<AT> Women and Gender, Past and Present: A Jewish Studies Story

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When it comes to gender equality, Jewish Studies has a long way to go. All-male conferences, overwhelmingly male editorial boards, sexist condescension, and implicit bias still plague the field. It is still possible to publish an article that ignores women or a book that implies that women had no substantive role in the making of Jewish history. But that does not mean that the field has gone untouched by feminist scholarship—far from it.

In addition to calling for inclusive representation at conferences and in publications, feminist scholarship has intellectual lessons for Jewish Studies too. The field has learned some of these, but others it has learned only incompletely, or not at all. I see the fields of women's and gender studies as two of the intellectual legacies of feminist studies, and the scholarship in these fields has brought insights to academic disciplines across the field of Jewish Studies—to name just a few, that women play crucial roles in historical change and development; that masculinity and femininity are not essences but rather regulatory ideals constructed by people and cultures; that ideas about gender structure social systems even beyond the presence of women or men; and that men have gender too, which means that men and masculinity should be studied with respect to the construction of gender.

This last point hints at the development of gender studies out of women's studies; it also hints at the subtle tensions within women's and gender studies. These fields suggest on the one hand that scholars should pay more attention to women and on the other hand that scholars should also pay more attention to men, masculinity, and manhood. In order to challenge masculine hegemony, we must study men more. But we must study men as men, not a the default representatives of humanity, or of Jewishness. We must center women in our scholarly narrative, but we must also include men in our scholarship about gender. *Women* still appears as an entry in the index of most mainstream works in Jewish Studies, whereas *men* does not. This demonstrates that women are still a special topic, one the scholar can isolate from the rest of the story, but

men are so integral they cannot be isolated in this way. *Gender* is still so often taken to mean only women. In the 2010 edited collection *Gender and Jewish History*, for example, only one of the 21 essays focuses on men or masculinity.[1] At first glance, this seems like the flip side of the problem I marked at the outset: scholarship focuses *too much* on women. And yet, a closer look suggests that perhaps it is more a matter of the scholarship on women and gender being marginalized and isolated as a special interest. Are these two currents a case of women's studies versus gender studies, a conflict over the legacy of feminist scholarship?

To answer this, we need a robust understanding of the history of feminist scholarship in Jewish Studies. How did we get here, and where do we go from here? Here I will discuss the multiple origins of feminist studies in Jewish Studies, describe two major conceptual moves that women's and gender studies have advocated, and suggest why pursuing these two conceptual moves can be a difficult yet ethically important balancing act.

<H1>Multiple Origins

When the editors of *Jewish Social Studies* approached me about contributing to this discussion, they asked me to write about feminist contributions to Jewish Studies in order to honor the first generation of Jewish women's historians. At first I didn't notice the subtle move from feminist contributions to the specific field of history, but upon reflection, it makes good sense: many of the elder stateswomen of Jewish Studies are or were historians. Hasia Diner, Paula Hyman, Marion Kaplan, Deborah Dash Moore, and a dozen other women scholars line a section of my bookshelves. Hyman, Charlotte Baum, and Sonya Michael co-wrote *The Jewish Woman in America* in 1976. Kaplan published *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany* in 1979. These were some of the pathbreakers of the feminist study of Jews, and many of their books and articles remain must-reads for Jewish Studies scholars today.

Why were there so many historians among these pathbreaking women? Is there something particular about history? Were scholars pursuing feminist projects in other fields? Were the methods of history somehow uniquely suited to feminist inquiry? Feminist approaches are hardly limited to historical genres of writing. Today,

philosophers, scholars of religion, literary scholars, social scientists, and textualists all write well-regarded feminist scholarship in their fields. Some fields are more welcoming than others, and some marginalize feminist inquiries as a special interest, but it is clear that excellent feminist inquiry can occur in each of these disciplines. So the representation of historians among early Jewish Studies feminists was not a result of some kind of methodological uniqueness of the discipline of history.

Perhaps male scholars of Jewish history saw a nonthreatening place for histories of Jewish women—not exactly relegated to the kitchen, but complementary to "real" (read: intellectual and political, and implicitly male) history. The history of women, some imagined, could be told alongside the truly important history of Jewish men without upsetting the apple cart. These women historians, however, did not see their work as a side project to the real work of doing history. They saw their scholarship as critical and transformative, and they were not always content with dominant historical narratives. For historical scholarship in general, the early 1970s also marked the ascendency of social history, sometimes imagined as "history from below." With this move toward everyday people, women Jewish Studies scholars, who were unlikely to have rabbinical training, also found themselves with access to the crucial sources for this kind of history: they did not need rabbinical training to find and analyze documents of social history, such as letters, diaries, and the traces of everyday bureaucracy. Women scholars had been less likely to have access to sources such as Talmud, other rabbinic materials, kabbalah, or responsa, and so had been marginalized when rabbis and religious leaders were the primary subjects of history. Women scholars did not merely benefit from social history; they pushed it forward and insisted that it include women as historical subjects in all arenas—immigration, labor, and local economics and politics.

