

THE JOY OF WISDOM. AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH R. BASKIN

Judith R. Baskin and Katja Stuerzenhofecker*

Introduction

What follows is a transcript of the interview with Judith R. Baskin that opened the Sherman Conversations 2017 on the theme ‘Gender and Jewish Studies’.¹ Baskin is Philip H. Knight Professor Emerita in Humanities in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Oregon. Most of her work is in the areas of medieval studies and Rabbinic literature.² Her contribution to gender studies in Jewish Studies spans four decades, beginning at a time when there were virtually no gender-sensitive resources to draw on. It is this general aspect of living through and contributing to the paradigm shift brought about by the emergence of gender studies that is the focus of this interview. The appreciation of Baskin’s output itself is left to those who can do it justice.

The interview highlights significant milestones in the journey of Baskin’s scholarship including her awakening to the twin facts that there is a huge gap in the historiography of the Jewish past, and a limited construction of what it means to be a Jew. We explore factors that have facilitated and hindered Baskin’s career, and the ways in which she herself has built networks of support.

The title of this interview refers to *simchat hokhmah*, the ritual created by Savina Teubal in the 1980s to celebrate a woman’s transition from adult to elder as a vital member of the community with many gifts to share. Judith Baskin had moved on to being emerita only three months previous to the interview. It seems more than fitting that during the interview we watched a video of Debbie Friedman singing for the first time “L’chi Lach” at Teubal’s own *simchat hokhmah*.³ That is to say, Baskin’s publications and interventions in academic institutions continue to be a blessing for Jewish Studies.

KS: Welcome Professor Baskin. We are very pleased to have you with us coming all the way from [the University of] Oregon. But I guess officially you’re now happily [retired], having left institutional life behind you.

JRB: It is true that I retired June 15 of this year (2017), but my university gives retired faculty the option of continuing part-time teaching for up to 5 years, so it’s an easing out rather than an abrupt ending. I will continue teaching one course each term this coming academic year, and then I’ll see how I feel, if I want to go further; but, yes officially, I’m now emerita.

KS: And your CV tells us that you’ve got publications lined up as well which I hope we’ll be talking about.

JRB: Yes, and I expect that will continue into the future.

KS: I want to start in an artificial way by asking you about your student experience, but of course in a way the story doesn’t start there, I’m sure. And as we go through it, we might all want to think about how does that differ or where are the similarities to my own journey. We can think about what difference context makes.

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¹ The Sherman Conversations 2017: Gender and Jewish Studies, hosted by the Centre for Jewish Studies, University of Manchester, 4/09/2017. See: <http://www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/sherman-conversations-2017/>

² For a full list of publications and activities see Baskin’s academic profile at the University of Oregon: <https://casprofile.uoregon.edu/sites/casprofile2.uoregon.edu/files/cv/cv-1818.pdf>

³ <https://youtu.be/Oy1p2elmM8I>

We do have an accidental biographical connection, you and me: the year when you finished your BA in 1971, that was the year I was born, and now that you officially retired from Oregon, that's the year when I'm expecting to get my doctorate. So, different journeys with overlaps.

You went to Antioch College which prides itself to be the first co-educational college in the United States with the same educational opportunities for women and men. Then you went to Yale where I guess the gender set up amongst students was rather different.

JRB: Yes, Antioch College is in Yellow Springs, Ohio. My mother, who grew up in Denver, Colorado, chose to go to Antioch around 1944 because it had a unique work-study plan where one studied for three months and then went and worked somewhere, ideally in one's area of vocational interest. My mother was a pre-med student and this structure gave her many opportunities in pharmaceutical companies and at hospitals. It was not as easy to find appropriate jobs for someone in the Humanities. I began university study 50 years ago in 1967. I was a History Major and spent my junior year at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. 1969-70 was a euphoric time in Israel; it was two years after the Six-Day War and the unification of Jerusalem, and that year, I think, saw the largest number of international students at Hebrew University.

If I look back over my four years of undergraduate study, I only became aware of the new wave of feminism and the beginnings of feminist studies in the year when I returned from Israel, 1970. But such approaches were still very much on the periphery and were significantly marginalized.

