

Bonna Devora Haberman

Blood and Ink: Israeli Feminism Liberating Judaism

Lexington Books, 2012. 262 pp.

reviewed by Haviva Ner-David

Bonna Devora Haberman, a founding member of Women of the Wall (WOW), could not have chosen a better time to publish her academically written yet activism-focused book, *Blood and Ink: Israeli Feminism Liberating Judaism*. Recently, WOW's struggle to pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, in full voice, in a group, with *tallitot*, *tefillin* and a Torah scroll, has become a subject of almost daily news flashes. This book sheds light on what Haberman sees as the deeper, more subversive message of that almost-25-year-struggle and illuminates why she feels this cause is so vital to her personal vision of a world repaired through religious feminism. As a long-time active member of the group and a woman rabbi in Israel, I share Haberman's vision of full egalitarianism in a non-gender-segregated society. Reading this book re-inspired me toward the cause of Women of the Wall, but at the same time it raised questions for me as to my own place in the group.

Women of the Wall is a group of women from all denominations of Judaism who pray together on the New Moon of each Jewish month in the women's section at the Wall, a public holy site that has been dominated by the ultra-Orthodox since Israel took over the site in 1967. In general, women pray there only as individuals and in silence, as opposed to the men, who pray in groups, in full voice and with ritual accoutrements. Because of WOW's avowedly pluralistic nature, it has made efforts to accommodate all of its participants, including those who believe that a group of women may not recite prayers that require the presence of a *minyan* (a prayer quorum, traditionally consisting of ten men). Thus, the group decided that if ten women are present who want to call themselves a *minyan*, they can recite those prayers as long as it is understood by all that those who do not count themselves in the *minyan* are not included in it, but are participating in the service in a different capacity.

The history of WOW's gains, successes and setbacks form the background to the broad sweep of Haberman's book. Haberman sees Israel as the embodiment of living Judaism, and she uses WOW as a case in point for how a combination of textual analysis and on-the-ground activism can change the face of Israeli society and thus of Judaism in general.

In the first chapter of this courageous and ground-breaking book, Haberman argues that religion, if it is to be a redemptive force in the world, must rid itself of the gender regimes and roles that even the most modern and democratic societies let it perpetuate under the banner of freedom of religious expression. As long as the men who wield the power in the patriarchy are allowed to protect and maintain the status quo, the goal of an equal and just society will never be reached. And as long as women's voices and experiences are not welcomed into all areas of human life, Haberman argues, society will not move beyond the violence, discrimination, conflict and oppression in which it is mired.

Through an analysis of four issues that WOW challenges—women wearing sacred prayer shawls, raising their voices in prayer, changing the custom of a sacred place and counting in a prayer quorum—Haberman critiques traditional Jewish approaches to gender and presents often radical and redemptive feminist reinterpretations.

For example, discussing the idea that a woman's voice is sexually distracting and therefore should not be raised in places of prayer, Haberman brings the original source for this notion, from the Talmud, where a woman's voice is called "lewd." The proof text is a line from the biblical love poem Song of Songs, where a woman's voice is described as alluring. "Let me hear your voice," declares the male lover to his female beloved; yet the Rabbis turn this into a prohibition on hearing a woman's voice. But they also turn to the biblical Hannah for the paradigm of prayer (1 Sam. 1:13), and they even portray the scene of man and wife lying naked side by side in bed, each turning away from the other to recite the bedtime Shema prayer. As is her general way throughout this book, Haberman grabs on to these "counter-texts" and runs with them. In this case, she concludes:

Interrogating some of the actions and interpretations at work to silence the voices of Women of the Wall, the texts contain fear and gender segregation as well as counter voices. The Song of Songs proposes erotic attentiveness of a sacred kind that coexists with and even cultivates sublime religious intention. Realizing this possibility depends upon the way we formulate our relation to sacred activity in general, and to prayer in particular. The Talmud envisions a family in bed, declaring in each other's naked presence the Oneness of the divine—holiness in the daily rhythms of life. On the pages of the Talmud, prayer transpires among intimate human connections, conscious of our bodies. Unlike austere revelation or apocalyptic scenes of ultimate divine power, we can conceive daily encounters with wonderment, women with men in fearless prayer, our intentions unruffled, even intensified by human closeness and passion.

