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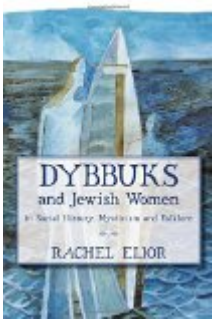


**Rachel Elior.** *Dybbuks and Jewish Women in Social History, Mysticism and Folklore.* Jerusalem: Urim, 2008. 128 pp. $21.95, cloth, ISBN 978-965-524-007-8.

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Over the past twenty years, Rachel Elior, the Cohen Professor of Jewish Philosophy and Jewish Mystical Thought at the Hebrew University, has produced a steady stream of publications on the history of kabbalah, most of which has been competently translated into English, as indeed is this volume under review. Exhibiting a prolific range of mastery over primary sources, from the texts of Qumran to the corpus of Hasidic literature, several recurrent themes run constant throughout her work, among them a dualism she views as basic to all forms of kabbalah: a polarity between forces of good and evil, the above and the below, heaven and earth, the revealed and the concealed, and so forth. Indeed, a distinct dualism can be seen in Elior's work itself, evidenced by the two essays comprising this volume: Elior the historian of mysticism and Elior the strident political feminist. Elior's many publications on the history of kabbalah, while of necessity including discussions of feminine symbolism, are essentially theological rather than political, and to my knowledge, offer no feminist critique of either kabbalistic theology itself or its influence on the actual lives of Jewish women, past and present. In fact, both the substance and the rhetoric of most of her work suggests that kabbalah as a whole, in all times and places, has been a liberating, mind-expanding force in Jewish history, evidenced in the title of her popular introduction to kabbalah, *Jewish Mysticism: The Infinite Expression of Freedom* (2007).

The first essay in this volume, "Like Sophia and Marcelle and Lizzie," as well as her recently edited volume of essays, *Men and Women: Gender, Judaism and Democracy* (2004), reveal Elior the strident political feminist. "Like Sophie and Marcelle and Lizze" presents a condensed summary of the history of women's oppression in an omnipresent, omnipotent patriarchal system, both within Jewish tradition and throughout the world at large. This is followed by a list of recommended procedures for the radical transformation of the current social and legal status, and consequently, lived experience, of women worldwide and Israeli women in particular, through an

extension of the boundaries of liberal-humanist thought and legal practice. While Elior the historian of kabbalah and Elior the political feminist share a common ideological rhetoric of liberation and transformation, whether kabbalistic or feminist, there is little overlap between the two persona in most of her work. Problematically, a feminist critique of peculiarly kabbalistic forms of patriarchal oppression are never addressed in her many studies of kabbalistic theology. It is as though kabbalah, in any form, is essentially meta-patriarchal, perhaps due to its ability to apparently limitless capacity to transcend the boundaries of space and time, heaven and earth, the seen and the unseen, the concealed and the revealed, and so forth.

The second essay in the volume, "Speaking Voices; Silencing Words; Silenced Voices," reads as an attempt by Elior to bridge the polarity between the persona of the historian and that of the feminist. Indeed, its central thesis about the emergence and decline of the phenomenon of spirit possession in Jewish communities during the early modern period presumes a causal connection between the phenomenology of post-1492 Lurianic theology and a specific oppressive patriarchal social institution, arranged and/or forced early marriage. While spirit possession and its remedy, ritualized exorcism, are longstanding phenomena that transcend the boundaries of particular cultures, the version in the early modern Jewish context had particular parameters. The documented cases involve the penetration of a living person by the spirit of one deceased, commonly known by the Yiddish designation "***dybbuk***"; in most cases the spirit was identified as an individual usually denied reincarnation, or ***gilgul nefesh***, due to sins committed during the former lifetime, in accordance with the dictates of Lurianic kabbalistic theology. A fascinating subject indeed, the phenomenon of Jewish spirit possession has been the focus of much recent scholarship hailing from a variety of disciplines, including the work of medical anthropologist Yoram Bilu (***"Ha-dibbuk be-yahadut: hafra'ah nafshit ke-mash'av tarbuti,"*** published in ***Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*** in 1983) and an eclectic volume of papers edited by historian Matt Goldish highly recommended as an introduction to the field: ***Spirit Possession in Judaism: Cases and Context--From the Middle Ages to the Present*** (2003).

