

## Airing Our Dirty Laundry

Many Jewish women today are reclaiming and refashioning traditional Jewish laws about menstruation, from menarche to menopause to mikvah immersion. Yet menstruation still remains mostly private—a woman is not compelled to disclose to others whether or not she has her period. So it is surprising to learn that among Karaite Jews, who observe Jewish practices as they are literally written in the Torah, woman's menstrual status is an open secret, and can affect everything from where she can eat and sleep to her participation in Jewish communal practices and rituals.

In *The Stains of Culture: An Ethno-Reading of Karaite Jewish Women* (Wayne State University Press, \$27.95) Ruth Tsoffar, an Israeli-born anthropologist, studies how San Francisco's Karaite Jews, who emigrated from Egypt (some via Israel), observe biblical menstrual laws in ways that are extremely socially limiting for women.

**“Once I got married, I had to tell the whole world when I have my period.”**

When a girl first gets her period, she must wash all her clothes, sleep in a separate bed (if she has shared one with a sibling) and eat at a separate table with silverware specifically designated for the menstruating woman or girl. In Karaite communities in Cairo, menstruating women were not allowed to cook food, enter the synagogue or touch anyone, especially their husbands. On the other hand, Karaite couples resume sexual relations seven or eight days after menstruation (a week earlier than the rabbinic tradition mandated), and Karaite women do not immerse in a mikvah after their periods. Instead, they perform a ritual at home in the shower; the woman stands, and another woman pours seven cups of water over her while instructing her to recite the Sh'ma.

Karaite women have the double burden of both hiding and exposing their menstrual status. As one woman ruefully explained, “I grew up in a home in which no one knew that I had my period and when I had my period. But once I got married, I had to tell the whole world that I have my period.” A mother of a bar mitzvah boy is unable to participate in his celebration when she gets her period, even after carefully choosing the bar mitzvah date after long calculations. Another woman who has her period on the first night of Passover must spend the Seder sitting at a separate table, away from her family and other guests. And a Karaite religious teacher once asked one of Tsoffar's colleagues, “*Mah ha-matsav shelakh?*” (How is your situation/condition?), and then explained, “It's not shameful [to be menstruating or to ask about it]. It's natural. If you have it, we should wash the chair afterwards.”

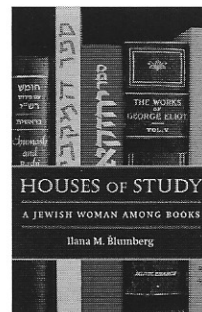
For all the oppressiveness of these restrictions, they also enable Karaite women to feel connected to generations of women in their community, following rules and codes passed on from mother to daughter. In sharing their stories with us as well, Tsoffar acknowledges that she may make some readers squeamish. Yet by airing Karaite women's dirty (or bloody) laundry, so to speak, she has opened a window into women's ritual life in a little-known Jewish community.

—Susan Sapiro

## Female Wisdom/Male Knowledge

Ilana M. Blumberg's *Houses of Study* (University of Nebraska Press, \$24.95) is a love affair with books—both those that open from left to right, and those that open from right to left. In this memoir, which spans two continents and nearly four decades, Blumberg describes the words and texts that shaped her as a feminist, a Jew, a professor of literature, and the mother of a young daughter for whom she now delights, not surprisingly, in selecting books.

Blumberg moves back and forth in time, beginning with the year she spent



studying Jewish texts in an Orthodox seminary in Israel when she was 18. She contrasts the feminine form of wisdom that was expected of the young women, *Binah*, with the more serious and rigorous *Hokhmah* to which their male counterparts aspired. For Blumberg, *binah* was never enough; secretly she prayed, “Teach me more than I need to know. Help me find *hokhmah*, wisdom, acquired knowledge. And let the reward for my combined *binah* and *hokhmah* be something other than a good match.”

Blumberg devotes herself wholeheartedly to the pursuit of knowledge, beginning with her childhood years in Ann Arbor of the 1970s, where “the dictionary held down our house.” She learns to chant from the Torah not at the Orthodox day school she attended, but from her father. Her Hebrew comes to her from her fervent Zionist grandfather, author of one of the first modern Hebrew textbooks, who writes her letters from his home on Rehov Beit HaKerem in Jerusalem. Blumberg's studies continue at Barnard, where she describes negotiating the space between Butler Library and the *beit midrash* (house of religious study)—a passage that recalls Virginia Woolf, whom she invokes along with Donne, Yeats, and her beloved George Eliot.

For Blumberg, the pleasure of knowledge is always meant to be shared, and she is not to be stopped by barriers to her full engagement: “Praying at my *bubbe's* side, I have imagined jumping or falling over the railing of the balcony, wondering what a falling female body might look like from above, from below, surprised that no girl has yet had the courage or the decency or the fear to fall.” Blumberg allows herself to fall freely—first for the non-Jewish boyfriend she lives with during her graduate school years (much to her mother's consterna-

tion), and then for the idea of a Jewish family, which she cannot have with him. And so while all her friends are “simply, untroubledly married,” she finds herself neither here nor there, lamenting “how not having a family of my own makes Jewish life impossible, how faith seems stupid without children, husbands, mothers-in-law. How there is no joy, comfort, or pleasure in banding together with other single Jews my own age, pretending we are a family, assigning the postures we learned in our earliest childhood games of playing Shabbat.”

