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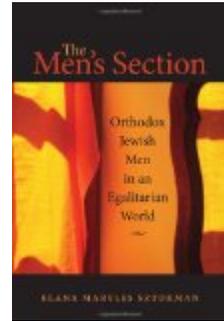
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elana Maryles Sztokman. *The Men's Section: Orthodox Jewish Men in an Egalitarian World*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011. 288 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61168-078-2; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61168-079-9; ISBN 978-1-61168-080-5.

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Men of the Minyan

Part qualitative social science, part personal memoir, and part post-Orthodox feminist manifesto, Elana Maryles Sztokman's *The Men's Section: Orthodox Jewish Men in an Egalitarian World* offers a thought-provoking, though significantly limited, examination of contemporary Orthodox masculinity. Sztokman examines the growing phenomenon of so-called partnership *minyanim*, synagogues on the fringe of Orthodoxy that allow women to lead many parts of services and to read from the Torah. Yet, rather than following the more expected path of examining Orthodox women's experiences in these new synagogues, she shifts the focus to the experiences of men, raising new and intriguing questions about the ways in which the culture of Orthodoxy constructs, confines, and defines masculinity. Based on interviews with fifty-four men, all members of partnership minyanim, and based on her own personal involvement in several specific synagogues, she expands the growing discussion of gender in Judaism and Orthodoxy by arguing that the changing women's roles in religious communities involve simultaneous change in masculine experience as well.

Sztokman begins in part 1 by "Introducing Orthodox Men," namely setting up a model of what it means to be a normative, middle-class, synagogue-attending, married, Modern Orthodox man, and comparing it to various culturally defined images of transgressive Orthodox men, such as singles, *hafifniks* (slackers), Reform men, widows, or homosexuals. Part 2, the most incisive and

sharpest section of the book, traces these men as they move past aspects of mainstream Orthodoxy's patriarchy and as they struggle with the competing impulses of various roles of masculinity that make demands on them: patriarchal Orthodox male, feminist man, Torah reader, prayer leader, breadwinner, sensitive husband, caring father, professional, and community member, among others.

Part 3 examines these men as they "Create New Boundaries," marking themselves as different from various "others" that they reject. Sztokman listens closely to her subjects as they describe partnership minyanim as being distinct from Reform congregations, and she describes how these men reinforce elements of the patriarchy that remain even at the feminist edge of Orthodoxy, such as enforcing a dress code and restricting women's roles in the synagogue. In part 4, Sztokman shares her personal frustration at the inability or unwillingness of even the most liberal Orthodoxy to move beyond the deeply entrenched male power structure and replace it with something genuinely equal. *The Men's Section* concludes with a sharp critique of Orthodox masculinity, suggesting that Orthodox men need feminism more than they realize to save them from the alienation imposed upon both men and women by Orthodox patriarchy. This patriarchy has made men so competitive and out of touch with their own inner lives that they "are thirsting for a female culture of interconnectivity" (p. 202).

The Men's Section is in part insightful and refreshing and in part frustratingly personal and thinly researched. With so much talk about the changing roles of women in Judaism and Orthodoxy, the conversation, even the feminist conversation, assumes that women are the Jewish "other," that their experiences are problematic and need addressing, and that the experience of plain, i.e., male, Jews is unproblematic. Sztokman takes that conversation to a new level as she asks challenging questions about the ways in which masculinity should not be taken for granted as a static phenomenon, but is rather shifting, socially constructed, problematic, and at times internally contradictory. More, the roles of women in Judaism cannot be properly addressed without simultaneously addressing the changing roles of men.

Indeed, Sztokman reveals just how deeply entrenched patriarchy is, even within overtly feminist Orthodox congregations. As harsh a conclusion as it is to hear, particularly for me as a feminist Orthodox man, Orthodoxy and its synagogues retain significant aspects of hierarchy and male dominance. She questions why even ideological Orthodox egalitarians cannot succeed in separating Orthodoxy from male power, for either the men or women involved. The conclusion that "Everything that men are expected to do as Orthodox men ... assumes female servitude," may be slightly overstated but it is not groundless (p. 220). Sztokman suggests that the kind of Orthodox feminism I advocate really qualifies as "the youthful, charismatic patriarchy of the charming intellect -aggression with a smile" (p. 205). This demands significant soul-searching.

Unfortunately, the book suffers from three related problems. First, her description of mainstream Orthodox masculinity—what she calls the "Be an Orthodox Man Box"—is not based on systematically collected data, but on her impressions of watching male synagogue life, interviews with men who have left mainstream Orthodoxy for the fringes, and even movies like the Coen brother's bitter 2009 satire, *A Serious Man* (wrongly identified as being about an Orthodox protagonist). She does not interview Orthodox men who have chosen to remain in the Orthodox center or collect data from the men's section of non-partnership minyanim.