Elior relies up this recent literature for her substantive primary data, most importantly the primary sources documenting Jewish spirit possession collected by Gedaliah Nigal (***Sippurei dibbuk be-sifrut yisra'el*** [1983]), and for the historical contextualization as well as the theoretical framework of her analysis. Thus, Jewish spirit possession in the early modern period is contextualized as part of a general reactionary response to both the emergence of the rationalist, scientific worldview of the late Renaissance, as well as the traumatic expulsion from Spain. Elior independently contextualizes the phenomenon of spirit possession within what she designates a collective, dualistic kabbalistic myth, and reads various of its elements as direct embodiments of dualistic kabbalistic theology. For her theoretical framework, she assumes both a Foucauldian stance on the medicalization of human experience as a form of social control, as well as a Freudian understanding of deviant behavior as due to the transference of repressed impulses resulting from traumatic sexual experience. Elior's contribution to the scholarship is her reading of the ***dybbuk*** phenomenon as a culturally scripted, controlled mode of physic liberation resorted to by Jewish women living under exceedingly repressive circumstances, over which they had little or no control, in a particularly oppressive patriarchal system. While the Freudian notion that "it was not uncommon for women who did not know how to speak about themselves and their psychological anguish, and who were not heard in public, to express themselves through physical ailments, mental afflictions and associated madness" is scarcely novel in feminist critique, Elior's reading of ***dybbuk*** possession as a scripted cultural ritual of liberation and control is

novel (p. 62). Ostensibly, Elior presents the phenomenon as a mode of individual liberation, as afflicted persons, chiefly women, avoided sexually related stress and trauma caused by lack of personal agency in decisions involving marriage, by submitting to spirit possession and, hence, being allowed a culturally appropriate mode of expressing deviance from social norms.

The force of Elior's contribution is weakened in two ways. The first weakness is a failure to acknowledge gaps or inconsistencies in both her presentation of the primary data and her arguments, and more generally speaking, her ubiquitous reliance on what can only be designated a romantic linguistic analytic methodology (championed by Max Müller, the pioneer of the discipline of comparative religion in the mid-nineteenth century, among others), which assumes an equivalence between the history of language and that of culture, so that linguistic evidence can be presumed to encode historical evidence of an actual cultural practice. Turning to the first problem, the seventy-five cases of documented spirit possession include forty-nine cases involving women and twenty-six cases involving men, showing that a significant number of men, as well as women, were afflicted. While the majority of cases certainly involved women, that majority is not so significant that the spirit possession of men can be ignored; Elior's interpretation of the phenomenon as due to psychic repression caused by female sexual trauma and the related societal oppression of women fails to explain the cases of male spirit possession. Yet not only does Elior not provide a rationale for spirit possession endured by men; she also does not explain why she neglects to do so. A more serious impediment to the force of her analysis is an internal ambivalence in her own valorization of spirit possession. Primarily, Elior assumes the phenomenon to be a mode of liberation, a last resort mode of "power of the otherwise powerless" for Jewish women experiencing acute sexually related stress and societal oppression (p. 62). The experience of spirit possession offered a brief respite from conscious responsibility of one's actions and hence from the "patriarchal world of real life," constituting a transgressive, if short, act of personal liberation (p. 64). Yet at the same time, without explicitly acknowledging this fact, Elior's presentation of the exorcism procedure distinctly shows the entire process of possession and exorcism to be, ultimately, an affirmation of social control. Through what the documented sources describe as a lengthy ritualized process, the procedure of exorcism always results in the defeat of the chaotic powers of deviance, reified as the possessing spirit, and the reestablishment of social and moral order. As Elior describes it, the exorcism process was an orchestrated battle between order and chaos, with order always winning out. Thus, viewed as part of an entire process, spirit possession is not so much a means of individual liberation, but a sort of controlled demonstration of the patriarchal powers that be. In this piece of ritual theater, the voice of the ***dybbuk*** can be heard, in fact, not as the liberated voice of the oppressed, but rather the voice of a puppet manipulated by patriarchal strings. Elior never explicitly acknowledges this inherently ambivalent aspect of spirit possession. Rather, she chooses to present its two faces as embodied in different actants in the drama of exorcism: while the possessed woman experiences spirit possession as liberation, the exorcist experiences the satisfaction of exerting social control. While this is certainly a logical interpretation, it is just as logical to assume the experience of spirit possession to be an orchestrated simulation of individual liberation within a strict context of ultimate social control. In a similar vein, Elior describes spirit possession as a painful experience, akin to rape, in which the spirit of the dead often penetrates the body through the woman's vagina; the difficulty in presenting such an experience as a liberation from sexual trauma induced by patriarchy is self-evident.