Haberman analyzes the ramifications of the traditional exemption of women from wearing a prayer shawl with ritual fringes on its four corners. A fringed garment represents all of the 613 mitzvot, and so, by wrapping oneself in a prayer shawl, one is literally wrapping oneself in the mitzvot. Haberman writes:

Exempting Jewish women from this substantial obligation compromises women's material connection to the entire fabric of Torah. By contrast to men's clothing obligations and accoutrements that uplift spirituality and inspire divine connection, women's clothing obligations aim to cover up immodesty from male viewers. This combination of exemption and obligation constantly reinforces the message of the female body as an unworthy and impure object of the "male gaze" and control. Many women internalize this view to such an extent that they submit themselves to it willingly, even desirously.

As Haberman explains, although women are permitted to wear a four-cornered fringed garment despite their lack of obligation, the mainstream traditional halakhic sources from the sixteenth century onwards discourage them from performing this mitzvah, based on the argument of R. Jacob b. Moses Moellin (the Maharil, 1360?–1427) that women are "a different species of people" (*'am bifnei 'atzman*), and the 613 mitzvot do not apply to them (resp. *Maharil haḥadashot*, §7). Many sources, such as the Ashkenazi glosses of R. Moses Isserles (1525 or 1530–1572) on the *Shulḥan 'arukh*, the Code of Jewish Law, assert that it is hubris on women's part to perform this embodied ritual from which they are exempt (*Shulḥan arukh, Oraḥ ḥayim 17:2*); it is unbecoming of a woman, who should be silent and unseen.

Invoking and subverting the claim of the Maharil and its acceptance into mainstream Jewish Law, Haberman writes:

The unanticipated sight of fringed garments on women's bodies produces visual dissonance. Women-with-fringes function like the fringes themselves. Women of the Wall visually assert the authenticity of women's ritual performance, invoke awareness of all of the commandments from which women have been excluded, and exhort toward women's full participation as subjects in Jewish public life. The performance of the ritual of the fringes during women's prayer at the Western Wall is particularly symbolic.

But Haberman does not only critique the status quo. She provides us with an alternative to the patriarchal model represented by traditional Judaism. That model, she claims, is steeped in themes of death and bloodshed; sacrifice and martyrdom are lauded (as they are in all Western religions) in stories like those of Cain and Abel, the Binding of Isaac and Pinchas the Zealot; and war is often considered a holy endeavor (the biblical word for holy sacrifice comes from the same root—*k.r.v.*—as that for battle). In place of this destructive model, Haberman proposes a liberation-as-birth model based on the biblical Exodus story, infused with the universal human experience of birth. A constructive theological orientation that could make religion a liberating force for humanity, Haberman argues, must be grounded not in the blood of death and battling in war, but in the blood of birth and the notion of collaborating in Creation.

Haberman writes:

Birth is both a universal experience and a meaningful cultural sign—birth is not less part of the human predicament, not less worthy of formulating our worldview, values, policy, and behavior than death. Birth is a culmination of intense, sometimes ecstatic union, of protracted growth and incubation, and finally, of gripping and productive labor. Birth embodies human collaboration in bringing forth new life, new hope, from enclosed space into open expanse. Birth highlights human vulnerability and evokes caring. Flowing and congealing with blood, birth quivers at a dangerous threshold with death, while it aspires irrevocably to life, growth, and sustenance. As a formative human experience, birth is much more accessible than death—we can all experience birth as readily as any human event, as birthers, witnesses, accompanists, through accounts, through records. Birth has the potential to initiate and proliferate the priority of caring into society. Rather than the blood of life-taking, life-giving is the nucleus of this book.

