fact, because the volume's scope pushes disciplinary boundaries so explicitly – it contains three main sections entitled “Women's Culture in Modern Jewish History,” “Gendered Dimensions of Religious Change,” and “Jewish Politics in American Accents” – the category “history” barely does justice to its rich content. Whereas the first 11 of 22 chapters contribute largely to historical and historiographical discourses, chapters in the second half of the book examine Jewish literature (ChaeRan Y. Freeze on Lev Levanda, and Anne Lapidus Lerner on Linda Pastan's poetry); cultural production (Lauren B. Strauss on Jewish women artists, and Deborah Dash Moore on photos of New York City taken by five different photographers); feminist thought and activism (Claire E. Sufrin on the legal turn in the work of Rachel Adler and Tamar Ross, and Judith Rosenbaum on Margaret Sanger); and roles within various legal and political arenas (Deborah E. Lipstadt on four players in the arrest of Adolf Eichmann, and Michael Scott Alexander on Golda Meir and Henry Kissinger).

History plays a significant part in this volume for other reasons: though the word *Festschrift* appears nowhere in its pages, nearly every chapter testifies to the pioneering efforts of historian Paula E. Hyman (1946-2011). The editors hint that they sought out contributors who were in the best position to pay tribute to Hyman's teaching, scholarship on Jewish history, and feminist activism. As a result, most (if not all) of the scholars whose work appears in this volume have a direct connection to Hyman: they are her students, teachers, colleagues, and friends. If these essays were intended to provide a reflection of her legacy, they certainly succeed in demonstrating Hyman's great impact on the field of Jewish gender and women's studies. The afterword by Richard I. Cohen addresses the evolution of Hyman's contributions to the study of French Jewry; the book's concise bibliography chronologically lists her publications.

Following the work of Paula Hyman, many essays in this volume proceed from the feminist principle that the study of gender is intimately intertwined with social history, everyday life, and women's history. In their brief introduction, Moore and Kaplan lay out two main goals: to assess the state of the field, and to ask “how gender – the culturally and hierarchically constructed differences between the sexes based on *perceived* differences – influenced women's lives and actions, and the histories or stories scholars told” (6; italics in original). The outstanding essays in this book achieve, but also surpass, these modest aims. Several authors pave the way for sophisticated new considerations of gender and gendered practices; others offer

riveting accounts and analyses of stories that are only just emerging. In the interest of brevity, the remainder of this review discusses select contributions thematically and not in the order in which they appear in the book.

Chapters by ChaeRan Y. Freeze, Chava Weissler, and Beth S. Wenger present the most innovative arguments within Jewish gender studies: they analyze gender with respect to cultural behaviors, performances, and embodied practices in addition to constructs of sexual difference. In exquisite close readings of Lev Levanda's serialized novel *Turbulent Times* (1871-1873), Freeze parses this text to uncover "hidden transcripts" embedded in dialogues, reflections, and epistolary writings of female characters. She employs a metaphor of gendered nations (Russia is masculine; Poland, feminine) to demonstrate the imagined Jewish nation's longing for liberation from its "stepparents" (198). Taking present-day kabbalistic dance as a starting point, Weissler's piece bridges historical and contemporary opportunities for women to engage with Jewish mysticism. By viewing the study of Kabbalah not through the lens of authenticity but through people's individual and embodied relationships to it ("vernacular Kabbalah"), she proposes a new paradigm for evaluating spirituality (217). Also with an eye to the present day, Wenger's essay reflects on the so-called "boy crisis" of American Jewry – the allegation that non-Orthodox Jewish women possess more connections to Jews and Judaism than their male counterparts – to showcase numerous ways in which gender imbalances are linked to class and generational differences (350f.). Echoing Weissler's focus on embodiment, Wenger examines perceptions of the American Jewish community cast in terms of masculine virility and power.

New insights into the significance of class and economic status for Jewish gender studies resound most prominently in the chapters by historians Todd M. Endelman, Marsha L. Rozenblit, Rebecca Kobrin, Judith Rosenbaum, and Lila Corwin Berman. Taken together, these five studies connect Central and Eastern Europe with the United States and masterfully illuminate regional differences and similarities. Endelman's assessment of gender and conversion in Berlin, Vienna, Breslau, Warsaw, and Cracow presents a "poverty thesis" that complements the "education thesis" advanced by Hyman and also by literary scholar Iris Parush (181-82). Endelman demonstrates that many Jewish women who converted to Christianity in certain regions (such as Berlin and Cracow) did so for economic reasons, whereas women from middle-class homes had greater access to non-Jewish cultures because of their familiarity with several languages. Likewise, Rozenblit's essay, which explores the range of Jewish marriages that transpired in 1920s Vienna, underscores the pragmatic and financial reasons for which many couples chose partners during what she views as a "period of transition" from arranged marriages to those based on love (89).