Ultimately, Blumberg finds her match, but the true moments of pas-

sion in this book, as in the Donne poem she quotes in full, “care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.” Her prose soars to a breathless lyricism when she enacts for us the pleasures and perils of conquering an uncharted page of Gemara; and the complicated, fascinating laws governing the treatment of holy books, which must be kissed when they fall to the ground; and the significance of her name, Ilana, spelled out in Hebrew on a gold necklace, with the letters lamed and nun “restraining the attraction of the magnetic characters [yood and hey, a name for God], whose union is believed sufficient to spark the divine fire.” This book is a

union of letters and texts no less magnetic; to enter Ilana Blumberg’s houses of study is, invariably, to become ignited.

—Ilana Kursban

## Assimilation at Mid-Century

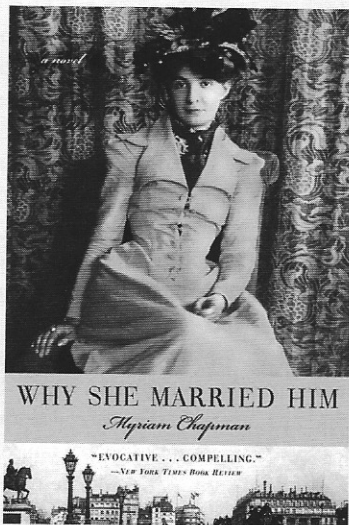
It is an oft-told story: inter-connected Jewish immigrants make good, then collide over the wedding that makes them family. *Golden Country* by Jennifer Gilmore (Scribner, \$25.00) is a poignant and engaging novel about the Jewish-American immigrant experience, complete with difficult mothers, Eastern and Western European culture clashes,

In *Charity Girl* by Michael Lowenthal (Houghton Mifflin, \$24.00) and *Why She Married Him* by Myriam Chapman (Other Press, \$14.95), young women living at key historical moments fight to take control of their choices and their lives.

In the midst of World War I, Lowenthal’s Frieda Mintz is held in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, in a War Department detention home for women suspected of spreading sexually transmitted diseases to soldiers. Frieda, who’d tangled with her family over her wild streak, left her mother’s home after her father’s sudden death. She wants to choose “sky-high over safe,” not like her mother who, Frieda believes, thinks that “everyone, to keep the world in spin, must be dragged down to her level of frustration.” Frieda yearns to race behind the wheel of a fast car, like the heroines in the movies she escapes to, using money intended for meals. She adores working at Jordan Marsh, where she feels part of the sisterhood of the ladies’ undergarment department.

While marching in the All America Liberty Loan parade, Frieda meets a charming soldier, and soon after is tracked down by an inspector who informs her that she is infected with a “social disease.” Lowenthal includes an author’s note explaining that during World War I, the U.S. government detained 30,000 women for offenses that ranged from dressing provocatively to suspected prostitution. About half of these women, the ones who were then diagnosed with sexually transmitted diseases, were held for months without trial.

At the detention home, the women (and girls) face daily lectures and chores. Frieda sums up the philosophy as “desire kills, appetite is evil,” which she likens to her mother’s attitudes. Whereas the men are “innocent victims,” the women are blamed for spreading disease and told that they must take responsibility for their own health, to choose their own happy ending. The one other Jewish



resident instantly recognizes Frieda as a Jew. Frieda worries. “People always seem to think they know just who she is: a Jew, a reckless girl, a slut. If the first label’s right, how long can she resist the conclusion that the rest are also true?” During her time in Fitchburg, aided by fellow inmates and staff members, Frieda struggles to define her relationship with her family and determine who she wants to be.

Across the world in Paris, in Myriam Chapman’s *Why She Married Him*, the slightly older Nina Schavranski fights to gain her parents’ acceptance of her decision to marry Abraham Podselver, a Socialist she has met through the Russian University lectures. The novel follows the roots of Nina and Abraham’s courtship back through Nina’s family history and their decision to leave Ukraine after a pogrom.

In Ukraine, Nina had sympathized with the growing workers’ movement, but she balanced the desire for broad justice with her respect for her own father’s treatment of the employees of his clothing workshop. Chapman shows how Nina has fought to prove to others that she shares their earnest desire for change, while not rejecting her bourgeois parents.

Nina’s relationships with mentors, teachers, and suitors who both taught and betrayed her, are all believable, but her choice to marry Abraham may be difficult for modern readers to grasp. In her strongest moment of praise, she describes him as “Only sometimes a little hard,” telling her mother, “He will change. Mamatchka, I know it.” She may believe that marrying him solidifies her commitment to being a progressive, but she risks her family’s disapproval without even the promise of future happiness. After telling her parents about the engagement and that she is “already happy,” Nina finds that a “new fierceness takes possession of her. It is not so hard to be happy, she thinks. I can do it.”

—Sara Marks