

Roni Bar lev

Shalem College, Israel

## “Winds of Feminism in Early Chasidism”

The birth of the Chasidic movement, which was established over two hundred years ago in Eastern Europe in the wake of its founder Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, was without doubt a tremendous historical event in the history of Judaism. Novel intellectual and social movements such as Socialism and Humanism would later tie themselves to the image of the Chasidic movement, and some even saw Chasidism as a forerunner to Zionism.

Shmuel Horodezky, an early twentieth century scholar of Chasidic studies, claimed that a hidden feminist revolution took place within Chasidism that brought equal opportunity to Chasidic women and opened new avenues for them in social and religious life. This opinion held as an academic consensus for decades until it was rejected at the close of the century by Ada Rapoport-Albert, who reopened the issue for further inquiry.

In this lecture, I hope to analyze the issue of “Chasidic Feminism” as an extraordinary religious phenomenon that integrates conservative religiosity side by side with a groundbreaking radical new spirituality. Complementing the existing discussion around this issue, I want to propose a novel perspective on women’s participation in Chasidism. I will argue that the crux of its novelty does not relate to the status of women in Chasidism,

but rather to the very introduction of femininity as a catalyst for religious upheaval. In line with the feminist readings of thinkers such as Carol Gilligan, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous, I intend to show how elementary feminine elements within human culture were used by Chasidic thinkers to redesign their spiritual and religious worldview.

Lawrence Baron

San Diego State University

“The Pioneering American Jewish Women Directors: From Elaine May to Claudia Weill”

Although women have always been involved in the production of American films as actresses and screenwriters, their entry into the ranks of directors was belated. The ferment of the 1960s, the decline of the Hollywood studio system, the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the rise of second generation feminism, and the development of ethnic identity politics as an alternative to the Melting Pot paradigm for American society—all of these paved the way for the emergence of significant Jewish women directors in the 1970s who imbued their films with a Jewish and/or feminist perspective.

This presentation profiles the directorial debuts of Elaine May (*The Heartbreak Kid*, 1972) Joan Micklin-Silver (*Hester Street*, 1975), and Claudia Weil (*Girlfriends*, 1978) and the institutional sexism they had to overcome to direct films that were either produced or distributed by major Hollywood studios. It analyzes how their depictions of Jewish women and

men challenged the gender stereotypes of such characters in mainstream American movies.

Emmanuel Bloch

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

“The Halachic Dress Codes for Women: Sources and Significance”

*Tsniut* [Modesty] is a popular theme in contemporary Jewish religious discourse. However, a significant novelty lies in the recent emergence of popular halachic guides that for the first time understand *Tsniut* as a form of dress code for women. As of today, dozens of such books have been published, mostly in Hebrew and English, but also in other languages such as French and Yiddish. In effect, we are witnesses to the creation of nothing short of a new halachic genre, which has been so far insufficiently addressed by the scholars active in corresponding fields.

This paper will address this new phenomenon by focusing initially on its legal sources. One such source is the ancient prohibition against praying in the presence of *Ervah* [nakedness]. This paper will show that the prohibition underwent significant evolutions in Talmudic times, which then served as a springboard for considerable rabbinic creativity across the centuries. This accumulated body of legal reasoning eventually provided some of the building blocks necessary for crafting the first halachic dress codes.

The paper will then introduce two of the contemporary “discourses of Modesty” that emerge as a result of this modern conceptualization of traditional *Tsniut* as a set of bottom-line norms.

Matthew Brittingham

Emory University

“Jewish Women and a Changing America in A. D. Oguz’s *Di fraydenker* (1922)”

In *Gender and Assimilation*, Paula Hyman showed how a number of immigrant male Jewish writers projected their fears and dreams about assimilation, acculturation, and social change onto immigrant Jewish women. The popular Yiddish writer A.D. Oguz performed just such projections when he wrote his romance novel and family drama, *Di fraydenker* [*The Freethinker*], serialized in *Der Morgen zshurnal* in 1922.

In this post-WWI novel Oguz focuses on three immigrant families--a family of freethinkers of Jewish origin (“assimilationists”), a family of devout Orthodox Jews, and a family of German Antisemites. When the children in these families begin to fall in love, the contrasting family ideologies expose how they impact the women of the novel in terms of morality and honor. Oguz uses the family impacts of religion and free thought to in fact have a wider conversation about the future of Jewish identity and Judaism in America.

I will use *Di fraydenker* to show how Yiddish writers like Oguz both maintained and reframed gender stereotypes during a time of uncertainty in

American Jewish life. They interpreted the American and American Jewish environment to be fundamentally changing in the post-WWI era—Jewish freethinkers were on the decline and religion was on the rise in America.

