

Danya Ruttenberg, ed.. *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*. New York: New York University Press, 2009. ix + 294 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8147-7605-6.



Reviewed by Evyatar Marienberg

Published on H-Judaic (January, 2011)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism is a delightful book. As with any publication comprised of articles by various authors, not all parts can be honestly considered of equal importance or quality by any reader. Nevertheless, the writer of this review—who considers himself more or less conversant in the study of Judaism and sexuality (and who, by the way, does not know the volume’s editor or the vast majority of contributors)—found the majority of the contributions to be, on his subjective scale, between good and superb.

The short introduction by Ruttenberg is a nice piece by itself. It shows clearly her intention to avoid producing yet another one-sided book on sexuality in Judaism, in which Jewish stance on the matter is presented as simple and, not surprisingly, positive. That is appreciated; the one kitschy *Kosher Sex* Amazon sells is more than enough. “Are Jewish attitudes about sex enlightened or problematic?” asks Ruttenberg. “Both of course, and neither.... Jewish sexuality is nothing if not complex” (p. 2). The vast majority of the eighteen

articles assembled in her volume express the same balanced opinion.

Sarra Lev’s article “Sotah: Rabbinic Pornography?” is a remarkable analysis of the rabbinical description of the ritual performed on a woman suspected of unfaithfulness to her husband. Although Lev hints at the fact, and scholars such as Ishay Rosen-Zvi showed, that this ritual is probably an imaginary construct of the rabbis (using an actual biblical text), for readers of the Mishnah for close to two millennia, the ritual was very real. Lev, using fascinating insights from studies of pornography, forcefully shows that the text is a sad example of a literary pornographic description of an imaginary public rape—not less—produced by men for consumption by men. Reading this Mishnaic text was never easy for me or, I imagine, for most readers. After reading Lev’s chapter, I know why.

Judith R. Baskin’s “Prostitution: Not a Job for a Nice Jewish Girl” is a useful and interesting exploration of the issue of prostitution in the Bible and

in rabbinic literature. It is followed by a chapter by Bonna Devora Haberman entitled “Divorcing Ba’al: The Sex of Ownership in Jewish Marriage.” Haberman attempts to discuss in twenty pages and eight footnotes--and with a very strong agenda--everything about marriage and divorce in Judaism. Personally, I did not find this chapter convincing.

Aryeh Cohen’s piece, “The Sage and the Other Woman: A Rabbinic Tragedy,” sounds much like a carefully constructed poetic, oral presentation. Cohen analyzes a story that, for students of Talmud, is well known: It is about a woman who came to the sages to protest the death of her learned husband, and the explanation she is given is that his death is somehow related to lack in observance of rabbinic laws related to menstruation. Other than one questionable interpretation--which argues that the woman’s statement regarding her husband not thinking of “anything else” while being with her in bed, is referring to him not thinking of Torah (p. 62)--Cohen’s discussion of the story, its various versions, and its interpretations in the Middle Ages, is a beautiful and rich piece.

Esther Fuchs’s article, “Intermarriage, Gender, and Nation in the Hebrew Bible,” deals with exactly that. It is an enlightening study of biblical texts, mostly from the Pentateuch and the Book of Esther, using a serious theoretical framework.

Melanie Malka Landau’s “Good Sex: A Jewish Feminist Perspective” is another very fine contribution, an effort to define what is “good sex” from an ethical perspective, using a fascinating analysis of a Talmudic story in TB Menahot 44a. I imagine that any young yeshiva boy knows this story, even if his rabbis do not show it to him. (I certainly knew it. For years, I wore *tzitzit* mostly because of this story. Why? Check the text.) The story is about one scholar’s surprising encounter with a kind of “elite prostitute” whom he later marries. Leaving aside one unfortunate quote--that typical and unsubstantiated orthodox cliché about the

benefits of keeping the laws of menstrual impurity for the couple’s intimacy (p. 101)--Landau’s use of the sources and her arguments are well established. “Although ‘good sex,’ traditionally, is any sex within the prescribed framework, this essay argues that ‘good sex’ also encompasses a deep recognition of humanity” (pp. 96–97).

Naomi Seidman’s “The Erotics of Sexual Segregation” uses both theory and Seidman’s personal experience to explore the fact that “the traditional world offered a wide range of same-sex environments, each with its distinctive patterns of interaction.... [C]onservative Orthodox communities, with their complex homosocial structures, satisfy one particular aspect of feminist desire--what was referred to, in an earlier time, as ‘sisterhood’” (pp. 111, 114). Seidman argues convincingly that this fact might play a role in the surprising attractiveness of traditional frameworks for people, particularly women, who cannot otherwise be easily described as traditional.

Haviva Ner-David contributed a chapter entitled “Reclaiming Nidah and Mikveh through Ideological and Practical Reinterpretation.” It is an interesting piece that mixes historical study, theology, ideology, and law. Ner-David describes--bluntly, at times--the way she and her husband deal with the laws of menstrual impurity. Her attempts to relate her cycle to certain psychological states, thus justifying different behavior in different moments, are interesting and might convince some. I still wonder, for example, how Ner-David might explain why a woman who does not have a period (due to pregnancy, menopause, a medical condition, or certain contraceptive pills), but who may still have different psychological states at different moments, will suddenly not need these rules.

