



Cia Sautter. *The Miriam Tradition: Teaching Embodied Torah*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010. x + 168 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03577-7; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07762-3.

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Women's Embodiment of Jewish Teaching, Worship, and Customs in Medieval Spain

Cia Sautter, a dance and yoga practitioner and religious studies scholar, is faced with the predicament of many dance scholars: how to interpolate the meaning and cultural significance of dances, ritual movements, and quotidian experiences in a period far removed from modern times or extant sources; and furthermore, what integrating these physical practices into historical discourse can tell us about the people who lived it. In *The Miriam Tradition*, Sautter seeks to reinsert women into rabbinic Jewish tradition through specifically highlighting their role in leading worship through dance. She writes from the position of religious studies, and engages with ideas from dance studies and Jewish histories of the Mediterranean. Although fraught with oversights, Sautter's wisp of a study contributes to the literature through discussion of dances of *Sephardiyot* (Jewish women of Mediterranean descent) primarily in medieval Spain.

Sautter's goal is to bring women and their dancing traditions back to the center from the margins of medieval Spanish Jewish worship through highlighting the significance of the archetype of the biblical dancing prophet Miriam. Sautter initially does this through the role of *tanyaderas*. These women, who were lay spiritual leaders, significantly contributed to religious life and teaching. "Following in the tradition of Miriam," Sautter writes, the *tanyaderas* "brought their culture of dance, drumming, and song to their Judaism. They also brought their Judaism to their culture, performing dance and music rituals for specific Jewish holidays and special occasions" (p. vii). Sautter argues that the roles of these women and others whom she introduces over the course of the book embodied rabbinic tradition by performing and leading dances as part of worship. It is also significant to unearth the importance of these women's dancing bodies in medieval Spain during a time in which the Sephardic community went beyond written Jewish texts and embraced mysticism through the writ-

ing of the Zohar and men's practice of Kabbalah. Furthermore, it is imperative to demonstrate women's active roles during this time, in which, as Sautter notes, influential Spanish Jewish scholars, such as Moses Maimonides, condemned—even prohibited—men witnessing women singing and dancing.

Sautter's methodology incorporates textual analysis, feminist analysis, dance analysis, and historiographical methods, and yet falls short in fully supporting her subject matter. Though she relies on the work of scholars Ronald Grimes, Catherine Bell, and Tom Driver who focus on ritual, her larger methods of analyzing the dance in her study are not in dialogue with current discourses in dance studies. In chapter 1, "Women and Sacred Power," Sautter notes that she uses "surviving" Sephardic dances to evoke historical ones within what she terms a "dance culture of Judaism," but she does not fully define either term (p. 17). Though she builds on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) to, as she notes, "redefin[e] postmodernist views of dance as 'text'" and "view the symbolic movement of dance as a means of creating language," Sautter does not engage with such dance scholars as Susan Leigh Foster who have articulated dance-specific methodologies for choreographic analysis of dances and dance texts since the mid-1980s (p. ix).

This oversight of dance-related methodologies that articulate a lived experience become problematic within the study, as Sautter is unable to reconcile a thinking body with a dancing one. In chapter 2, "Movement Matters," where she relies heavily on Franz Rosenzweig's theory of Hasidic dance as embodying Torah to show that premodern *Sephardiyot* dancing expressed belief even though it was secular, she perhaps inadvertently undermines her project of demonstrating the importance of women's dancing within worship. In stating "but in ritual and the highly stylized and noncognitive activity

of dance, one is more likely to stop deliberate thinking and to start embodying belief,” Sautter likely intended to point to a transcendent experience wherein knowledge resides in the body, which then becomes a kind of vessel for spirituality (p. 42). Yet this contention that embodied experiences are not cognitive deprives a tradition like the embodied Torah she discusses to also have an embodied knowledge, that of a thinking body. Such an assertion also works at cross purposes with her goal to bring women back into traditional Jewish worship: if embodied forms like dance and thus embodied Torah are not cognitive, Sautter does not conduct a feminist reading but rather relegates women to the realm of feeling and the body, as opposed to that of the mind, reinforcing a long-held patriarchal binary that men think and women feel. This attitude returns at the end of chapter 5 when, differentiating men’s and women’s mourning rituals, Sautter states, “Where men had to do this [mourn] by concentrating on words, letters, and syllables in kabbalistic meditation, the women did so through movement, pausing to consider life and death” (pp. 129-130). A discussion of embodied Torah as embodied knowledge within a thinking body would better support her claims.