Jay Caballero

University of Texas at Austin

“An Ironic, Subversively Feminist Reading of the Daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 27 and 36”

Two interpretations regarding the pericopes on the daughters of Zelophehad predominate, one focusing on chapter 27 and the other on chapter 36. Those scholars who concentrate on chapter 27 view it as an etiological story to explain the female names attached to certain clan districts in Manasseh. The (mostly feminist) scholars who discuss chapter 36 give attention to male kin members' effort to restrict the marriage options of the daughters.

This paper will propose that the priestly author might have intended these two stories to be read as ironic commentary on male leadership in Israel. The key to such is that the author does expect his readers to know that the clan districts are associated with the daughters. Thus, he is playing with the impression that the male relatives of the daughters of Zelophehad attempted to curtail the daughters' land acquisition and use, but that the daughters' obedience to God's and Moses' instructions resulted in their names being associated with large swaths of land, whereas the names of their male relatives were lost to history. This results in a new feminist reading that ironically subverts both the intent of the males in the story but also the standard feminist readings.

Jeannette Gabriel

University of Nebraska at Omaha

“Locking Up Al Levy: Jewish Masculinity in the Early Civil Rights Movement”

Building on Sarah Imhoff’s call for greater focus on masculinity within Jewish gender studies (*Jewish Social Studies*, 2019), this paper examines the complex relationships between Jewish masculinity, sexuality and civil rights. Imhoff contends that employing a feminist analysis and gendered critique that centralizes issues of power may result in reassessments of Jewish history and culture. This paper takes up Imhoff’s call to consider how challenges to Jewish masculinity impacted Jewish involvement in the early civil rights movement. It examines why a Jewish World War II soldier, Al Levy, was targeted after raising concerns about the treatment of African-American soldiers at Lincoln Airbase in 1943.

His involvement in an entrapment case concluded in his being court martialed and sentenced to four months’ hard labor for behavior unbecoming a soldier. Levy’s case was nationally publicized by labor and Jewish communities. Critically examining how entrapment both challenged and strengthened concepts of Jewish masculinity, this paper more broadly considers how antisemitic home front experiences contributed to the Jewish community’s involvement in the early civil rights movement.

Joel Gereboff

Arizona State University

“Gendering Emotions in Genesis Rabbah”

Western philosophical and cultural traditions have often depicted males as having a capacity for rational behavior while asserting females are inherently emotional. The consequences of this claim have been manifold, manifesting in patterns of gendered social relationships and roles. The book of Genesis in both overt use of emotion terms such as anger, envy, and fear, as well as in its narratives that present what can be classified as “emotional scripts,” describes various individuals and their interactions as shaped by emotions. The large rabbinic midrash, Genesis Rabbah, dating from approximately the early fifth century CE, offers a verse by verse (selective) commentary on this biblical book. It often augments biblical texts by filling in background information about motivations and character traits.

In my paper I will examine how the various midrashic statements in Genesis Rabbah comment upon the biblical texts, noting in particular both its observations on those biblical passages that include emotion terms as well as its addition of emotions as factors contributing to the actions described in the Bible. I will explore whether there are patterns in terms of the gender of the characters to these exegetical comments. For example, are certain emotions more commonly associated with female characters than with males? Are male characters criticized for exhibiting certain emotions,

while it is taken for granted that females routinely are subject to such emotions?

This paper forms part of my ongoing research on emotions in Judaism, with special attention to classical rabbinic sources. In previous papers I have analyzed specific emotions as they appear in rabbinic texts, noting the documents in which those texts are located. In this paper I intend to adopt a documentary approach and to explore whether there is a consistent message within Genesis Rabbah. In the course of my research I will compare how other rabbinic sources comment upon the biblical passages discussed in Genesis Rabbah.

- David Gillota
- University of Wisconsin, Platteville
- “Schlemiel Feminism: Jewish Humor and Activism on *Broad City*”

- The *schlemiel*—loosely defined as one who consistently brings about his or her own failure—is an important figure in Jewish culture and Jewish humor. Numerous scholars have explored the ways in which luckless schlemiel characters (such as those portrayed by Woody Allen or Larry David) question the status quo and challenge traditional masculinity. Nearly every famous schlemiel character, however, has been male.

- Recently, though, we are seeing female comedians utilize the schlemiel figure to explore contemporary Jewish femininity. The most important iteration of this trend occurs on the Comedy Central series *Broad City* about the comic misadventures of two friends—Abbi and Ilana—in New York. Both women identify as Jewish and as feminists, and they are often activists for progressive causes. As schlemiels, though, they often fail to live up to their feminist ideals, or they find their progressive activism to be futile. This presentation will

situate *Broad City* within the traditions of Jewish humor and Jewish activism and will illustrate how the series embraces a progressive, feminist ideology even as it satirizes its characters for their comic failures. The result of such humor can be deemed a “schlemiel feminism.”

