

K'ra

Another Sh'ma Feature Review

EROS AND THE JEWS: FROM BIBLICAL ISRAEL TO CONTEMPORARY AMERICA. *David Biale*. Basic Books, \$24.00

This book is a *tour de force*, an ambitious exploration of a topic that has generally been ignored by Jewish scholarship - sexuality and desire in Jewish history and culture. As a social historian and a feminist, sensitive to issues of gender and popular experience, I have long felt that Jews have too often been presented as disembodied intellects, all head and no body. In this brilliant and fascinating book David Biale reflects on the relationship of the physical to the spiritual and intellectual dimensions of Jewish tradition in an impressive variety of historical contexts. He also attempts to discover the changing reality of Jewish sexual practice throughout history.

Biale's central focus is the ambivalence of Jewish religious, and later secular, elites to sexuality. Arguing against the conventional view that Judaism, as contrasted with Christianity, unambiguously affirmed sexuality as long as it was regulated within marriage, he demonstrates the tensions between asceticism and sexual expression within various types of traditional Judaism and documents the debates about the appropriate role of sexuality within Jewish life. Although both procreation and pleasure were both recognized as legitimate goals of sexual relations, traditional Jewish cultures tended to privilege the former over the latter. Biale addresses, in his own words, "the dilemmas of desire," the conflicting ways in which Jews constructed their sexuality. More accurately, because of the absence of women from the production of Jewish texts in the pre-modern period, he acknowledges that he shows how Jewish *men* struggled with issues of sexuality. Although the sources limit his discussion to male attitudes, he is sensitive to the multiplicity of voices and experience within Jewish society throughout history. Indeed, he seeks to uncover in elite sources the subtexts that point to popular behavior and occasional resistance to rabbinic constraints.

Interpreting pre-modern texts as diverse as the Hebrew bible, the Talmud, rabbinic responsa, medieval Jewish philosophy, mystical works, and Hasidic tales, Biale traces the evolution of Jewish attitudes toward sexuality within the broad intellectual and social contexts of the societies in which Jews lived. Medieval Jewish philosophers and kabbalists in southern France and Spain, for

example, appear to have shared many of the intellectual concerns of their Muslim and especially Christian fellow intellectuals. Examining the linkage of sexuality with the realm of the divine in kabbalistic and Hasidic texts, he argues persuasively that this mystical theology of sex contained both ascetic and misogynist elements and cannot simply and easily be appropriated by contemporary religious Jews as a model for their own sexual lives.

As for the modern period, Biale indicates that ambivalence about sexuality has persisted even among those who rebelled against traditional Judaism. Although the east European *maskilim*, generalizing from their own particular experiences, scathingly attacked traditional patterns of family life, they and the succeeding generation of Hebrew writers did not succeed in finding a secure place for Eros in modern Jewish experience. Instead, through their writing they represented Jewish family dynamics as crippling and left a cultural legacy that culminated in *Portnoy's Complaint*, the discussion of which Biale uses to frame his book. Similarly, Zionists offered a powerful critique of what they saw as the sexual neurosis spawned by Diaspora Judaism but were unable to realize their ideals of sexual liberation and egalitarianism because the Zionist revolution also demanded ascetic self-discipline and subordinated gender equality to nationalist goals.

Biale's interpretations will stimulate debate and controversy, as they should. I, for one, found his discussion of attitudes towards sexuality as represented in a myriad of texts far more persuasive than his attempts to read out from scattered references the actual history of Jewish sexual practices or the extent of popular resistance to elite norms. Although he notes, for example, that cases that appear in responsa literature offer no statistical evidence about the prevalence of particular types of behavior, he tends to speculate much more broadly than his sources should allow. Moreover, the mere existence of documented behavior or specific texts, such as one eighteenth century pornographic poem in Hebrew, is no proof of their cultural importance. Finally, Biale's editors would have done well to remove the many exclamation points that dot this book and that suggest, erroneously, that discussion of sexuality is inherently prurient.

No brief review can suggest the richness of Biale's well documented analysis. As he shows so well, the subject of sexuality in Jewish life and tradition is not only of historical interest but has implications for the ways in which we define ourselves as Jews today. (*Paula E. Hyman*)