Sautter demonstrates how much of medieval Sephardic culture and tradition, dance notwithstanding, displays influence from the larger Mediterranean and Near East, including that of Muslim and Christian traditions within Spain, Turkey, Morocco, the Balkans, and Greece. For example, Sephardic women, Sautter contends, were part of the secular culture of the Mediterranean and Near East, and thus *raks al-sharqi* (belly dance) was part of their movement repertoire. Comparisons like this are productive within the context of the study, and reinforce the active cultural exchange within the medieval Sephardic world. The study would have benefited from fuller description of the movement in these dances from the sources that are available. Sautter could also have detailed further what looking at this material through the body tells us about values in Sephardic culture as understood through these *Sephardiyot*’s bodies.

Chapter 3, “Miriam’s Dance,” most closely achieves Sautter’s objectives of demonstrating the centrality of women’s dance and *tanyaderas* to Jewish worship. Her primary sources here include four extant *haggadot* that date from fourteenth-century Sephardic communities in Spain and the Near East: the *Sarajevo Haggadah*, the *Golden Haggadah*, the *Hispano-Moresque Haggadah*, and the *Sister Haggadah*. Sautter closely examines the paintings depicting Miriam in these *haggadot* for information concerning how women of the time may have danced,

since the imagery was reflective of secular and religious cultural modes. Though she includes comparisons between the dance as represented in the imagery and other dancing contemporary to the time, namely, *branles* and other medieval European traditions, Sautter could have pressed further to ask who these women were and why they were dancing. The discussion would also have benefited from further probing of what the images tell us about the role of women in the medieval Sephardic community and what is the significance of the prominence of these paintings of dancing women in *haggadot* when women were otherwise excluded from religious practice, as Sautter asserts elsewhere in her book.

In chapters 4, “Miriam at the Wedding Celebration,” and 5, “The Rachel Tradition–Dancing Death,” Sautter expands her definition of “Torah” to include communal customs associated with wedding and mourning rituals performed and led by women. Chapter 4 focuses on dance traditions linked to weddings, including dances surrounding *mikveh* (ritual immersion) and henna ceremonies, rituals of passing from maiden to bride and from one family to another, and dancing to assuage fears of marriage. Sautter demonstrates how these dances in particular reflected Mediterranean and Near Eastern traditions. Continuing her use of biblical imagery to contextualize the female archetypes she utilizes in this book, Sautter introduces the dances of death in chapter 5 as the “Rachel tradition.” As she notes, “Rachel, weeping for her children’ is an image representing mourning in Judaism” due to the representation of Rachel as weeping for the nation of Israel in the book of Jeremiah (p. 110). Sautter reads passages from the Mishnah and shows how these texts portray *endechas*, Jewish women as community mourning leaders through music and dance. To this end, she notes, “women’s lament served as not only a means of catharsis, but [also] a reflection of a biblical tradition that symbolized that God was beyond the cycle of death and life” (p. 116). Sautter’s further search in this chapter for Jewish connections in twentieth-century flamenco performance through this language of mourning introduces a slippage that does not fully support her argument.

Sautter draws from primary written texts, including the Hebrew Bible, Mishnah, the Zohar, and kabbalistic texts. She does this to show the role of women and their dancing within these foundational and spiritual Jewish and religious writings. Her use of the evidence of the extant fourteenth-century *haggadot* is particularly effective in supporting her claims of the significance of dancing Jewish women to Sephardic ritual, yet she lacks this kind of evidence in the rest of her study. She relies mostly

on secondary sources to fill in these gaps. While Sautter references established scholars, her sources do not exemplify a dialogue with current discourse in dance studies, and though her bibliography lists sources that engage Jewishness and gender, as well as dance history in Spanish and Jewish contexts, they are not part of her main text. Her bibliography reveals a dearth of current scholarship across fields. Sautter could detail further what this embodied understanding of the Torah, or looking at this material through the body, tells us about values in Jewish culture, and to generally articulate through critical analysis what is important about *Sephardiyot's* bodies in all

of these spaces.

Sautter brings forth work worth considering in discussing the role of women and their dances in medieval Sephardic worship. Her study speaks to a general audience interested in ideas pertaining to religious studies. The study would have benefited from a more complete interrogation of how dance served these purposes, and what it means to examine Jewish culture through dance. Her offering of reconsidering these women's roles in society through the body is significant when reconceptualizing the role of *Sephardiyot* during this time period.

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