This leads to an exaggeration, a strong focus on the faults of mainstream Orthodox masculinity without adequate discussion of its strengths. Orthodox men, in this description, are in constant "male on male competition" (p. xi), and they suffer from "silent alienation from the services" (p. 60). They are judgmental, distanced from

their own emotions, overly cerebral, and they focus on self-control and control of others. Her description of typical Orthodox masculinity regularly uses terms such as "perfectionism," "spiritual boredom" (p. 66), "shame" (p. 44), "sterile individualism" (p. 57), and "emotionless, connectionless, cold" (p. 221). "Groupthink," "hierarchies," "cliques," and "fear" keep men within the Orthodox box by stifling their emotional and religious independence (pp. 76-81). "The Orthodox man does not think for himself" (p. 63), and what he "feels is outside the permitted realm, simply irrelevant," (p. 62). These themes certainly exist among Orthodox people, both men and women. But, in the absence of data gathered from mainstream Orthodox men, this description remains unnecessarily one-sided.

Second, the book is marred by a series of over-readings, almost all them more critical of Orthodox men than the data require. I am not sure what one can learn from an Orthodox rabbi who suggests that sexual relations between unmarried Jewish men and gentile women "are for practice [*sic!*]," but the vignette does not indicate that Orthodox male "sexuality—as long as it's hetero—is legitimate" (p. 66). More subtly, informants spoke at length about the role of the Orthodox *hazzan* (cantor) in bringing the congregation to a particular prayer experience and in getting the prayers right. Sztokman glosses this as an indication of the need for masculine "control" over the congregation, despite the fact that her informants do not use this term (pp. 52-53). This leads to a limited analysis centered on hierarchy and power, but it avoids an equally plausible gloss discussing "leadership," a term which includes control, but could also introduce themes such as sensitivity to the needs of others, vision, fostering unity, or offering direction.

Third, Sztokman draws all of her data from men who attend partnership minyanim and then assumes that the phenomena she identifies in her subjects stem from Orthodox masculinity. But without a point of comparison it becomes difficult to know what aspects of the men's self-description should be linked to their masculinity per se, or to other aspects of the middle-class suburban post-industrial religious experience, aspects that might show more commonality between men's and women's experiences. Do women describe the experience of leading services differently than men do, or do they share some of the element of control/leadership that men project? Sztokman criticizes Orthodox "legalism," suggesting that the intense concern with precision in ritual is "an expression of men seeking control in a world of chaos ... so as to avoid having to actually feel emotions such as fear,

uncertainty, and pain” (p. 225). Even if one accepts this description of how men experience “the letter of the law,” in the absence of a comparison to how both punctiliously observant and less punctilious women experience legalism, it remains difficult to know how and in what ways legalism should be linked to masculinity. (As an aside, to my mind a gender-based analysis of Haym Soloveitchi’s influential thesis about the changing role of legalism in Orthodoxy is a significant desideratum.)[1]

The best section, part 2, succeeds precisely because it is the material for which Sztokman has the best data. She traces the contradictory and tension-filled attempts of Orthodox men to negotiate the competing roles that culture thrusts upon them and which they take upon themselves. They want to be good wage-earners, good husbands, good fathers, good religious men. They want to find a high place in the socially constructed hierarchy of business, family, synagogue, and piety, even as contradictory impulses pull them in many directions simultaneously. Professional success takes resources from parenting, and the patriarchy of the synagogue makes men less caring of the women in their lives. Different men negotiate these tensions differently, but all suffer from an inability to square the circle. The analysis in these sections is often rich and sensitive, in large part because this is what the research program was designed to get at.

The morning after I finished reading *The Men’s Section*, I attended the early-morning weekday services in my local, admittedly patriarchal, Modern Orthodox synagogue. In addition to the usual mixture of rote and heart-

felt prayer, I was struck by three events: an adult neighbor enthusiastically high-fiving an 11-year-old boy who had gotten up early before school to pray; an awkward-looking outsider who had arrived for prayers and was immediately greeted by several men who offered to find a spare pair of *tefillin* (phylacteries) and to assist the man in navigating the unfamiliar prayers; and about a dozen men chatting happily while munching on the pastries and drinks offered after services by the lay-led Talmud study group that had just finished a tractate. No doubt, hierarchy, emotional awkwardness, alienation, aggression, and boredom all characterize some aspects of Orthodox masculinity, but that morning I could not help but notice also kindness, caring, equality, sincerity, and warm belonging. The conclusion that “emotionally and spiritually, men go into synagogue alone and come out alone” simply cannot be justified (p. 203).

I do not mean to reject Sztokman’s first-person experience; I understand her growing alienation from Orthodoxy. “As a woman,” she summarizes, “I can never really be truly Orthodox” (p. 224). But *The Men’s Section* would be improved had it offered a more balanced portrait of male experience. “At the end of the day,” Sztokman concludes, “being a woman is much nicer than being a man” (p. 222). This may well be true, but viewing things through such lenses makes for pretty thin social science.

Note

[1]. See his “Rupture and Reconstruction,” *Tradition* 28, no. 4 (1994): 64-130.

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