Finally, a problem with all of Elior's work is her romantic assumption of "the complexity of

the reality memorialized in language" (p. 125). In short, the history of words and their meanings are seen as directly analogous to the development of culture, hence to historical and social realities. For example, in the section of the essay entitled "Contexts for the *Dybbuk*," the oppressive reality of an essentialized patriarchy seems to be revealed whenever the root "*dvk*" appears in Jewish literature. Through the occurrence of the root " *dvk*" in Genesis 2:24 in relation to the marriage of Adam and Eve and its subsequent association with various biblical appearances of the root "*b'l*," Elior jumps to the following general conclusion in the space of three sentences: "Obligatory intercourse in a milieu of sanctity and purity is a social convention that embodies the hegemonic power structure's symbolic-cultural order with regard to the body and its ownership" (p. 65). This conclusion is followed by a string of dualistic distinctions between prohibited and permitted sexual relations and more conceptual leaps based on word association. The method described above, basically a form of word association, allows Elior to interpret the exorcism ceremony as a complementary, binary opposite "sort of photographic negative of the [Jewish] wedding ceremony" (p. 105). While the two ceremonials, wedding and exorcism, may well be read as analogously opposite metaphorically speaking, the claim for an actual, historical connection between them can be made only if the primary documentation itself evidences this correspondence through precise language, which has not been established.

For Elior, literature, as well as language, conceals cultural memory. The final section of the essay is devoted to a brief discussion of arguably the most famous literary embodiment of Jewish spirit possession, An-Ski's early twentieth-century play, *The Dybbuk*. The play dramatically presents all of the key elements of spirit possession Elior claims are evident in the occurrences in the early modern period: denial of individual rights; arranged marriage; societal repression and conformity; patriarchy and the oppression of women; and last but not least, the experience of spirit possession as a mode of liberation from the strictures of social authority. Indeed, as Elior herself puts it, "The play powerfully and dramatically depicts the clash between the powerful social norm of arranged marriage and the powerless striving for personal choice and individual freedom" (p. 114). In fact, so closely do the themes and explicit content of the play correspond to the details of Elior's analysis of earlier occurrences of spirit possession that it would appear that Elior has read the earlier historically documented cases in light of An-Ski's play, rather than reading the latter as a modern literary embodiment of the former. In the romantic literary *gilgul* of spirit possession portrayed so effectively in An-Ski's play, it can be valorized unequivocally, if tragically, as an unambivalent mode of liberation. Here, in the generic world of romantic fiction the heroine can be legitimately liberated from both patriarchal social oppression and arranged marriage by being reunited in death with her true love, Chonon, after perishing during the process of exorcism. Dying for true love in defiance of social norms, even in our day, is a legitimate, indeed, classical, mode of romantic liberation from sexual and/or social coercion. The situation for actual Jewish women of the past seeking liberation from sexual trauma and/or social oppression through spirit possession should be judged quite differently, being real life and not fiction. In this case, their death, which apparently often did occur as a direct or indirect result of the process of exorcism, must be regarded as a cruel historical tragedy rather than valorized as a mode of liberation of the oppressed.

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