Joseph R. Hodes

Texas Tech University

### “Golda Meir and the Struggle for Gender Equality in Israel”

While Zionism, with the creation of the State of Israel, ideologically claimed to offer gender equality, Golda Meir broke glass ceiling after glass ceiling to actualize that vision. Israel was, and remains, a chauvinistic nation. One need only look to the Hebrew word *baal*, which means both husband and owner, to illustrate this point. The male founders of the nation were pragmatic people living through a brutal, post Holocaust existence, and they had no energy for ideals.

If women wanted equality, they would have to take it. Golda Meir seized it, opening the doors toward a more gender equal society, constructing a vision to serve all Israelis. In 1923, she gave a Labor party speech strategically placing herself at the center of the party and, in an otherwise all-male political leadership, positioned herself as a powerful orator. In the first Knesset, she was the only female among twelve other ministers to form the government. That government, with 46 out of 100 seats, had a mandate for a progressive agenda, and Golda wasted no time creating one.

As minister of labor, she created labor rights that still stand. Many Israelis feel they have labor rights granted by the state, not realizing those rights were largely created by Golda Meir. She became the first female

minister of foreign affairs in the Western world, and in 1969 she became the first and, until now, only female Prime Minister. This paper will discuss how Golda Meir, through immense struggle, not only positioned herself as politically equal to men, creating a more gender equal society, but also became the leader of men, paving the way for women to play leadership roles in Israel, turning Zionist ideals into reality.

Mara W. Cohen Ioannides

Missouri State University

“Jewish Homesteader Memoir: A Woman's Story”

With the resurgence of the study of Middle America, the overlooked experience of homesteading Jews must be examined. Homesteading was not exclusively a gentile experience. While few Jews were farmers, their experiences are vital to the understanding of the American Jewish experience. There are few published Jewish memoirs, fewer still by women, and even fewer still of the homesteading experience.

Jewish homesteading memoirs are almost exclusively by women. The list is short: *Rachel Calof's Story* by Rachel Calof, *Dakota Diaspora* by Sophie Trupin, "Memories of Yesterday" by Kate Herder, and "North Dakota Memoires" by Henry and Lea Fine.

This paper will examine these published memoirs to see what it is that they teach us about the roles of men and women in the Jewish American hinterland. How Jewish farmers, men and women, maintained Jewish traditions about gender. And how and when those gender roles were broken. This in turn can inform us about the Americanization process of American Jews in the Midwest.

Hannah Kehat

Givat Washington Academic College, Israel

“The Gender Revolution and Judaism as a Choice”

In 1998, I founded "Kollech," the Israeli religious feminist movement, which was followed by Israeli religious LGBT organizations. The encounter between the Jewish patriarchal tradition of thousands of years and changes in gender perception created complex challenges: theological and halachic challenges that indicate the gender bias of the Bible and the halachic authorities throughout the ages, communal challenges of changing the character of the social structure from a hierarchical structure to a flat, egalitarian structure, and cultural challenges of changes in discourse and customs toward an equality and containment culture. Indeed, there has been fierce, sometimes hysterical opposition by the religious establishment and the ultra-Orthodox community to feminism and to the LGBT revolution.

Nevertheless, I would argue that this revolution, which Jewish women led since Sarah Schenirer and which continues today among Jewish different groups, reveals a process of re-choosing Jewish identity: being Jewish despite these difficult conflicts. Instead of religious abandonment, we see a supreme effort to reintegrate into it and to reinterpret traditional and halachic Judaism, which will contain the new identities and the new halachic requirements.

Thus, this revolution reflects a necessary historical trend for Judaism—from a heterodox patriarchal religion to a religion of autonomous choice.

Gail Labovitz

American Jewish University

“*Poskot* in the Palace of Torah: A Preliminary Study of Orthodox Feminism and Halakhic Process”

Several years ago, I wrote an article that considered Rachel Adler’s work on marriage in *Engendering Judaism* as a possible model for what a feminist halachic process might look like. This paper will constitute a companion piece, analyzing--through the lens of feminist legal theory/ies—a selection of works by (self-defined) Orthodox women who are working on halachic analysis, theory, and *p’sak* [legal analysis] , in order to develop some preliminary inferences as to if and how their writings might chart a(nother) course toward conceptualizing and enacting a feminist halachic process.