During my Antioch years, I can recall two female professors, only one of whom was a tenured faculty member. That was in a course on Victorian England, and she did do a small amount of research on Jewish working girls in London, but only much later in her career. There was very little about women in any of the academic courses that I took, and certainly not at the Hebrew University, although the professor of a course I took on Islamic Art was female. Although there were, of course, female students, we were not exposed to feminist approaches; there were no courses on women, and no idea of the importance of gender as a category of analysis, even at a place like Antioch College which was extremely liberal and always ahead of its time. This was especially true in terms of racial issues. In addition to its early-adopter co-educational policies, Antioch was one of the first institutions in the United States to admit African-American students. Coretta Scott King, the wife and then widow of Martin Luther King, was a student there during my mother's time. Antioch later went on to become famous, probably 10 or 15 years ago, in establishing a code of sexual contact, establishing a pattern for any kind of sexual relationship which should be consensual from act to act, "may I kiss you" etc., which became a pattern of respect, so it was forward-looking. But again, it's quite amazing to look back and see that even in 1970-71, academic questions about gender were not raised.

I went on to Yale University as a post-graduate student in 1971. Yale College, the undergraduate core of the university, had become co-ed only two years earlier, in 1969. By 1971, there were women undergraduates who were third-year students as well as women in the first and second year, and there were also a fair number of women in the Graduate School (which had been admitting women for many years). In my program, which was Medieval Studies, eight students were admitted the year that I came in, four men and four women. By the end of that year only four of us remained, two men and two women. And ultimately, only two of us, one male and one female, went on to academic careers. Today the program only takes in one student per year, perhaps more realistically, but in the early '70s the same result was achieved by a winnowing process. In those years, there was no Jewish Studies program, either in the Yale Graduate School or in Yale College, although there were relevant courses.

KS: In 'The Scholar as Daughter' (1998) you're reflecting on your family background, and the marginalization as a Jewish female amongst Christians and especially Protestants. You write about your schooling where you had to sing Christian hymns and read New Testament texts -

JRB: - none of which I regret by the way, it was very broadening. I grew up in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. My parents were in fact American. My father was a Reform rabbi, who was hired at the Temple Anshei Sholom in Hamilton in 1949 and remained there throughout his career. It was an industrial city, with a population then of about 300,000. There was an educational separation between Protestants and Roman Catholics, a by-product of the confederation of Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Québec) in 1867. The provinces equally fund Catholic schools and public schools, as it were, so that's why the public school population was mostly Protestant with a very small sprinkling of Jewish students. In the western part of the city where I and where most Jews lived, there would be perhaps two or three Jewish students in any given class. And there was religious education in the schools, including hymns, recitation of the Lord's Prayer, a daily Bible reading, and even a minister who would come in once a week and give a little *drash*, usually on a New Testament passage.

KS: We come to that aspect when we talk about your thesis in a minute but you already mentioned your exposure, or lack of, to feminist thought. I went through the historiography of early feminist literature, and what I found was 1971, Rachel Adler's "The Jew Who Wasn't There" in *Davka*, also in *Davka* Rita Gross' 1976 "Female God Language in a Jewish Context," and the same year in *Lilith*, Blu Greenberg "Women's Liberation in Jewish Law," and [you] in 1976 presented a paper at Smith College on women and religious vocation in Judaism.

JRB: In 1976, I was hired at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. By then, issues connected with feminism and Judaism were becoming much more visible. I was not involved in the groups in New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia, where people like the late Paula Hymen, a major matriarchal figure in our field, were involved not only on a scholarly level in using gender as a category of analysis but also in their personal lives in finding ways in which women could find equal roles in Jewish religious practice. Because I had attended college in Ohio, and because of my family's origins in Hamilton, Ontario, I was outside of those circles that originated in large urban centers with significant Jewish communities and educational options.

