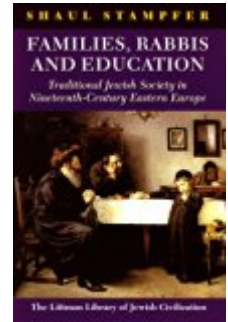


Shaul Stampfer. *Families, Rabbis and Education: Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe.* Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010. xii + 414 pp. \$64.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-874774-85-3.



Reviewed by Marc B. Shapiro

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

For many years, Shaul Stampfer has been recognized as an authority in all things dealing with nineteenth-century Jewish Eastern Europe. In his newest book, we have a collection of numerous essays representing more than twenty years of his scholarship, including one essay published for the first time (“The Missing Rabbis of Eastern Europe”). Stampfer’s focus is not on the purely intellectual debates between rabbinic elites. He is more interested in social history, how average people and in particular women lived. Even his discussions of rabbis emphasize such matters as inheritance of rabbinic positions and the rabbi’s role in communal life. His sources are quite broad: traditional rabbinic works as well as Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian texts and newspapers.

I could write extensively about every essay, each of which taught me a great deal. (And I never imagined that an entire essay could be written on the *pushke* [charity box] and its development.) Yet to remain within the word limit for this re-

view, let me just mention some of Stampfer’s most important points, the major theses of the book.

People have generally assumed that marriages in Jewish Eastern Europe were very stable, with divorce being quite rare. Stampfer, however, provides evidence to demonstrate that divorce was common and not shameful. Based on his evidence, he is fundamentally correct. In addition to citing statistics, Stampfer also refers to memoir literature that mentions divorce. Yet I also think that Stampfer (and ChaeRan Y. Freeze before him) exaggerates the frequency of divorce. For example, one of his statistics of marriage and divorce is from the 1860s in the city of Berdichev where for every three to four marriages, there was one divorce. He cites similar statistics for Odessa (p. 46). Stampfer goes so far as to claim that “it may well be the case that there were thirty divorces for every hundred weddings in the nineteenth century” (p. 128). However, these numbers are certainly skewed for the simple reason that while marriages took place in every town, to obtain a divorce couples had to travel to a larger city where

there was a *beit din* (rabbinic court) and scribe. Thus, divorces from any one city do not reveal a ratio of marriage to divorce. The situation is identical to what happens today. Couples get married anywhere they want, but must come to a central location for their divorce.

Stampfer also argues that contrary to another popular stereotype, early teenage marriage was not at all common in traditional Jewish society. While it occurred among the economic and intellectual elite, and is immortalized in memoirs of the latter, early teenage marriage does not reflect the life experience of the average young Jew. Similarly, the lower class, which encompassed most Jews, did not have much use for matchmaker services, and indeed, romance was a factor in their marriages.

Tied to the points made so far is the place of women in society. Many of us are accustomed to think of traditional society as one in which men had all the power and made all the decisions, and in which the husband went out to work while the wife served as a homemaker. Yet Stampfer shows that while this perception fits in very well with contemporary “family values,” it is not how East European Jewish society functioned. Women generally worked, were involved in business ventures, and were thus “out of the home.” Unlike today, the stay-at-home wife and mother was not necessarily an ideal. Stampfer also notes that many Jewish names were created from women’s names, which he thinks “reflects a reality in which both men and women could be in the centre” (p. 133). Adding to these arguments, Stampfer includes the following suggestive comment: “Another indication of the place of women in Jewish society can be found in the aesthetics of Jews in Eastern Europe. Males were regarded as attractive if they were thin, had white hands, and wore glasses. These were all reflections of lives devoted to study and perhaps to asceticism. On the other hand, attractive women had full bodies and were strong and active. Their appearance promised

work and support. Different ideals are expressed here, but the image of the ideal woman is not one of weakness” (p. 133). In short, East European Jewish society was not what we would regard as a patriarchy. Conservative views on the importance of women staying in the home to raise children might be sound social policy, yet we should not assume that this is how East European Jews ever actually lived.

Another fact noted by Stampfer, which will no doubt be surprising to readers, is the existence of coed heder. This is certainly not the image that people have of this institution. Yet while the coed aspect is interesting, especially, as Stampfer states, “given the contemporary concern (or obsession) in certain very Orthodox Jewish circles regarding co-educational education even in elementary grades,” even more significant is what this says about education for girls (p. 169n11; see also p. 32). Contrary to what many think, there were East European Jewish girls who were educated just like their brothers, and Stampfer thinks that the ratio of girls to boys in heder was approximately one to eight (p. 170). As for education in general, while some people like to imagine Eastern Europe as a place where Torah study always thrived, Stampfer notes that “one can safely conclude that by the mid-1930s there were far more young Jewish males in secondary schools than in yeshivas” (p. 272). Also worthy of note is Stampfer’s point that the *kollel* (a school of rabbinic studies for married men) system developed because there were no longer many rich fathers-in-law willing to support a son-in-law who was studying. In addition, he argues that the shrinking of the job market for rabbis also had a share in the development of the *kollel*.

Let me conclude with some minor comments and corrections. On page 69, note 39, the proper reference in *Pithei Teshuvah* is *Even ha-Ezer* 9:5, and the rabbi cited should be R. David Ibn Zimra (Radbaz), not R. Jacob Willowski (Ridbaz). On page 181, Stampfer discusses the famous description by

R. Barukh Epstein of his aunt, Rayna Batya, the wife of R. Naphtali Zvi Judah Berlin. While acknowledging that some have doubted the veracity of Epstein's story, Stampfer states that "the account seems plausible." Here I must disagree. While there can be no doubt that Batya was an unusual woman, Epstein's account of his conversations with her, as with much else in his autobiography, cannot be relied on. I have discussed this at length elsewhere, and readers can examine my arguments at the Seforim Blog from January 16, 2008 (http://seforim.blogspot.com/2008_01_01_archive.html). On page 285, Stampfer refers to the Moscow chief rabbi Jacob Mazeh (1859-1924) as having been martyred. Yet this is incorrect as Mazeh died a natural death. On page 326, note 6, regarding the Vilna Gaon's attitude toward R. Jonathan Eibeschuetz, see Sid Z. Leiman, "When a Rabbi Is Accused of Heresy: The Stance of the Gaon of Vilna in the Emden-Eibeschuetz Controversy," in Ezra Fleischer, et al, eds., *Meah Shearim* (2001). Finally, on page 327, Stampfer offers evidence of criticism of the Vilna Gaon during his lifetime. In my September 12, 2009, post at the Seforim Blog, I offer another example of such criticism (<http://seforim.blogspot.com/2009/09/writings-of-r-hayyim-gulevsky-part-2.html>). This is reported by R. Hayyim Dov Ber Gulevsky who heard it from his grandfather, R. Simhah Zelig Rieger, the dayan of Brisk. (Incidentally, Gulevsky is quoted by Stampfer on page 353.)

As mentioned at the beginning of this review, there is much more that can be said about Stampfer's careful scholarship, which is a treat for all readers. I know that many share my wish to soon see in print the English edition of his classic work on the Lithuanian yeshivot.

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