This entails consideration of questions such as: what constraints on their interpretive methods do these women feel obliged to abide by? What sources can be or can’t be invoked as authoritative? Do the methods of their halachic inquiries—or the outcome or both—differ from those found in *p’sak* by male authorities? And what defines a process and/or outcome as feminist in their understanding? Likely sources will include books and

articles by Ronit Irshai and Tamar Ross, the articles in the volume *Jewish Legal Writings by Women*, and Hebrew responsa by Rabbanit Idit Bartov and Rabbanit Anat Novoselsky.

Susan Marks

New College of Florida

### “Constructing Gender Bride By Bride”

“By three means is the woman acquired . . . .” So begins the Mishnah on betrothals. Many have called attention to the way such an act of acquisition defines gender in the rabbinic period. But seen in light of the larger project of this Mishnah, we learn that this is just the tip of the iceberg. This paper argues, based on parallels to Roman betrothal law, that the rabbis concerned themselves not with acquiring, but “acquiring correctly.” Often misidentified as about betrothal ritual, this mishnaic tractate instead describes an examination of all betrothals after-the-fact, bride by bride, action by action, to judge their acceptability.

The Mishnah’s policing includes consideration of betrothals of those descending from priestly lines, building upon earlier ideas of Levitical purity. The framing of these concerns echoes Roman fixation on the purity and coherence of the body of Roman citizens, thus revealing the shared goals of shaping of status, gender roles, and property. By establishing the need to determine licit unions, the rabbis of *m. Qiddushin* present a vision of acceptable gender roles and a holy Israel to which an unacceptable partner must not be joined, all the while establishing themselves capable of such scrutiny.



Samantha Pickette

Boston University

“‘When You’re a Funny Girl’: Confirming and Complicating Accepted Cultural Images of Jewish Femininity in the Films of Barbra Streisand”

During the height of her film career, Barbra Streisand’s depiction of Jewish female identity deviated from the cultural stereotypes that existed at the time. Without subscribing to the archetype of the spoiled Jewish-American Princess or the lackluster Jewish Ugly Duckling, Streisand subverted the categorization of Jewish women as entitled, unattractive, and uninteresting.

Her protagonists were unmistakably the heroines of their own stories, proud of being Jewish, outspoken about their desires, and determined to accomplish their goals. Yet, despite the transgressive nature of Streisand’s female protagonists, her films are ultimately conservative, considering that each protagonist is punished for her inability to conform to expectations and subsequently loses “the love of her life.”

This paper explores four of Streisand’s films—*Funny Girl* (1968), *The Way We Were* (1973), *A Star is Born* (1976), and *Yentl* (1983)—and analyzes each in terms of this dichotomy between articulating transgressive images of Jewish femininity and undercutting the power of these Jewish women by upholding classical romantic genre conventions. Therefore,

Streisand's films both challenge and uphold traditional cultural images of Jewish women and reflect the ambivalence of female-driven narratives of this time period that sought to work within the very paradigm they were attempting to deconstruct.

Cynthia Shafer-Elliott

Jessup University

"The Heroines of Every Day life: Ancient Israelite Women in Context."

The average ancient Israelite woman is often ignored within the Hebrew Bible, unless she plays a specific role within the narrative. Archaeology, however, helps us to see the women of the text more clearly.

This paper will illustrate how archaeology in general, and household and gender archaeologies in particular, provide a glimpse into the daily lives of average women in Iron Age Israel (ca. 1200-586 BCE); furthermore, how the physical reality of an ancient Israelite woman can help us to hear her voice within the text will also be explored.

Margaret Gurewitz Smith

Bellevue University

“‘Male and Female, a Single Mystery’: Sex and Gender in the Zohar”

Studies often approach the *Zohar*, medieval Kabbalah’s chief text, via intellectual and exegetical history, searching for what it might reveal about the evolution of cosmogony and mysticism in the Jewish experience.

Focusing on the *Zohar* as an esoteric work, however, risks overlooking the real-world communities that created and studied it.

I propose an examination of the *Zohar* that explores its implications about sex and gender, topics of daily importance for the Jewish communities that utilized it. The *Zohar*’s author, Moses de Leon, wrote it in late thirteenth century Iberia, and its approach to sex and gender reflects that context. The *Zohar*’s treatment of the matriarchs, for example, mirrors standard approaches to gender in medieval Jewish society.

Both the *Zohar* and medieval Jewish society (as reflected in responsa and legal petitions) approved of sex and sexuality, while nevertheless constructing passive and minor roles for the women engaged in those relations. These parallel approaches to sex and gender illuminate that the *Zohar* was not only a work concerned with mystical yearnings, but also a

text firmly rooted in the concerns of those living in the earthy environment  
that anchored it.