But certainly when I came to the East coast to Yale, I became much more aware of the growing Jewish feminist movement and by the time I was at UMass at Amherst in 1976 where people like Judith Plaskow and her partner Donna Devine, who was a professor at Smith College, were on the scene, I began to participate. Smith College is just a few miles from the University of Massachusetts. Amherst College, Smith College, Mount Holyoke College, Hampshire College and the University form a consortium, and there are a lot of interdisciplinary and also intercollegiate events, such as that 1976 symposium. Also, it was only in 1976 that I discovered the memoirs of Glikl of Hamelin, when I came across the Schocken paperback at a bookstore.

I have to say that in my Graduate School education there was little consciousness of feminism and its potential impact on academic research. Although one professor, Roberto Lopez, an important medievalist, who founded Medieval Studies at Yale, did give a seminar in which I participated on "Approaches to Medieval Studies" in 1972. He was prescient and he saw that women's studies was going to become a scholarly field. And he encouraged the four or five of us in the seminar to think about focusing dissertation work on women, which was very farsighted. In fact, I did prepare a bibliography on Jewish women in England, a topic in which I was interested. My research would have been somewhat different had I taken that route, but there was no professorial encouragement nor any obvious scholar with whom to work. And, at the same time I was enchanted with my courses on midrash and with comparative exegetical work in patristic studies. The thing about the Medieval Studies Program at Yale was you could move in diverse directions and I ended up doing a dissertation that compared three biblical gentiles, Balaam, Jethro, and Job, in rabbinic and patristic texts of the late antique era.

However, ironically, because of my interdisciplinary training I have written on both medieval topics and on rabbinic themes, which I think is also a function of having started almost 50 years ago. Today, I don't think many young scholars would do that because they tend to be trained intensively in

one specific area. But in Medieval Studies we were trained to be very careful scholars in our textual readings, but also to do comparative work, so I have enjoyed being able to do work in both areas.

KS: I always like reading the acknowledgements in books as a sort of academic gossip column. When your doctoral thesis was published as *Pharaoh's Counsellors* in 1983, you acknowledge Brevard Childs, the giant of Old Testament at Yale who I believe saw his scholarship as Christian discipleship, and Sid Leiman, a Jewish Studies scholar, Jaroslav Pelikan, Judah Goldin, Robert Doran and Susan Niditch at Amherst College, and Jacob Neusner.

JRB: Brevard Childs was a lovely man. I signed up for his course on "Old Testament Law" at the Yale Divinity School. There were only two Jewish students in the course, and he assigned a reading that we found offensive because it was predicated on understanding the Old Testament as a prediction of Christianity. We approached him about that, confronted him as it were, and he was very sympathetic and acknowledged that, yes, this was his approach but he suggested that we should look at other points of view. He then added course readings, including a famous Moshe Greenberg (1960) article on Jewish law, into the course. We each had to make a presentation and I presented Greenberg's work to the class. Professor Childs was helpful to me and he agreed to be one of my dissertation readers.

The Yale Divinity School did have an approach in those days that was very Christocentric, as one would expect. Of course, I had no idea of this when I signed up for the course. This approach has changed over the decades but Judah Goldin, whom I thought of as my mentor and potential dissertation director, did ultimately leave Yale, as I understand it, because he felt the Department of Religious Studies was too closely tied to the Divinity School. Mr. Goldin was there when I came in '71. I took his midrash seminar for two years and I sat in on his undergraduate Biblical Hebrew class. We read the 2 Samuel inheritance narrative and it was a wonderful and revelatory experience. And I took his Rashi seminar and served as one of his teaching assistants in an undergraduate "Introduction to Hebrew Bible" course; also, in the summer of 1972, I joined two other students once a week in reading Kohelet at his home. I adored him, really, and I was very sad when he left for the University of Pennsylvania at the end of the 1972-73 academic year.

