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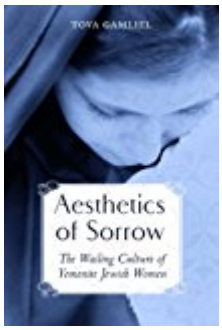

Ṭovah Gamliel. *Aesthetics of Sorrow: The Wailing Culture of Yemenite Jewish Women.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014. x + 450 pp. $54.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8143-3476-8.

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The Yemenite Jewish practice of wailing at funerals and in the first three days of the *shiva* (week of mourning) faces extinction. In Tovah Gamliel's formulation, "as performed weeping, [wailing] is an in-between configuration that may bridge between the internal (subjective) and the external (social) worlds, between the spontaneous and the structured, and between grief (the affective response to a loss) and mourning (actions that express grief)" (p. 32). In the shadow of Israel's own Westernized memorial culture with its formal structures and state-sponsored rituals, "wailing comes across as wearing a mask of sound, motion, clothing, language and customs that conceals folk knowledge" (p. 36). Through anthropological fieldwork in Israel, Gamliel takes a dialogic approach that paints the picture of a wailer, the culture that spawned this tradition in Yemen, and its evolution in the Israeli context.

In Yemen, wailing emerged in a culture in which men and women were segregated in their mourning practices. Seated in a circle within the *diwan*, the largest space of the house, a place not usually available to female gathering, women would sit together drink coffee and lament the passing of the deceased. In a highly ordered system of grief hierarchies women would take turns to expound upon the dead using both formulaic and individualized lamentations in a tune that was specific to the community (and varied from region to region). Often led by the most senior and venerated of the women, those mourning for the first time would learn the language of grief.

These wailing circles built community solidarity through the shared weeping that wailing generates and were an integral part of the social order. Out of this system emerged the wailer, a woman whose knowledge of life cycles and loss gave her special status within the female group. In a society in which women left their childhood home and moved to live amidst their husbands' families, these losses began at an early age, but the wailer was usually post-menopause, familiar with the risks of childbirth, and had experienced her own bereavements. This female profession operates "amid two sets of clashing images that

are known in various cultures and are intuitively familiar to them, too. One image is the wailer as a deranged, dangerous witch; the other image dominant in the wailing tradition in Yemen but now threatened considers the wailer a dignified, authoritarian, and wise individual--a crone woman" (p. 25). Paid for her services either in a financial donation, or more commonly in Yemen with gifts of food and clothing, the wailer might be sent for, or arrive uninvited at a house where a death is known to have occurred.

Traditionally, women prepared the body after death but did not attend the funeral, follow the body, or visit the cemetery. Thus a clear separation took place between male eulogizing, in Hebrew, as part of the formal, religious text-based acts of commemoration, and the unwritten, spontaneous, colloquial Arabic lamentation that occurred among women at home. These differing rituals afford male responsibility for the deceased's soul through the act of prayer and eulogy, and female responsibility for the body of the living. In this arrangement, compassion for the mourners is an extension of other traditional female duties of caring.

The wailer's responsibility was to help release the grief, and to narrate the life of the departed in part to get at the truth, but in part to frame the memory for the living. Acts of generosity, charity, kindness, and religious learning alongside the age of the subject and his or her role within the family would be recalled. Gamliel describes this act as "giving words," and these descriptions would move the mourners to powerful, throbbing tears. In a ritualized performance that included covering her face with a kerchief, rocking, small arm movements, and a lament whose rhythm, rhyme, and music all served to create affect among the audience, the wailer would spontaneously construct her lament, often calling not only on the life and death of the deceased, but also on other tragedies in the life of the community, the family, her own life, and even Jewish histories of tragedy, particularly the exile.

The only exception to these unspoken rules lay in the requests made of the Yemenite Jewish community by the Arab population among whom they lived. Jews were not only considered expert in wailing; in the local Yemenite culture wailing was viewed negatively but deemed necessary. Hence, Arabs would invite Jews to wail in their homes for their own deaths. But the respondents in Gamliel's research reveal that these performances of mourning were play-acting: "[M]ale Jewish eulogizers had fashioned an imitation of the women's performance into their own, they distorted its original form" (p. 201). There was no desire on the part of either the mourner or the wailer to get at the truth--instead, the dead were described in heroic terms that evoked battle imagery in accordance with Muslim tastes and in contrast to the Jewish tradition. Jewish men often performed the role of wailer--something they would never have considered within their own circles, and imitated the gestures and music of the female wailers in a parody that mocked their hosts. They did this to curry favor, for the remuneration they received, and because in many ways they had no choice. But their insincerity was reported in their misuse of language, gestures, and their employment of Hebrew, which was used to disguise the real words they were using, that at times were false and even defamatory of the dead.

