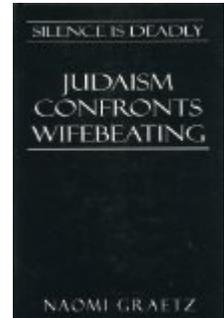




Naomi Graetz. *Silence Is Deadly: Judaism Confronts Wifebeating.* Northvale, NJ and Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 1998. 272 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7657-6013-5.



Reviewed by Robyn Sassen

Published on H-Judaic (August, 2000)

A perception has been held and nurtured that domestic violence in the Jewish family is something of a contradiction in terms. The concept of *Shalom Bayit* and the ways in which Jewish home life is structured around a calendar that lends itself to family togetherness and sharing seems to support this view. In reality, however, the perception that a level of aberrant behaviour is completely absent is impossible. For one thing, it uniformly describes a set of people as impervious to the realities that constitute being human; put another way, like any other social grouping, Jews are and have been victims and perpetrators of terrible domestic realities that compound contemporary existence. Jews are a diverse people, some of whom may be prone to domestic violence and the need to assert power. The Jewish religion, like any other, is one filled with both significant and beautiful ideals but it also comprises practices, customs and beliefs which may be open to subjective opinion and interpretation.

Silence is Deadly serves a socially cleansing role as it exposes and evaluates the realities of wife abuse in an orthodox Jewish framework in

an objective and hard-hitting manner. In this respect, it begs comparison with Abraham J. Twerski's 1996 *The Shame Born in Silence : Spouse Abuse in the Jewish Community* (Pittsburgh : Mirkov Publications). Unlike the Twerski publication, however, rather than citing case histories, Graetz's work presents a more abstract argument. Designed to be read on different levels, it considers *halachic* and contextual interpretations and practices in a way that is both well documented with reference to the primary texts, and accessible to the lay reader. Naomi Graetz, an observant Jew, demonstrates an astute understanding of the mechanisms of biblical interpretation and commentary, as well as an ability to eloquently convey complex biblical assertions and problematics in lay terms, which would be acceptable for the academic reader as well. She became aware of the prevalence of wifebeating among the very orthodox in Israel, which served as an impetus for her to begin what became a ten-year project, researching and exposing this phenomenon, which has come to fruition through this book.

This tract will be deeply significant to a variety of readers. It is important for one who wants to make sense of the contradictions inherent in being an observant Jew in contemporary times. It holds value as it presents an inroad into how Jewish exegesis and commentary works. It would also be of account to readers within fields relating to addressing domestic abuse. Above all, this book is vital for readers who are wives, daughters and mothers who have been heir to a set of values that have been twisted by its misled practitioners. As Graetz points out and contemporary realities reveal, these are the women who have for centuries been emotionally hurt, materially deprived, raped, beaten or killed in spirit if not in body by their husbands in the name of interpretations of practical religion.

Simply designed, this small book is bold, aggressive and intelligently assembled. It is divided into eleven chapters that constitute three primary sections, which *in toto* present a sequential narrative of the realities and history of wifebeating. Its multi-witness approach records solutions and realities from a Jewish as well as humanitarian perspective. In entirety it is a devastating piece of work describing the impetus and justification behind Jewish orthodox battery behind closed doors. Because of its sequential structure, it is the kind of book that can prove dangerous if "dipped into," because comments, criticism and sources may easily be understood out of context, particularly in the chapters that examine the body of commentary condoning wifebeating in a community.

Graetz begins with an overview and definition. She comments on the unseen nature of the problem, robustly defending how it can be manifest and explaining how wife abuse is not restricted to physical pain but can be asserted verbally, economically, emotionally or sexually. Counterpoised with this reality, is *halakha*, the constructed legal injunction which governs Jewish behav-

our and upon which so much commentary and criticism rests.

These premises are extended beyond the abstract. Graetz focuses first on the ways in which Biblical tracts seem to condone battery and denigration of women in its original narrative and commentaries. Three examples of this are the passages relating to Lot's virgin daughters (Gen. 19:7-8), offered to impostors to appease the impostors who are attacking (angelic) guests in Sodom; the narratives surrounding Hagar, Abram's handmaid (Gen. 16 : 4-6) in which she is not only mistreated but willfully and publicly humiliated; and aspects of Abraham's relationship with Sarah (Gen. 12:12), which compromise and objectify her when she is compelled to pretend she is Abram's sister in order to save his life, but not necessarily her own dignity. In addition, Graetz looks at other textual references, allusions, and commentaries, including complex issues like that of the *sotah* or woman accused of adultery and subject to public humiliation and indignity, even if she is innocent and her husband guilty or merely jealous.

This level of interpretation continues with an examination of prophetic literature, in particular that articulated in the Book of Hosea, which may quite distinctly align the relationship between God and Israel to that of husband and wife, which becomes all the more frightening when the metaphorical image of Israel as miscreant woman and God as her overseeing husband becomes interpreted literally. Here Graetz examines how this metaphorical relationship of punishment and reward may be interpreted by the proverbial man-in-the-street and echoed in his own conjugal relationship.

Throughout the firm line taken in these two crucial sections to the text, Graetz does not lose sight of the fact that she is using the "official" commentaries as reference. Graetz's text does not interplay with the contemporary problematics of feminist theory in reading subliminal contexts into previously established and accepted areas of

commentary and thesis. Rather, she presents her observations in a manner which is both clear and realistic in terms of contemporary statistics and journalism, as well as the direct factual evidence given in the original texts and their commentaries.

