

imposed upon the marital “merchandise” by members of both sexes—such as body builds defined by the “media-created construction of beauty,” or “perfect” levels of religious observance. This extended singleness raises unprecedented tensions: if, starved for human touch, individuals violate their own standards of forbidden physical contact, can they carry on religiously as though nothing has happened? Meanwhile, community leaders ask: Does mainstreaming singles risk legitimizing a way of life alien to Jewish mores?

The realities of Jewish married life are addressed sensitively by several essays discussing education for “family purity” observance. Does the period of enforced abstinence following the menstrual period really make a wife “as dear to [her husband] as on their wedding day”? Not always, admits Deena R. Zimmerman. However, halakhic arguments in favor notwithstanding, shortening the period of abstinence will have to wait, according to Zimmerman, for “the rebuilding of the Temple.” Though trained as a female halakhic advisor (a new institution on the Orthodox scene), she urges those in need of leniencies to pop their stained underwear into the mailbox of a male *posek* (rabbinic decisor). Was she there for Stampfer’s remark that “questions of *taharat hamishpahah* were [traditionally] in the purview of women”?

The book concludes with an excellent presentation of a comprehensive sample curriculum on “Life Values and Intimacy Education” for yeshiva day schools, by Yocheved Debow and Anna C. Woloski-Wruble. In the crucial area of sexual values and ethics, why aren’t these compelling ideas addressed not only to the Modern Orthodox, but to Jews everywhere?

DEBORAH GRENNIMAN

Mommy and Me

A very different kind of motherhood novel

Meg Wolitzer’s *The Ten Year Nap* (Riverhead Books, \$24.95), though presented as a novel, is more of an ensemble piece, where the voice of each of her

female characters works best in juxtaposition with the others. It’s less plot than plotting: these are the stories of women who’ve each chosen, one way or another, to make their families their careers.

The characters in this book are book-smart, if not whip-smart. Take Amy Buckner, who has left her career in law to be home with her child; now that he’s 10, she feels deep ambivalence about returning to work. She lives vicariously (as women inevitably tend to do in women-themed books, oddly enough) through the clandestine affair her new friend Penny Ramsey is having with a gorgeous young Englishman. Amy’s old best friend, Jill Hamlin, has moved out to the suburbs with her adopted daughter, and finds herself painfully isolated and lonely. Another mother from Amy’s son’s school, Roberta Sokolov, is a liberal-minded activist who works as a volunteer with a grassroots organization to help young women in South Dakota get abortions—yet she still finds that her life lacks definition.

The women travel through age-appropriate circles of ideas and conversation, from the crushing economic vise of family life in Manhattan to the permutations of sexuality within the context of marriage. Amy can’t figure out why her husband seems to be more attached to his BlackBerry than his libido, and discovers that in order to make economic ends meet in Manhattan, he has been labeling the couple’s expenses as work expenses to be reimbursed.

Yet two features set this book apart from the standard pink-cover genre of “chick lit.” First, a kind of chronological kaleidoscope lends the modern tribulations a welcome grounding and gravitas; Wolitzer intersperses chapters about the women of the early 21st century with stories of their mothers and their pasts, from Amy’s Canadian feminist mom to Penny’s lover’s mother, a secretary for Margaret Thatcher. The second redeeming characteristic of the book is Wolitzer’s skill with language, and her ability to convey common situations in a few well-chosen words. When pondering her son’s addiction to fantasy novels, Amy muses, “Maybe it was just that the actual world

of adulthood, with its long meetings and requirements that you sit still, was too disappointing for most boys to face head-on.... At which point, in order to weather the pain of losing that last fantasy foothold, you discovered the sexual wonders of girls, with their outsized breasts, nimble tongues, and the geometrical welcome of their open legs. You replaced one type of fantasy with another, and then you never, ever had to lose that one.”

The idea behind the title—that women who opt out of the workforce to be at home with their children are, in effect, taking a nap—may at first seem depressing. But for its natural readership of intelligent women who have made this choice, women who spend most of their time alternating a monosyllabic, child-friendly vocabulary with a polysyllabic echo chamber of self-examination, this book will resonate. Under the piles of to-be-folded clothing and behind the wheels of the SUVs picking up four-year olds, there are unspoken words, frustrations, bittersweet regrets and, occasionally, brilliance.