In Israel, the wailer's role developed alongside evolutions in mourning. The wailer no longer led women in a circle of mourning in which each participant was expected to find words; instead she became the instrument through which grief could be released by the audience. Her performance was evaluated for its capacity to lead everyone to tears and for the eloquence with which she was able to describe the deceased. While women continued to avoid the cemetery in large part (though not entirely), the shiva took place at

home in mixed company and the wailer spoke for both men and women. She might even appear at the grave and lead the first wailing after the formal Hebrew service. Though many "primitive" cultures have patterns of wailing, among the Yemenite this culture was still viewed within the strictures and traditions of Jewish law.

The very act of wailing as a profession is traced to biblical injunctions to call the wailers on certain occasions. The women were expected to retain their religious devotion and observance. The wailer was expected to appear modest in her appearance in a way that conformed to Jewish laws of dress (head coverings, long sleeves, and legs covered). She was expected to show delicacy and piety in her wailing. In her final chapter, Gamliel shows that Yemenite Jews view their wailing culture as more modest and richer than that of other ethnic wailing cultures in Israel, which they deem as hysterical partly due to what they view as the marginalization of the words so central in the Yemenite tradition. Within these religious strictures, the wailer leaves herself open to charges of boldness and pride--and she must protect against accusations of impropriety.

This book is dense in its construction and in the subject matter with which it deals. The exploration of the processing of grief invokes the sadness of bereavement, and considers the loss to the individual and the community that a death brings. The emotional weight that this subject involves can at times make the reading hard going, but Gamliel's careful exploration of the subject makes the challenge a worthwhile endeavor. Tightly situated within the theoretical material that considers other wailing cultures, acts of performance, and connection between mourning and cathartic expressions of grief, Gamliel's work offers a comprehensive and nuanced examination of the culture she explores. She also highlights the unusual nature of describing a culture removed from the society that produced it.

Each chapter offers an analysis of one aspect of the role of the wailer. In the first chapter Gamiel explores the issues that surround wailing and in chapter 2 she presents Johara, once considered the greatest of wailers in Israel, whose memorialization creates an archetype that strikes at many of the traditions associated with wailing. In chapters 3 and 4 she differentiates between wailing in terms of the language used, and wailing as a musical performance with an audience. She shows the patterns, metaphors, and symbols that reveal the conventions of the words and explains that while these might sound banal as text, the "music" of wailing elevates these to powerful experiences. In chapter 5 she considers "wailing as a path to healing" through the communal experience of shared grieving (p. 220). Chapter 6 presents the religious context and historical relationship to Arab and Jewish traditions--the "proper time and place for emotions is strengthened by the attribution to wailing of magical properties and the danger a lament may inflict if it oversteps its intended context" (p. 378).

Somewhat repetitive at times, as it explores respondents' statements from multiple perspectives in different chapters, the book's construction makes it possible to delve into chapters independently. However, as a whole it presents a complete picture of this dying tradition. The epilogue considers the reasons for the demise of this tradition and the reasons that the younger generation born in Israel offers for increasingly rejecting it.

Referring to those who were not familiar with the culture in Yemen as the "second circle," Gamliel shows the change in relationship between the audience and the wailer. This younger generation wants the wailer to facilitate their own grief, and view her instrumentally. They require authenticity and sincerity, but debate the wailer's role, at times preferring to express their bereavement "in many diverse ways and intensities … [that] prevent[] the formation of a consensus about the role of the deceased in the family narrative" (p. 133).

This clash of control between the mourners and the wailer can be seen in the respondents' claims that she should not laugh and joke after she has wailed, or that she should live in a perpetual state of solemnity. This divorces the tradition of wailing from its cultural contexts as a profession and as a service that builds communities of grief and creates the narrative of the deceased. In Gamliel's interviews with wailers, the women point to the importance of building the moment of cathartic, heart-wrenching grief, but then allowing the audience to recover, and even concluding with humor so that the mourners can recover in the safe space of shared solidarity. Ultimately, in the modernity of contemporary Israeli society, wailing lies in conflict with Western memorial culture and in time will no doubt die out.