

Review of Bonna Devora Haberman, *Israeli Feminism Liberating Judaism: Blood and Ink*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2012, ix + 251 pp., ISBN 978-0-7391-6785-4

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The Women of the Wall (WOW), an organisation of Jewish women who meet monthly to pray together at the Kotel (Western Wall) in Jerusalem, celebrated their 25th anniversary in November 2013. In this book, Bonna Devora Haberman, a founder of the group, presents a 'theology of liberation' woven from, among other sources, the group's experiences and commentary on biblical and rabbinic texts. She argues that Judaism has been distorted by a sexism that limits women's religious expression; only when women understand their religious liberation as a process akin to birthing will it escape. She holds that the problem is particularly egregious in the State of Israel, where a state rabbinate dominated by the ultra-Orthodox maintains control of religious sites, including the Kotel.

Since 1998, WOW has gathered for prayer at the Kotel at the start of every new month in the Jewish calendar (*Rosh Hodesh*). The Kotel, the one wall remaining from the ancient Jerusalem Temple, is considered by Jews to be a holy site and its administration falls under the aegis of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The area nearest the wall is divided into two sections, one for men and one for women. While it is quite common to see men praying aloud as a *minyan* (quorum for public prayer), women pray individually and quietly. WOW disrupts these norms with prayer that is not only communal but joyful and loud.

Haberman holds a PhD in Ethics and Education from the University of London. Her career has been defined by both academic work and political and religious activism. Here she writes with a bold, authoritative voice, which makes clear that, though it is steeped in research, this book is foremost a work of advocacy. In the first chapter, she proclaims the problems women face in contemporary Western society. From there, the book does not proceed in a particularly linear fashion, and so in the summaries that follow, I discuss the chapters by theme.

In Chapters 2 and 4–6, Haberman describes the verbal and physical harassment WOW members have faced from ultra-Orthodox men and women at the Kotel. These protestors are angered by members of WOW wearing *tallitot* (prayer shawls usually worn by men); by the sound of their voices in prayer; by their possession of a Torah scroll; and more generally by their violation of *minhag ha-makom*, the custom of the place. The question that runs through all of these issues is whether the legal guarantee of religious freedom requires the state to protect WOW from the harassment of other Jews who feel that what they are doing is not proper. Or, on the flipside, should the State defend the religious sensibilities of the ultra-Orthodox by prohibiting the women from praying at the Kotel where they can be seen and heard by others?

Haberman recounts the legal cases that have addressed these questions, showing that the secular Israeli court system has repeatedly accepted claims made in the name of Orthodox tradition. (And, I do want to note, this story has continued since the book's publication, becoming particularly heated in 2013.) She also reviews these claims, arguing in each case that what is defended is but one reading of the relevant biblical or rabbinic sources; other readings support WOW's position. As Haberman writes, 'the practice of discrimination on the basis of sex, unacceptable and illegal under any other aegis, is accepted on the grounds of tolerance and respect for religious views, and on account of political coalition bargaining' (2012: 107).

Haberman recognises that when WOW meet to pray, their prayers are a form of political activism. In this vein, she writes that '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 religious life' (2012: 93). Comments like these make the sarcasm she sometimes uses in describing ultra-Orthodox Jews inappropriate, as when she writes that 'evidently, the specter of women attired in the garments of Jewish prayer alarms and threatens' (*ibid.*).

In Chapter 3, Haberman briefly discusses Catholic liberation theology and feminist theory, and she introduces themes that will be central to her own liberation theology including exodus, eros, and the relationship between writing, reading, and action.

In Chapter 7, Haberman turns her lens onto conflict among the members of WOW. For most of the organisation's existence, WOW considered itself to constitute a 'prayer group' but not a *minyan*. This decision was made in deference to more Orthodox members who held that only men may be counted toward the quorum of ten Jews required for public prayer. As a result, in these years the members of WOW did not recite any prayers that required the presence of *minyan*. Haberman discusses the biblical sources cited as reasons why a *minyan* must have ten men; she emphasises how in each case – the ten sons of Jacob are one example – the men in question are not particularly admirable. Nevertheless, a *minyan* is the standard for public Jewish prayer, and Haberman describes how she grew to resent the limitations that WOW took upon themselves in refusing to consider themselves a *minyan*.

In Chapter 11, Haberman describes the group's decision to pray as a *minyan* in 2011, writing that 'in our hearts, some of us feel a liberation pulse.' This is supported by Chapter 10, where Haberman offers an unusual reading of the

biblical Song at the Sea (Exodus 15) and Miriam's role in the prayer there as an alternative model for public prayer.

In Chapter 8, Haberman develops her argument for using birth as a metaphor for liberation by retelling the story of the Israelite exodus from Egypt with a focus on commentaries that credit the Israelite women with ensuring that children are conceived and born despite the oppression of enslavement. This is coupled with Chapter 9, in which she recalls the births of her children, presenting labour as a difficult but spiritually fulfilling experience. While Haberman does not clearly state the relationship between these accounts and the work of WOW, there is a tacit acknowledgement that before it can serve as a positive, empowering metaphor for liberation, most readers will need to revisit their attitudes toward birthing itself.

Blood and Ink is at its best when Haberman presents readings of biblical and rabbinic texts. Ultimately, I would describe Haberman's work as an example of what Tamar Ross calls for in *Expanding the Palace of Torah*: a re-telling of Jewish narratives by the women who are enmeshed most deeply in the tensions that pull at the tradition today. Ross contends that such women provide the most authentic voices for change.

I am also troubled by Haberman's tendency to present Judaism as a stable entity that has been corrupted by sexism, as in the book's subtitle, 'Israeli Feminism Liberating Judaism.' A more polythetic definition of Judaism would have complicated her presentation but in ways that I think would have been quite helpful. Despite these critiques, the book is well worth reading as a provocative account of one woman's pursuit of spiritual expression and dignity within the terms of her tradition. Particularly if framed in Ross's terms, *Blood and Ink* is a powerful primary source that would make for an appropriate reading assignment in courses on religion and feminism.