At this point, the book leaves the subject of WOW and branches out into Haberman's personal liberation theology. It is unclear how WOW contributes to the proliferation of a birth-based model into our collective psyche, except that it is a group of women. Haberman writes that men are birthed and can witness birth, and they can even collaborate in birth, but, as we all know, they cannot give birth—just as they cannot participate in WOW. They can support WOW but they cannot be active participants, notwithstanding Haberman's clear redemptive vision of women invading men's spaces and men invading women's spaces.

As Haberman points out, WOW is uniquely made up of women from all denominations of Judaism, and because of its commitment to that principle of inclusion, its decisions are aimed at making all its participants, including those who do not believe in egalitarianism and mixed prayer, feel comfortable. But because of that commitment, men are excluded; and so, interestingly enough, Haberman's redemptive vision cannot be played out fully through WOW. This is a weak point of the book and of Haberman's use of WOW as the playing field for the enactment of her vision.

There are men who appreciate WOW's need for empowerment in a women-only space, but at some point, one would conclude from Haberman's liberation theology, the doors must be opened to men as well—so that the genders can mingle and be influenced by one another. But there are clearly women in the group who do not share Haberman's vision. Rather than working toward a fully egalitarian world, their goal is women's empowerment within a gender-segregated world. This is very different than Haberman's goal. As she writes:

This book proposes to configure both human and divine roles to share in creative liberation, to work collaboratively to liberate religion from its oppressor role, to redress discrimination and oppression fortified by religion. This liberation aims to improve our societies overall. When women and men share more fully in private

and public functions, children, men and women all stand to benefit from a more caring world. One of the first steps is appreciating and supporting the process of change within religious communities. Freed from both defensive and threatening postures that have ensconced gender oppression as an emblem of tradition, religious cultures have profound resources to contribute to contemporary society.

It is important to Haberman to maintain that she is working for change from within—but one wonders from “within” where she is working. She is clearly not Orthodox, although, through the cause of Women of the Wall, she is hoping to help empower Orthodox women and influence the Orthodox world toward more ritual participation by women. And while she does use halakhic texts, she cannot claim to be traditionally halakhic, for she feels empowered to make halakhic determinations that go against the mainstream halakhic community. Haberman’s felt insider status seems to rest on the fact that she has not given up on Judaism and organized religion altogether. Given her often radical feminist approaches, one wonders why she has not.

Haberman calls her Liberation-Birth paradigm a Jewish model. Liberation is clearly a Jewish theme. But birth is a Jewish theme only inasmuch as it is a human theme that no religion could possibly ignore (although Judaism does a pretty good job of ignoring it, as there are no traditional Jewish rituals around birth). Thus, Haberman turns to her own personal birthing stories in the relevant chapter, and this is a powerful part of the book—real, memorable and graphic (in accord with her understanding of Judaism as an embodied religion). But it is telling that, to make her point, she must turn to her own stories instead of to Jewish texts. The problem is precisely that Judaism does not embrace a birth-as-liberation theology. Haberman’s hope is that the Judaism of the future will be a religion whose focus is collaborative birth and egalitarian liberation rather than hierarchical order and exclusive holiness. Her goal is to wrest Judaism from those who attack WOW in the name of Torah and claim that their violent, misogynist, hateful behavior is an authentic expression of the core values of Judaism. But why, if, as she writes, religious systems perpetuate “ensconced gender oppression as an emblem of tradition,” must we continue to work within these patriarchal, hierarchical, power-controlled systems?

On religion’s importance, Haberman writes that it “interprets life and death, challenges and aspires to purpose, meaning, and, beyond language, to ineffable experience of the sacred,” and that it is “a master key to women’s public participation and leadership, and to the betterment of the human condition.” She thus presents religion as a potential redemptive force, but she admits that it is not currently acting as one. Therefore, she proposes breaking down the hierarchy from within. But this will be a long and difficult struggle—a reality to which WOW can testify after almost 25 years of progress and setbacks, gains and losses; and the struggle may not prove fruitful in the end. Nevertheless, Haberman’s vision of a progressive, peaceful and cooperative world is inspiring, and hopefully groups like WOW can make a difference—even if only as a first step toward reaching Haberman’s fully egalitarian vision for Judaism and the world.