JORDANA HORN

The Rain in Babylon

An unexpected interrogation of the Talmud

Massekhet Ta’anit (Mohr Siebeck, €89.00), is the inaugural volume in a new series of scholarly feminist analyses of each of the tractates of the Babylonian Talmud. *Ta’anit*, the tractate that is the subject of this volume by Tal Ilan, deals with ritual fasting, usually in a case when rain fails to fall.

Ta’anit, which literally means “fast,” seems at first to be a surprising choice for feminist analysis; why not begin with any of the various tractates that deal directly with women’s issues, such as *Ketubot* (marriage contracts) or *Niddah* (menstrual impurity)? Yet as Ilan compellingly demonstrates, the central metaphor that runs through this tractate is highly gendered: the rabbis use the term “copulation” [*r’via*] to describe rainfall. Rain is overtly compared to a male (Ilan aptly translates the Talmudic phrase as

“virile rain”) and the land, of course, is always female. Moreover, the rabbis of the Talmud explicitly compare the land under rainfall to a woman in the act of sexual intercourse, which reflects another common Talmud metaphor in which a woman is the fertile field in which a man deposits his seed.

Ilan’s examination of this metaphor as it plays itself out throughout the tractate is a central subject of this volume, but not its only subject. She also considers all those passages in Ta’anit that deal with women and gender. Her analysis extends to such issues as: Did men and women dance together in Talmudic times? Did the women of the Talmud wear make-up? And, following the twisted thread of Talmudic discursiveness, she touches also upon issues as far afield as: Did anyone have sex in Noah’s ark? How to account for the trope of women eating their children that appears in Lamentations as well as in rabbinic literature?

These questions, which arise out of passages in this tractate, are explored through comparative analysis with the Jerusalem Talmud and classical rabbinic midrashic collections. All texts are presented in both Hebrew and English, with parallel texts placed conveniently side-by-side and with all feminist or gender-related passages underlined.

“Feminist investigation is most interested in the history of textual transmission,” she explains in her methodological introduction. “It is the working hypothesis of this discipline that editing and copying worked in a specific direction—to belittle, denigrate and silence women.” Unfortunately, the print of the text is in a

frustratingly small font size. One can only lament that even in our age, which has witnessed a great revolution in feminist Jewish scholarship, women are still making themselves small.

This series of feminist commentaries on the tractates of the Babylonian Talmud is the brainchild of Ilan, an Israeli-born professor who is currently teaching in the department of Jewish Studies at the Freie Universität in Berlin. The other tractates have been assigned to feminist Jewish scholars the world over, including Judith Hauptman of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Tirzah Meacham of the University of Toronto, and Shulamit Valler of the University of Haifa. The publication of this series, which is sponsored by the Freie Universität, is the first time since WWII that significant scholarship in the field of Talmud is being spearheaded and funded by a German academic institution. Moreover, although feminist Bible commentaries have been around for decades, this series looks to be the first comprehensive and systematic feminist analysis of the entire Babylonian Talmud.

To invoke the central metaphor of this volume, one can only hope, then, that Tal Ilan’s efforts will continue to yield fruit.

ILANA KURSHAN

Protestant, Muslim, Jew

One convoluted family of believers

Sadia Shepard, author of the memoir *Girl From Foreign: A Search for Shipwrecked Ancestors, Lost Loves, and Forgotten Histories* (The Penguin Press,

\$25.95), was raised near Boston by a white Protestant American father, a Pakistani Muslim mother, and her maternal grandmother, Nana. She grew up comfortable with her complex identity until, at the age of 13, she discovered that her grandmother had been born and raised Jewish in Bombay’s Bene Israel community, the tiny Indian Jewish community that traces its roots back to the Lost Tribes of Israel. Just before Nana’s death, Shepard promises her that she will return to her grandmother’s homeland. This book is the moving account of how she fulfilled that promise.

Shepard goes to India both because she longs to connect with her grandmother in a deeper way and because she feels that she must understand the Judaism of Nana in order to choose which religion is hers. She becomes involved in the Bene Israel community, teaching in the local Jewish school, going to services and celebrations at the synagogue her grandmother once attended, and tracking down Nana’s family in Bombay and her ancestral village on the Konkan coast. Her exploration is not a search for a theological Truth, but a quest to unpack what it means to belong—to family, to community, to country. As she says, “I want to be accepted here more than anything... I want to understand the story of the Bene Israel and find a way to tell it. I want the grocer and the vegetable man... to recognize me when I approach. I want to make myself understood in Hindi. I want to fit in, to live here and feel at home.”

Shepard’s narrative intertwines her relationship with her grandmother and the rest of her family in Boston, her

