

Book Review

Kornbluth, Sarah Tikvah and Doron Kornbluth, eds. *Jewish Women Speak about Jewish Matters*. Detroit: Targum/Feldheim, 2000.

Many modern Jewish women are confronted with a seemingly unsolvable dilemma: we want to relate passionately to our religion and culture, but serious and profound questions concerning "women's issues" keep us at bay, outsiders to our own heritage. The introduction to *Jewish Women Speak* asks, "...How much warmth and admiration can we (women) have for a tradition that doesn't respect us?" This new book re-inspires our identities as Jewish women, and make sense of the many things that preoccupy us.

Jewish Women Speak is an inspirational paperback by women for women. It presents an impressive collection of short essays on a myriad of Jewish subjects of particular interest to women. Amongst the many books dealing with women and Judaism, *Jewish Women Speak* is unique in its place within the framework of classical Judaism, arguing that Jewish women can indeed find womanhood without parting from the Jewish tradition.

Psychiatrist. Lisa Aiken encourages Jewish women to learn Torah: "In our generation, Jewish women have risen to the highest levels of secular knowledge and career advancement. We owe it to ourselves to take advantage of the unprecedented opportunities presently available to be Jewishly educated as well. History has shown that where there is no Jewish learning there are soon no Jews. Jewish women need to study Torah because it provides the knowledge and inspiration necessary to be caring and committed Jews."

Esther Shkop basks in the glory of powerful Biblical images of women and finds strong feminine voices therein: *I have forever held my peace, I have hushed and refrained Myself; now, like a birthing woman, I will cry out, panting and gasping at once.* (Isaiah 42:14) She comments: "The Malbim, in his commentary on this verse, differentiates between the words *eshom*, rapid, panting exhalations, and *eshaf*, which refers to gasping inhalations. In what might be the first description of the Lamaze method, the prophet transforms the allegorical meaning inherent in the image of the birthing woman. She is no longer seen as a victim of forces she cannot control; instead, she is rendered as the symbol of strength, of creative force."

Many of the essays are scholarly in nature, yet others are purely inspirational. A few re-examine stereotypes. For example, Elizabeth Kaufman, a veterinarian at Jerusalem's Biblical Zoo, who "became religious" in college, describes working women in the observant Jewish world: "For those of us who question unproven stereotypes, lets get something perfectly clear: Jewish women work. And they have always worked, whether as shopkeepers, teachers, or professionals, whether in Babylon, European shtetls, and twentieth-century America. And nowadays, like women all over the Western world, they work in every field. Some run their own businesses or are part of a larger corporation. Here in Israel one of my neighbors is a nuclear physicist. Another is a school principal. Several good friends are lawyers. One's a pediatrician. Two are successful artists. I'm a zoo veterinarian. Many of these professional women have been religious since birth; equally as many are newly returned to Orthodoxy. My point is, little is forbidden us.

We work in the fields we want. We have open choices. We can choose to work part-time or full-time. We can choose to stay at home with our children, and no one will pooh-pooh us because this, too, is a valued choice."

In a compassionate personal account (one of several in the book), Sara Rigler tells of her fifteen years involvement in eastern mysticism. She depicts a series of sexual scandals in the supposedly celibate Eastern religions: "After that, one guru after another fell like a game of dominos. Hardly a month went by without hearing of a new scandal involving, in the end, almost every major Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain teacher in America. The July 1985 issue of the *Yoga Journal* featured as its cover story, "Why Teachers Go Astray: Gurus, Sex, and Spirituality." It included an article on Sex Lives of the Gurus by Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield, who reported on a personal survey he had conducted: According to this survey, which includes information on fifty-four teachers, sexual relations form a part of the lives of thirty-nine of them.... Significantly, thirty-four of the thirty-nine teachers who are not celibate have had at least occasional sexual relationships with one or more students. I was devastated. Here I was straining every nerve and muscle to follow the ideal of celibacy, while the most highly regarded proponents of the path couldn't hack it themselves!" This propels her to discuss how modern women can find solace in Jewish mysticism.

One particularly outstanding section of *Jewish Women Speak* includes short essays on the Jewish Matriarchs, explaining how we can relate to their magnitude and put their teachings into practice. These essays are both decipherable and powerful, beckoning us to change for the better. A good example is that of Leah Kohn's moving essay on Sarah. After describing Sarah's greatness, Kohn writes: "Each time we use the physical for a higher purpose, we create in ourselves a dwelling place for God. In this way, physicality never becomes an end unto itself. Rather, for the Jew, this world remains a place where the mundane and routine present opportunities to connect to our Source. This task is a challenge, especially when taken on in the midst of a consumer society that overwhelms us with materialistic messages. As Jewish women, we have the potential to walk the path of Sarah, transforming and infusing meaning into every physical aspect of our existence, each in our own way, on our own time, step by step."

The appendix offers short biographies of great Jewish women, from the prophet Deborah in the Biblical period to 15th Century tycoon Donna Gracia Mendes and the somewhat forgotten 19th Century writer Grace Aguilar. Contributing to this impressive and thought-stimulating collection are female teachers of Jewish studies from the United States, Canada, South Africa, England, and Israel.

The editors of *Jewish Women Speak* fill a particular niche in the field of Women in Judaism. The work is especially suitable for young Jewish women who are uncertain of their Jewish identity. Though *Jewish Women Speak* does not address challenging areas, such as female rabbis and the agunah problem - it certainly could be a primary reader on the subject of Jewish womanhood: "In reality, Jewish women can feel completely connected to their womanhood without ignoring any of their tradition and completely connected to their tradition without denying any of their womanhood."

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