This leads Graetz to probe more deeply into the nature of metaphor in relation to *halakha* and in turn to the different *halakhic* interpretations and values which surround the reality of marriage. Examples of these revolve around the understanding of the husband, (*ba'al*) in the context of lord, master and owner of his wife; the rules of peace in the family home (*Shalom Bayit*) and how it may be perceived that this ideal should be enforced, and the rich contradictions inherent in such a set of misconstrued values. This section of the book concludes with an explanation of the formative laws and principles opposed to wifebeating that give the abused woman in a marriage sanction to leave legally and with dignity.

The second section of the book concerns rabbinical response to wifebeating. Graetz examines classic psychological steps in an understanding of trauma through the responsa and writings of sages from the time of the Geonim until the present day. This section of the book shows how wifebeating in the early sources was dealt with implicitly, and how in more modern times, it became acknowledged as aberrant from the norm. Here, Graetz examines acceptance, denial, apologetics and evasion of responsibility expressed by great Rabbis of the ilk of the Rambam, the Rashbah, and the Gaon of Vilna, amongst others.

This section orients the standpoint of a rabbi of a community, be it from Greece, Sarajevo, Egypt or wherever, in relation to the non-Jewish ruling body of the time and the context of the situation. It also sheds light on the enormous diversity of approaches to wifebeating in Jewish communities through time -- from approval and justification to financial retribution, coerced divorce or even forced amputation of a limb. This section

juxtaposes opinion expressed by a great diversity of rabbinical leaders. The way in which it has been assembled reveals the nature of Jewish commentary that leads from one sage to another, enriched through the generations by the currents of the time and the interpretations of its leaders. Here the reader is presented with insight into the reality and problematics of a forced divorce and the ways in which this can concatenate into the life of a woman and her children. By the same token, this section explains how *halakha* can be interpreted to give a woman in an abusive marriage legal sanction to leave the relationship and get on with her own life. It also presents the loopholes to which an abusing husband may turn in order to find support through the power and influence of *halakhic* precepts and injunctions, not to mention rabbinical opinion and perspective.

The section ends with the understanding that the statistics of wifebeating in Israel, and by extension, the rest of the orthodox Jewish world, remain unacceptably high, and to a large extent, unacknowledged. This is attributable to fear on the part of the women themselves, as well as recalcitrance on the part of members of the rabbinical fraternity to acknowledge this problem and take action. Graetz writes, "Rabbis are disinclined to interpret the *halakha* in such a way that men's rights over their wives are diminished ... [t]he prevailing attitude today among the majority of rabbis ... is one of conditional rejection, or evasion of responsibility" (150).

Graetz dovetails this section with the one which follows and which brings her tract to closure. This final section of the book phrases her argument under the aegis of a feminist approach that fits into rather than denigrates Jewish values. While she cites feminist thinkers in her understanding and explanation of complicity with regard to wife abuse, she takes their angles of approach into the same consideration as she took that of the rabbis cited earlier. The conclusion of her book gives the whole tract added cohesion

and direction, as it straddles opinions, truths and realities surrounding wife abuse. Here she suggests that, as in the case of *halakhic* injunctions in the face of post-Temple realities, a modern day *takkanah* be ratified by contemporary Jewish leadership to reshape current Judaism as it has been through history, redressing a need which has developed out of political bias and misinterpretation. She suggests that in the face of recourse to the legal structure of Judaism, contemporary leaders take the initiative to allow the religion to meld into contemporary realities, yet retain its stability. In other words, to acknowledge that "Judaism ... is not another word for legalism ... The law is the means, not the end" (201 : quoted from Rabbi A. J. Heschel). The primary focus of this proposed *takkanah* is to introduce into the body of *halakha* the reality that marriage is a contract between adults and not a tool with which the male partner can manipulate his wife as one can a vessel or a piece of meat. The book ends with a further explanation of *takkanah* in the contemporary *halakhic* process in the form of an appendix written by Rabbi Michael Graetz. This is followed by a table documenting the chronology of the responsa dealt within the text and a glossary of terms.

Graetz draws clearly expressed and objective attention to the shocking realities of marital abuse which not only comprise our history, but are blatantly present in contemporary times too. In doing so, she has phrased an irrefutably strong argument that cries out on behalf of all the *agunot* and women trapped in unhappy marriages, for the community at large to take action. This is an important publication which should be indispensable for any rabbi, rebbetzin, counselor, or indeed anyone who may claim to be *shomer mitzvot*.

This brilliantly conceived book presents a case which remains pro-Jewish. In fact, it glorifies the beautiful practices that constitute this religion, as it praises the structures of marriage, child

raising and other observances that are so intrinsic to it. Graetz's gesture of condemning the aberrations of the religion and how it has been manifest through personal bias and blatant legalism exposes contemporary Judaism, distinguishing it from the romantic light in which it is often represented. This enhances the importance of the book, giving Jews a chance at a credible position in contemporary thought and realities and presenting the possibility of redressing an issue boldly, broadly, with courage, and within the law.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Robyn Sassen. Review of Graetz, Naomi. *Silence Is Deadly: Judaism Confronts Wifebeating*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4422>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.