But he was kind enough to come to my PhD. orals to be one of the questioners, and he did something very important for me when I turned parts of my dissertation into a book, *Pharaoh's Counsellors*. I had a hard time in the early 1980s finding a publisher. Today, it's different, there is more interest in exegesis, comparative exegesis and the theme of biblical gentiles, as well as in publishing Jewish Studies scholarship in general. I couldn't find a publisher and I was aware of the Brown University Judaic Studies Series, under the supervision of Professor Jacob Neusner. Neusner was a formidable figure. I wrote to him and he said if Mr Goldin (at Yale we called our professors "Mr"; there were virtually no female tenured faculty with the exception of one scholar in the English Department) would vouch for me and my work, he would consider my manuscript. Mr Goldin agreed, even though he and Prof Neusner did not get along, to write a letter on behalf of the book and I think he addressed it "To whom it may concern". Nevertheless he did it and my first book was accepted and published in Brown Judaic Studies. This enabled me to receive tenure and made my further career possible.

My relationship with Jacob Neusner, who passed away recently, was only positive throughout my scholarly career. He was not only supportive of me, but also of his only female graduate student, the late Judith Romney Wegner who was one of my close friends. Over the years, Professor Neusner invited me to write essays for volumes he edited with his students. These include a chapter about his various views of gender and rabbinic literature for his *Festschrift*. He wrote a review (2003) of my book *Midrashic Women*, which he praised, and it was very rare for him to praise anyone, but he also said that in his view feminist studies of Judaism were a dead end but that nevertheless I had done as well as anyone could with this limited subject.

KS: In 1979 in *Method and Meaning in Ancient Judaism*, he *already* used a gender-sensitive lens pointing out the famous passage “women are a separate people” (BT Shabbat 62a), [that] male self-representation is androgynous and feminized, and [that] the impact of rabbinic law on women’s rights was a concern.⁴ So he did that on the one hand, he had that awareness on the one hand, but you say he wasn’t buying into feminist approaches.

JRB: As you say, he was very early in presenting very important insights about the secondary role, the otherness of women, in rabbinic Judaism. He really was the first one to state a lot of these things. Later in his career though, I think partly because of a dislike of what he saw as excesses of the university in the age of political correctness, he reversed himself and became more conservative in some of his later works. For his *Festschrift* (2014), I wrote an article on his approaches to women and gender and I pointed out this evolution.

I should just say a word about men of that generation of scholars. Some were cautiously receptive, but others had a very hard time psychologically in accepting women as equal colleagues and women’s experiences as worthy of study. I can give another anecdote: my father was a Reform rabbi, he is 98 now and still writing and teaching. Throughout his career he has written many pieces for popular audiences. He wrote one about 20 years ago on how Judaism had changed in the past two decades, and he asked me to read it and I did. He noted ten different areas of transformation but not one had to do with women. I said, “Daddy, this is really good but I can’t imagine how you would not have discussed women entering the rabbinate, and the impact of women as cantors and educators, and women taking on equal roles in synagogue leadership.” He admitted that I was correct and made appropriate changes, but this was a blind spot for him. So many of these men of those generations simply could not take women seriously on an intellectual level. Even Mr Goldin said to me once I would make a great dean of women. So yes, they made us angry and condemnatory, but I think we have to realize they were coming from particular places as well. For those who did overcome their prejudices and blind spots, as Professors Goldin and Neusner did in helping me in my career, I’m truly grateful.

KS: Are there any recurring frustrations and changing opportunities over the time of your career? From my generation’s perspective, I am very jealous of an academic progression from PhD. straight into full-time employment, staying with three institutions for such a long career. I don’t think that’s the academic landscape that I’m moving in now. I noticed that one of the events that you put on early on in 1983 at Yale was a lecture series “Young Women Scholars of Religion”.

JRB: Yes, I returned to Yale as a visiting assistant professor from 1981 to 1983, on leave from the University of Massachusetts; I think this hire demonstrated a wish on the part of some members of the Department of Religious Studies to bring a woman in. There certainly were no other women faculty in the department at that time, and it was not a tenure track job. But one of the things I was able to do was play a role in graduate admissions; in one instance, a male member of the committee objected to a female candidate because she was divorced. This happened in 1982, can you believe it?