This does not mean that these women's historians had it easy. To paint the scene in broad strokes, American Jewish communities were turning inward in the 1970s—some scholars suggest it was because of reflection on antisemitism, the rise of ethnic nationalism, the Holocaust, or the state of Israel[2]—but whatever the causes, many Jews in this cultural environment perceived feminism as a threat. Scholarship was never fully insulated from these inward turns, and so feminist scholars received pushback not only on scholarly grounds but also because what they were doing wasn't "good for the Jews."[3]

Moreover, Jewish feminists sometimes had uneasy relationships with their Jewishness and with the feminist movement. Religious and ethnic difference was often ignored, and some occasions even shaded into antisemitism.[4]

Feminist scholars in some other Jewish Studies disciplines, such as philosophy and sociology, also produced important academic work, though many other scholars saw their work isolated as a special interest that had little effect on their subfield overall. "The recent proliferation of feminist theory and research has had minimal impact on this field," Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum lamented about sociology in 1996.[5] Feminist scholarship is still working to be seen as a central part of Jewish philosophy even today. Thus, feminist historians are often the easiest to see in the history of the field of Jewish Studies, and though they were not the only ones, their work was more influential than was feminist inquiry in other subfields.

There was also another robust and influential group of feminist scholars, people we might call theologians—if that word doesn't seem too Christian. "Theology is the discipline that Jews eschew while nonetheless pursuing it with covert avidity," wrote Paul Mendes Flohr and Arthur Cohen in 1987.[6] If *theologians* does seem too Christian a term, that impression gestures toward the fraught place of Jewish theology in the academy. It also indicates why these scholars don't neatly fit in the Wissenschaft-centric story of Jewish Studies that prioritizes the objective scientific study of history, even if that "scientific" ideology no longer reigns. These women were academically trained and employed, but much of their writing was more in the vein of constructive religious thought than history. Rachel Adler first published "The Jew Who Wasn't There" in 1971. Judith Plaskow was writing feminist midrash in the early 1970s and coedited *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* in 1979. Several years later, Susannah Heschel had edited *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, a collection that included previously published essays and a section called "Toward a Feminist Theology of Judaism." Like the brief discussion of women's scholarship on Jewish history, this short list is only a small portion of the pioneering work in feminist Jewish Studies in the 1970s and early 1980s; it represents a much larger segment of scholarship.

The work of these feminist theologians highlights another aspect of the lessons to be learned from feminist scholars: they also critiqued gendered ideas and the ways in

which those ideas contributed to and perpetuated power dynamics. To take just a few examples from their scholarship, Plaskow noted that images of God were usually male and discussed why theologies that positioned the Jewish man as the default Jew created ritual alienation for women. Adler critiqued the metaphors of acquisition of a woman by a man in traditional Jewish marriage. Heschel critiqued the sexism at the root of Jewish legal authority. These feminist approaches helped demonstrate how gendered images and ideals could promote sexism and suggested that changing them would create more just and inclusive—as well as more accurate—images and ideals.

Though the historical and the theological might seem like two alternative genealogies, they are fundamentally intertwined. We cannot obviously and neatly differentiate theological works from scholarly ones in this case; the theological works were published by scholars, often for scholarly audiences. Moreover, the groups I have called historians and theologians had similar feminist commitments, even when their particular objects of study differed. Historians also paid attention to gendered systems, images, and metaphors, and theologians also sought to include women's stories. In addition, the membership of the two groups overlapped significantly: Paula Hyman, for example, contributed an essay about the usable past to Heschel's book, and she participated in Ezrat Nashim, an educational and consciousness-raising group that set forth a "Call for Change" to Conservative Judaism.

<H1>Lessons from Feminist Scholarship

Despite its multiple origins, feminist scholarship in Jewish Studies has made a shared set of critiques of the field. Some of these critiques have been heeded, others less so. Scholars articulated many of them early on in the 1970s and 1980s, whereas others came to the fore in subsequent decades. What were these new directions that feminist scholars of Jewish Studies offered us? Here I'll mention four, but this is hardly an exhaustive list.

The first was that scholars pay attention to women and women's experience. Historians should not write about the suburbanization of American Jewry, immigrant experiences, the social effects of emancipation, life in the Yishuv, biblical texts, the application of talmudic laws, or any such cultural location as if it were only the story of men. Furthermore, feminist scholars insisted that the solution was not just "add women

and stir." Rather, scholars had to be open to the fact that considering women's lives, writings, politics, labor, and other experiences might change our overarching stories about Jewish history, literature, law, language, and culture.

A second intervention insisted that scholars consider gender. At first, it sounds obvious, perhaps too obvious, given that people often think *gender* means *women*. But the call to consider gender was more than a call just to see women; it was an admonition to use gender as an analytical category and a category in which power always operates. Today, different subfields within Jewish Studies have incorporated this insight to different extents. Scholarship on Jewish literature and in Kabbalah studies, for example, seems to have taken this to heart more than has mainstream scholarship in rabbinics. Yet questions of gender and power matter if we want to think about subjectivity. They matter if we want to talk about politics, about Jewish emancipation, about Zionism. They matter if we want to talk about halakhah. Or economics. Or sports. Or just about any topic we can think of. Gender need not be a special interest, feminist scholarship reminds us; it helps us see all of our topics more fully and clearly.