Wendy Love Anderson’s “The Goy of Sex: A Short Historical Tour of Relations between Jews and Non-Jews” is a delightful chapter. One can only hope that the author will fulfill her plan to “someday to publish a book-length history of Jewish intermarriage” (p. 277). This well-arranged

and well-written summary of the issue might become an outline for such a book.

Elliot N. Dorff's "A Jewish Perspective on Birth Control and Procreation" is important, although it has some claims that are (how to say it?) problematic. For example, to say that "the Rabbis were again remarkable in recognizing and prohibiting marital rape, a feature of American law in most states only since the early 1990s" (p. 154) is a reminder of the tiresome "Jews do it better" mantra. Comparing a system in which women who suffer from violence could, at least in theory, request divorce with a system in which women still cannot initiate divorce--and then favoring the latter, at the very least, is questionable. Moreover, Dorff's article or parts of it seem to have been written a long time ago. For example, the recommendation that partners should provide "full disclosure of each partner's sexual history from 1980 to the present to identify whether a previous partner may have been infected with the HIV virus" (p. 157) makes little sense in 2009. The suggestion that Hillel houses on campuses distribute condoms is "so nineties!" It might even cause, I am afraid, a counterattack from CVS and Rite Aid. Suddenly, they might start to offer their own versions of Kabbalat Shabbat services as reprisal. Dorff's past and present contributions to the understanding of sexuality in the Conservative movement are of high significance, and a more updated article would have been more appropriate to this groundbreaking collection.

The remarkable chapter by Sara N. S. Meirowitz, "Not Like a Virgin: Talking about Non-marital Sex," touches on a topic crucial to many observant young Jewish men and women. If I could, I would make this chapter obligatory reading for any person who deals with such issues personally or as an advisor to others. Rebecca T. Alpert's "Reconsidering Solitary Sex from a Jewish Perspective" is a delightful and shameless exploration of what is probably the most common sexual activity, which Alpert reminds us has many

names. "I'll spare you the list," she says, "but you can look it up" (p. 182). Elliot Rose Kukla's "'Created by the Hand of Heaven': Sex, Love, and the Androgynos," is another remarkable, solid piece in this volume. It offers a glimpse of light into rabbinic texts: "They do not argue for sex and gender liberation, as some of us might wish that they had. But they also never question whether gender diversity really exists, or whether gender-nonconforming people should be included in romantic and social life" (p. 200).

The editor, Danya Ruttenberg, also contributed an article. Her "Toward a New *Tzniut*," reminds us that the term *Tzniut* (modesty) in today's Orthodox context "refers almost exclusively to female dress, and sometimes to female behavior" (p. 203). Ruttenberg suggests new, well-thought-out and argued rules. Jay Michaelson's "On the Religious Significance of Homosexuality; or, Queering God, Torah, and Israel" is one of the only chapters in the book that touches on deep issues of theology. It is also I think the first dealing with queer theory that I actually succeeded in understanding. And all this is done using a clear, thorough mastery of rabbinic texts and concepts. *Chapeau!* Gail Labovitz's "Heruta's Ruse: What We Mean When We Talk about Desire" provides a reading of certain Talmudic texts that involve sexual desire of men, generally rabbis, toward women. Laura Levitt's "Love the One You're With" is mostly a re-reading of works by Judith Plaskow, Audre Lorde, and the author herself. Not being a theory-driven reader or deeply conversant in the works of any of the three, I have to admit my difficulty in understanding and assessing this piece.

Arthur O. Waskow's "Eden for Grown-Ups: Toward a New Ethic of Earth, of Sex, and of Creation" can be seen as an interesting Midrash comparing the story of Eden with Song of Songs. Eden describes humans, Waskow reminds us, at an infantile stage in which they are unaware of their sexuality, and have a paternal figure, God, telling them what to do. Song of Songs, on the other

hand, deals with (idealized?) adults: they are aware of their sexuality, they enjoy it as two equals, and they do not find it necessary to obey external “authorities.” Also, they do not see their sexuality as necessarily linked to procreation. A good lesson for our own epoch, suggests Waskow, having the last word (except for the appendices) in the volume.

So, what do we have? We have a wonderful collection of mostly excellent articles on sexuality in Jewish terms. In her acknowledgment, Ruttenberg remarks that the time spent editing the book included many hours on Israeli buses. Her bus rides were well spent: The book is superbly edited—a few typos or tiny mistakes can be forgiven, given how common bumps are, on Israeli roads. It ends with a ten-page glossary, a list of contributors, a surprising and useful index of (Jewish) sources, and a subject index. All these are the final touch of a well-executed and thought-provoking piece of accessible scholarship. I second the editor’s invitation in her introduction: Come and learn.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Evyatar Marienberg. Review of Ruttenberg, Danya, ed. *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. January, 2011.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25642>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.