In any case, I was given the wherewithal to organize the “Young Women Scholars of Religion” lecture series with the support of the department. Among the scholars was Susan Niditch from Amherst College who was later offered a position at Yale in Biblical Studies. She had a joint position at Amherst with her husband who was in New Testament and they wouldn’t offer him anything, so they have happily stayed at Amherst for their entire careers. So that’s another sign of the way things were – spousal hires were not even imagined as a possibility. Ross Kraemer was another of the speakers; she went on to be a professor at Brown University, focusing on women of various faiths in the Hellenistic world. Also, among the speakers was Professor Ann Matter from the University of Pennsylvania, who had written her Yale

⁴ See Judith R. Baskin, “Women and Gender in Jacob Neusner’s Writings,” in Alan J. Avery-Peck, ed., *A Legacy of Learning. Essays in Honor of Jacob Neusner*, 33-47 (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

PhD. on Christian readings of the Song of Songs. All of us then would have been in our early 30s. I think it was a wonderfully successful series. It demonstrated that high-quality women were embarking on important careers and doing important scholarship. As I recall, it was very well attended. Of course, in those days any time you had a topic dealing with women and gender, you accepted that only women would attend, whether at the university or in the larger community. This is a continuing issue. But I believe that the lecture series at Yale was of general interest.

KS: Maybe this is the place for my little story that when I was personally inviting attendees to this conference, one male invitee pointed out that I might have made a mistake because I invited him to an all-female panel.

JRB: I will tell a story, too. The first time I gave a paper at the Association for Jewish Studies was in 1984. The paper was about widows and divorcees as anomalous women in rabbinic Judaism and early on I mentioned Jacob Neusner's work in *Meaning and Method in Ancient Judaism*, to which you referred earlier. The moment I mentioned his name, some of the men in the audience started talking to each other; this was in the midst of my paper and they started talking, and not even in whispers: "Oh, Neusner!" And someone else said, "I am really going to get her in the question period." I did what I would have done in the classroom if students were speaking during a class lecture, which is: I just stopped. I stopped talking and just looked at them until finally they noticed that the room was silent and they looked up. I shook for the remainder of the paper, it was so emotionally overwhelming, but I read it all. One of the men had the good manners to apologize afterwards. But that is the kind of thing that women were facing in the late '70s and '80s in academic settings, especially in the Association for Jewish Studies, which in those days was overwhelmingly male.

KS: [Your publication record begins with] a paper in 1979 on "The Rabbinic Transformations of Rahab the Harlot".⁵ I notice that you picked up the theme of prostitution again in the 2000s in an edited volume *The Passionate Torah* (2009). What's the explicit turn towards women's studies, what happened between the doctoral thesis and Rahab, and what came after that?

JRB: Mr. Goldin was the one who suggested that I might pursue Rahab because she was also a biblical gentile, in that I had written my dissertation on gentiles. I have to say that the initial paper (1979) was not written from a particularly feminist stance. I wrote about her and the rabbinic traditions about her and I sent it out under my full name, Judith R. Baskin, to various journals. It was returned with comments such as, "What is she writing about prostitutes for? Why?," that were very negative and appeared to be responding to a female author and the topic rather than what I actually said. It was ultimately accepted but not in a Jewish Studies-oriented journal. This experience convinced me that from then on I would send out articles only under my initials J. R. Baskin, and not make it clear that it was a woman writing. Using this strategy, I published several articles on patristics in *Vigiliae Christianae*, and I didn't have any problem. This experience showed me that in that moment in time the male gaze on an article written by a woman would likely be hostile. I also had no inkling then that an important aspect of publishing had to do with patronage and scholars doing favors for other scholars and their students. I had no mentor who was actively invested in helping me establish and advance my career.

What happened to bring me to feminist studies was the larger society in which I was living. During the two years I spent at Yale in the early 1980s, I was invited by the New Haven Jewish Women's Federation to be part of a lecture series on "World of our Mothers" (1982). This was shortly after the Irving Howe volume, *World of our Fathers* (1976), about Eastern European Jewish immigration to the United States was published, and these female Jewish community leaders had the idea of "World of our Mothers." I was asked to talk about Jewish women in the Middle Ages. Then, as I began to do research,

⁵ Accessed online at: <https://casprofile.uoregon.edu/sites/casprofile2.uoregon.edu/files/cv/cv-1818.pdf>

I was surprised to realize how little had been written about medieval Jewish women. I give Jacob Marcus enormous credit that in his collection of primary sources, *The Jew in the Medieval World* (1938), he included a fair number of excerpts about women (I am also appreciative of his pioneering work on American Jewish women); Irving A. Agus's books on medieval Franco-German Jewry based on Responsa literature also had some valuable material, but mostly the scholarship did not address women's lives. On the whole, the male experience was understood as the Jewish experience. That awakened me to the fact that if I was going to work on the Middle Ages, the place where I could contribute would be on Jewish women.