Essays by Rebecca Kobrin, Judith Rosenbaum, and Lila Corwin Berman reflect on the interplay of gender, sex, and power in America with respect to subservience, rape, early public demands for birth control, and even neighborhood territories. With her chapter on Jewish women as domestic servants, Kobrin presents a significant intervention in the way the Jewish family is constructed and studied. This work deftly challenges common misconceptions about the stability of the nuclear family, reminding us that many women without dowries were endangered by domestic work conditions, particularly when exported by their families from Eastern Europe to New York. In an incredibly moving account of Margaret Sanger's encounter with the Jewish women of Brownsville, Brooklyn, Rosenbaum analyzes the use and appeal of maternalist rhetoric for impoverished immigrant communities. In a departure from the New York model, Berman takes Detroit as an example of how Jewish space was demarcated in urban areas; she

examines the racial tensions in postwar neighborhoods to argue that “sometimes preserving Jewish stability necessitated, ironically, uprooting Jewish life” (342).

Scholars of German-Jewish studies will find this volume to be particularly useful; approximately one third of its essays focus primarily on Jews in German-speaking lands. In this latest essay on Pauline Wengeroff’s two-volume memoir (1908 and 1910), Shulamit S. Magnus focuses on questions of authorship and reveals the possibility that Wengeroff’s writings were translated from Russian to German. Elisheva Carlebach’s chapter takes up customs specific to women in its investigation of the obscure early modern practice of protecting drinking water during *tekufah*, the seasonal turning points of the Hebrew calendar. In an assessment of texts about coffee, Robert Liberles further pursues questions of gendered authorship and consumption to argue that coffeehouses ultimately were more far-reaching than salons in part because coffeehouses were deemed suitable for women’s social activities. Ismar Schorsch and David Ellenson pursue more traditional lines of inquiry with a focus on women’s roles in nineteenth-century Germany. Schorsch’s readings of letters between Leopold Zunz and his wife, Adelheid, shed light on her contributions to his scholarship. Ellenson summarizes the positions of Rabbis Samson Raphael Hirsch and Esriel Hildesheimer to show that even minor support for women’s education can be read as radical. Michael A. Meyer’s important contribution pays long overdue attention to key players in European Reform Jewish movements, as well as nineteenth and early twentieth-century reforms made to religious observance and practices. Meyer considers women such as Amalie Beer, Johanna Goldschmidt, Lina Morgenstern, Nahida Remy, Regina Jonas, and others who played a critical role in shaping German-Jewish history.

Both Holocaust and “post-Holocaust” scholars will benefit greatly from the chapters by Dalia Ofer, Marion Kaplan, and Deborah E. Lipstadt. Ofer’s historiographical essay cohesively summarizes previous research on gender with respect to Nazi Germany and East European victims; she argues for the study of gender and family survival strategies as a means toward expanding our definition of resistance. Drawing on her earlier study of Jewish refugees in the Dominican Republic, Kaplan writes of the impact of women’s absence and suggests that the failure of the Sosúa settlement can be attributed to the lack of single Jewish women, for the male farmers “had no one for whom to build” (112). Finally, Lipstadt’s spellbinding account breaks new ground in understanding what she calls “the post-Holocaust world” of historical narrative by underscoring the crucial contributions made by four women and men to Eichmann’s arrest (307).

With *Gender and Jewish History*, Marion Kaplan and Deborah Dash Moore have assembled a monumental contribution to the development of Jewish gender studies as a field that extends beyond Jewish history. A worthy companion to Paula Hyman’s well-known work, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women* (1995), this 2011 book should rightfully find a place in many libraries, including those with a focus on Jewish cultural studies, literature, art, photography, feminisms, and masculinities. Scholars interested in Europe and/or the United States will find these essays invaluable for current and future pursuits in Jewish and gender studies.

KERRY WALLACH
Gettysburg College, USA
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