

Book Review

Levitt, Laura. *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Laura Levitt, in *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home*, uses her own life, feminist analysis and cultural studies to present an honest, challenging and different approach to re-evaluate what it means to be a Jewish woman in North America at the end of the twentieth century. Levitt recalls how the immigrant experience has constructed her identity through her parents and grandparents. She questions how and in what ways the past, home and the father (patriarchy) are reabsorbed into contemporary Jewish feminist identities to define ultimately her place within Judaism and within the North American feminist academic community.

Both the difficulty and the originality in Levitt's work arise from the questions she proposes as well as her ambivalent responses. The reader is not going to get easy answers but more of an invitation to re-examine one's own life in relation to the profound questions surrounding the heart of Judaism and issues of gender, emancipation and citizenship in contemporary America. Levitt takes us on a journey through feminist theory, Jewish texts, rabbinic traditions, cultural customs, social institutions, expectations and desires to document this struggle.

Levitt begins with the two questions: What was given up in order to participate in American life? What price did emancipation and inclusion into American life cost the Jewish people? She argues that our struggle for liberation must now contain a critical examination and interrogation of the American ideal of liberalism and our loyalties to it.

For Levitt, "liberalism" seems to be an insidious concept, a seductive monolithic force that maintains a precarious status quo. Further, her concept of "liberalism" is the central premise on which she re-evaluates and explores how Jewish women are "trapped" within their own imagination. Problematically, however, Levitt never fully defines her own concept of "liberalism". Instead, the reader is left to rationalise how this defining "force" alters Jewish reality in North America, ultimately, without Levitt's guidance. Nevertheless, she believes that the images and ideas of liberalism prevent us from constructing and fathoming other possibilities and ways of being, and most importantly, from seeing the limitations and contradictions contained within the discourse of liberalism.

Interestingly, Levitt focuses heavily on the connection between "colonialism" (also undefined) and "liberalism", claiming both liberalism and colonialism include a series of material and discursive cultural configurations of power. For Levitt, these issues are pertinent to any discussion of Jewish identity in North America. Again, such exploration of liberalism and colonialism are never fully realised; however, it is clear that Levitt intends that the notions of both colonialism and liberalism carry with them an ambivalent at best and false at worst, promise of emancipation for Jews in North America.

Levitt uses a number of different examples of the Jewish experience to discuss how Jewish women's identity has been posited in North America today. One such issue is marriage and the Jewish woman. Levitt argues that through the *ketubbah* (the marriage contract) Jewish men

exercise power over Jewish women. The *ketubbah* represents an asymmetrical heterosexual relationship as the one and only sanctioned version of marriage carrying both religious and communal authority. Levitt argues that the *ketubbah* is a contract between the man and the community with no room for a woman's active participation. Issues of rape, sex, desire and especially agency (consent in the case of the *ketubbah*) in talmudic texts are discussed. She insists that the traditional view of sexual relations continue to define Jewish women despite liberalistic attempts to rewrite the *ketubbah* in more egalitarian terms.

Levitt also questions her place as a Jewish woman within feminist studies asking whether feminist study is a place where she can claim a Jewish feminist position and if the academic field of feminist studies is a place for her to engage in this kind of critical practice. She also asks if her work can be included in this field and is this feminist vision of an academic home open to her as a Jew?

To answer those questions she considers the work of Evelyn Beck's, "The Politics of Jewish Invisibility," (*NWSA Journal* 1:1,1988) and Nancy Miller's, "Dreaming, Dancing and the Changing Locations of Feminist Criticism," (in *Getting Personal*, New York: Routledge, 1991), as well as her own experience. Levitt argues that two themes stand out – the difficulties of writing on behalf of "others" or writing as "something" (in this case a Jew); and the inclusion/exclusion of Jewish feminist writings and issues within the academy.

Although Levitt explores many examples of Jewish institutionalisation and "colonialisation" both in North America and France, she always returns to the issue of liberalism. It appears that her main thesis is to demonstrate that she can only voice her "Jewishness" as a letting go of the desire for identification and sameness, which is painful as well as liberating - a letting go of the *myth* of liberalism. She confronts her own disappointment in not being just like the others – what she imagined as a communal desire for a liberal feminism:

"...this is how I began to reimagine my relationship to liberalism as partial. I wanted an emancipatory vision, but I also came to realize that the universal, inclusive claims of liberalism's vision were not quite what I had imagined them to be. By realizing that I was almost, but not quite able to be just like Pratt, I began to let go of liberalism's demand for a universal sameness as a basis of liberation." (128)

To conclude, Levitt follows Irena Klepfisz's poem *Bashert*, to further represent the place of home in America for Jews:

"America is not my chosen home, not even the place of my birth. Just a spot where it seemed safe to go to escape certain dangers. But safety, I discover, is only temporary. No place guarantees it to anyone forever. I have stayed because there is no other place to go." (151)

Although Levitt has been able to understand the disappointments in the American dream and has been able to let go of some of the excesses in her immigrant Jewish family's dreams of America as a promised land (the uncritical worship of America by Jewish immigrants), the ambivalence

however remains. It seems that liberalism, rabbinic Judaism, Jewish liberal theology and feminist study have their limitations and all fall somewhat short of their promises of liberation.

Levitt's search for home and identity shifts and moves throughout the book and she concludes on an optimistic note for the continuing journey:

"I have learned that, although nothing is permanent, traces of the past remain with us as part of a shifting vision. It is this partial, ironically still immigrant vision of home that I embrace as I journey out into an uncertain future." (164)

Although optimistic, Levitt's personal exploration does not reflect her academic one. Her ambivalence and longing for answers are perhaps entwined with the awkwardness of her definitions. Without a rigorous attention to the historical and political notions of "liberalism" and "colonialism", Levitt does not have a solid narrative, which illustrates the Jewish evolution from the margins to the illusion of the central. Then again, as a Jewish woman, I understand my own capacity to slip in between the words of the pedagogy in the secret and unspoken hope I can be accepted as a North American non-Jew; Levitt attempts to disrupt my own dreams of acceptance.

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