
Any observer of trends in the field of Jewish studies will have noted that two areas in particular have seen much new research and publication activity of late: the study of women and Judaism, and kabbala. These two trends come together in Ada Rapoport-Albert’s book on women and the kabbalistically-based messianic movement of Sabbatai Zevi and its offshoots from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

*Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi* begins and ends with the author’s reflections on the position of women in the Hasidic movement, which sprang to life in eighteenth century Eastern Europe at a time when Jewish communities worldwide had been thoroughly traumatized by the Sabbatian movement. In contrast to scholars, like Shmuel Abba Horodetsky, at the beginning of the twentieth century, and Nehemia Polen, at its end, who claimed to have found in the Hasidic movement “something of a feminist revolution in Judaism” (p. 1), Rapoport-Albert will have none of it. Neither in the structure nor in the ethos of Hasidism does she find any meaningful access for women who, for example, were excluded from the rebbe’s table at which he delivered his Torah. Possible exceptions to her thesis are given short shrift.

In contrast, the author meticulously demonstrates that the Sabbatian movement, from its inception to its demise as an organized force, included women not merely as followers and enablers, but also as leaders, prophets, and even messianic figures, “personally and even prominently engaged in the fellowships’ activities alongside or together with the men”. (p. 107) From Gershom Scholem’s
pioneering research on Sabbatianism and onward, scholars have been aware of this phenomenon, but no one prior to Rapoport-Albert has marshaled the available evidence to reveal a pervasive pattern with the same thoroughness. It is a pattern so remarkable that she can characterize it, in the title of one of her chapters, as an “egalitarian agenda”. Sabbatai Zevi himself gave voice to this impulse in a direct address to the Jewish women of Izmir (itself a transgressive act), in which he told them “I have come to redeem you from all your sufferings, to liberate you…” (p. 108) It continues in the writings of one of the greatest Sabbatian propagandists, Abraham Cardoso, and reaches its height in the world view of Jacob Frank and his movement, “culminating in the veneration in Frankist circles of Eva Frank as the female messiah and the living incarnation of the divine sefirah Malkhut”. (p. 321)

Whence comes this upending of the established patriarchal character of rabbinic Judaism? Rapoport-Albert traces its roots to two likely sources. The first is the religious culture of the conversos, those Jews forcibly converted to Christianity in Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century and their descendents. Under conditions in which the “public” face of Judaism (e.g. synagogues and schools) dominated by males had ceased to exist, women, who had been historically experienced in how to maintain Jewishness in the private domain came into their own as leaders. When the conversos and their descendents “returned” to rabbinic Judaism in places like the Ottoman Empire or Amsterdam, Rapoport-Albert speculates that the influence of this experience remained powerful. (p. 112)

The second potent factor to be considered is the mythic world of sixteenth and seventeenth century kabbala. The Zohar, for instance, a prime source of the kabbalistic world view, imagines “diametrically opposed conditions in which women operate in [the] other world. In their heavenly palaces they are relieved of all their earthly duties and obligations…the righteous women devote all their time to spiritual ‘pleasures and luxuries’”. (pp. 126-127) Women prophets and diviners are taken seriously by such key figures as Rabbi Hayyim Vital.

All of these trends come together in a Sabbatian movement that proclaimed that the coming of the messiah had basically and fundamentally changed the way the
The cosmos operated. This change meant that the relationship of Jews to the existing structure of Torah law was now fundamentally altered as well, including those parts of Torah law regulating and restricting the role of women, and prominently including the Torah’s rules of sexual propriety.

Hasidism, a revolutionary movement in its own right, was accused by its early opponents of Sabbatian-like heresies. Rapoport-Albert, however, concludes that, with respect to women, Hasidism went in a completely different direction from the one taken by the Sabbatians. She speculates in her conclusion that the Hasidism did so as a reaction against the heretical group’s inclusion of women. As she states, there is a “probability that in erecting their own impermeable gender barriers, the Hasidic masters were not just conforming to a traditional gender norm, but rather they were recoiling with horror from the spectre of its breached boundaries.” (p. 277)

*Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi* is a book of importance for all those interested in gender issues related to Jews and Judaism, as well as for those engaged in the study of Jewish mysticism. It further challenges people engaged in the study of Jews and Judaism in the Early Modern period to pay careful attention to the ways in which the Sabbatian believers influenced historical developments both in direct and in dialectical ways.

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