

Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues

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Nashim's Spring/Summer 2000 issue is devoted to the themes of motherhood and the impact of Talmud and modernity on women's lives in Israel and in the Diaspora. The topics under discussion include marriage, divorce, nursing/nurturing/rearing children, bat/bar mitzvah *rites de passage*, immersion in the *mikvah* (ritual bath), the rape of Dinah described in Genesis (32:4), even Zelophehad's daughters' claim on their father's property since he had no sons (Numbers 21:7).

In 1970, the Women's Liberation Movement shifted its focus from liberation to equality, almost creating a new paradigm. Jewish women, emerging as feminists during this time, were denied equality in the ritual life of the synagogue. Soon, however, scholarship in Judaic Studies by women began to flourish in an attempt to seek legitimization for women's equality in the synagogue, in higher learning, and in day-to-day life.

Women researched and authored eleven of the twelve articles included in this issue of *Nashim*. "The times they are a'changing!" and Labovitz's "These are the Labors: Constructions of the Woman Nursing Her Child" is one example of this change. Labovitz draws on her studies in Mishnah and Tosefta to discuss the implications of the wife as wet nurse to her child and how this could impact conditional divorce decrees.

Since I have two daughters, one born in 1959 and one in 1967, I was particularly interested in Halbertal's article, "Maneuvering in a World of Law and Custom?: Maternal Transmission of Ambivalence." Both of my daughters received an intense pre-university Judaic education. But there was little opportunity for them to use their knowledge within the Jewish community. In fact, I was complicit in transmitting an "ambivalence" about Jewish law and custom to my daughters. My oldest daughter, a traditionalist who is married with six children, is a nursery school teacher. My youngest daughter, a strong feminist, is unmarried and in her early thirties; she works as a systems librarian in a university library. She was the recipient of my unconsciously conveyed message that motherhood is not the only worthwhile female endeavour.

As a menopausal woman who was once an active *mikvah* goer, I was drawn to Cicurel's article on *mikvah* as a contested domain. Her fieldwork, conducted in Beer Sheva, Israel over the period of a year, confirmed my understanding of

the reasons for immersion in a *mikvah* are similar for both religious and secular women, in Israel and in North America. Cicurel indicates the orthodox women follow the dictates of the rabbinat and immerse in *mikvah* after the cessation of their monthly menses cycle. Secular women, however, regard participation in the experience of immersion not as ritual purification but as evidence of female power.

Whether or not a reader is in agreement with the authors represented in this issue of *Nashim*, one can rejoice that women's voices have been raised in scholarship in Jewish women's studies and gender issues.