Third, the world of gender studies also turned attention to the importance of sexuality. It is easy to forget in retrospect how central lesbian feminist critiques were in the early phases of feminist Jewish Studies. These critiques were political, often calling for social arrangements that did not center on—or in some cases even include—men. But they also pointed to academic practices, both on and off the page. As time has gone on, lesbian feminist voices have become just one small group of many scholarly voices considering the implications of heterosexuality, homosexuality, queerness, rape, coercive sex, and sexualization in their work. Like the study of gender, the study of sexuality also often has power as one of its central axes.

Fourth, feminist studies has also insisted that scholars attend to difference. Although this is true in fields beyond Jewish Studies, it has a particular urgency within the field given that Jewish Studies has always sought to theorize difference, and gendered difference offers another model for thinking about social, political, or epistemological difference. These are crucial lessons, but the field of Jewish Studies has not learned all these lessons fully.

<H1>Challenges Moving Forward

Jewish Studies, in my view, must reckon with feminist inquiry and gender studies in order to become a better, more interesting version of itself. Feminist theory reminds us to center women's histories and experiences, and gender theory reminds us that everyone has gender and sexuality. This means that we must study women, but we must also study men, heterosexuals, and other dominant groups. The challenge is to do so without writing over the importance of women and queer people.

The first conceptual move here seems obvious: Jewish Studies needs more women. Whether you are writing a history of economics or an account of early Reform Judaism or an analysis of material culture in the ancient Near East, you need to pay attention to the existence and experiences of women. This is not just a matter of sticking in an extra example—the scholarly equivalent of the sidelined text box in a high-school history book—it is a matter of considering women centrally.

The second conceptual insight is that gender and sexuality are actually constructed for people of all genders and sexualities. This means that men also have gender, and straight people also have sexuality, and so scholars must study these normative people and experiences too.

If we look at universities today, gender studies departments and gender history tend to focus on women. Many of them grew out of women's studies departments, and some have titles like Women's and Gender Studies that reflect this. There is a good reason why gender studies departments and gender history lean toward the study of women: the professional study of history has been lopsidedly focused on the study of men—and not men as men, but men as the assumed default humans. Jewish Studies still has not solved the problem of too few women in our work, whether it is at the level of the subjects we write about or the scholars we cite.

And yet, in my first book, I took the lessons I had learned from feminist scholars, and I wrote about men and masculinity. What was I doing? I knew that I was adding to the far bigger stack of books about men, and even if I did my best to include women's voices, both scholarly and historical, it still had more male characters than female ones, and men's voices dominated women's. But even knowing these costs, I wrote about masculinity, and I did so precisely because it so often goes unmarked.

Recent events, including the #MeToo movement, have forced a wide swath of

culturally engaged scholars to pay attention to masculinity. This is a good thing. Masculinity is culturally unmarked, and thus it has gone underanalyzed. When I say that masculinity often goes unmarked, in part I mean that ignoring men's gender and the construction of masculinity can help perpetuate the idea that *gender* equals *women* or that women have gender and men do not. We all already know that women's social roles and feminine ideals change over time and are different in different cultures. But by not studying men and not paying attention to how their gender roles and ideals are constructed, we can leave ourselves with the impression that masculinity is transhistorical and essential. So we must pay attention to men's gender.

But this does not mean that we have paid too much attention to women at the expense of men. Similarly, queer people and gender nonbinary people have not been overstudied, even if they are increasingly the focus of studies of sexuality. In the end, it is a tricky balance to pay attention to gender and sexuality in dominant or normative groups while also insisting on continued attention to women and queer people, but it is both ethically and intellectually critical.

Notes

[1] Marion Kaplan and Deborah Dash Moore, eds., *Gender and Jewish History* (Bloomington, Ind., 2010).

[2] Diner, Hasia. *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews In America* (New York, 2000). Fishman, Sylvia Barack. "American Jewish Fiction Turns Inward, 1960–1990." *The American Jewish Year Book* (1991): 35-69; Zeitz, Joshua Michael. " 'If I am not for myself...': The American Jewish Establishment in the Aftermath of the Six Day War." *American Jewish History* 88, no. 2 (2000): 253-286.

[3] For one articulate example, see Judith Plaskow, introduction to *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco, 1990), ix-xxi.

[4] See Laura Levitt, *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home* (New York, 1997).

[5] Lynn Davidman and Shelley Tenenbaum, "Toward a Feminist Sociology of American Jews," in *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies*, ed. Lynn Davidman and Shelley Tenenbaum (New Haven, Conn., 1996), 140.

[6] Arthur Cohen and Paul Mendes Flohr, *Twentieth-Century Jewish Thought* (New York,

2009 [1st ed., 1987]), xiii.