Similarly, around the same time I was invited to participate in a conference sponsored in Hartford, Connecticut by Trinity College and the Hartford Seminary, entitled "Women, religion and social change." I wrote a paper (1983) on women in rabbinic Judaism, afterwards published in the conference proceedings, *Women, Religion, and Social Change* (1985). So, in fact both of my subsequent scholarly tracks, Jewish women in the Middle Ages and representations of women in rabbinic literature, were beginning at the same time and in both cases I was shocked by the relative dearth of previous scholarship.

KS: I noticed that two early book reviews (1982, 1984) that you wrote in the early '80s, of Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz's *The Jew in the modern world* (1980) together with Chazan's *Church, State and Jew in the middle ages* (1982), and of Savina Teubal's *Sara the priestess* (1984), are paradigmatic for types of research and scholarship or agendas at [opposite] ends of the spectrum.

JRB: Yes, certainly that first edition of the Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz volume, as well as Chazan's anthology, had very little to say about women. I think in my career, partly by training, perhaps by personality, my approach has tended towards the synthetic; I have been very much a generalist, not least because so many areas have been of interest to me. As my vita demonstrates, I have written on topics connected with women from the biblical to the modern period; again this is something that was possible over the years of my career given that, in the early years at least, there were so few of us. I think most of the women in Jewish Studies scholarship of my era, those who earned their doctorates beginning in the 1970s, found themselves writing about themes having to do with women because of the confluence of the women's movement, the enormous changes going on in the general society and in contemporary forms of Judaism, and the fact that the books just weren't out there. Since so few of us had expertise early on, and I, at least, always tended to say yes if someone asked me to write something, we found ourselves covering broad areas of subject matter.

KS: You mention changes in Judaism at that time. I consider the work of Savina Teubal and also *Womanspirit Rising* (1979) displaying quite an overlap between scholarship and a desire to change the Jewish community. In 1999, you wrote a review of Daniel Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct* (1997) in which you were very dismissive of an effort that dresses up as academic scholarship, but actually pursues a personal agenda for social change of a particular kind.

JRB: Yes, I actually confronted him at an AJS conference about that because he admitted that he had consciously – how shall we put it? – not been factually correct at certain points in *Unheroic Conduct* and that he had used alternate facts, particularly in his discussion of Bertha Pappenheim, because they expressed his own wishes and hopes, rather than realities. I remember I said that books have lives of their own, and that a scholar has a responsibility in a book to represent things in a factual way to the best of the writer's knowledge, and should not present an imagined version of a more attractive past that fits one's present aspirations. I've always taken that line. I've been very unhappy with re-writings of biblical characters and times in ways that are anachronistic and do not fit with what we know of their actual contexts. I'm also somewhat suspicious of scholars, particularly those who write about rabbinic literature, who are looking for little redemptive hints in the texts that tie in with present-day struggles for religious

transformation. I feel there is, in the end, a line between scholarship and between social and religious change, and that while foundational documents can certainly be very useful and supportive, from a scholarly point of view we have to be as true to the text as we can. Boyarin shrugged when I raised these points, but others who were present expressed appreciation at what I said.

KS: Is there research from nowhere? To what extent is it impossible for the researcher not to pursue a particular agenda by simply asking certain questions and not others?

JRB: All scholarship in every era is affected by who we are, where we're coming from, and what is in the back of our minds, consciously and unconsciously, and thank goodness for that, because our changing concerns are what keeps scholarship alive and new in each generation. How many things could be said about any topic if we didn't have new approaches, new ways of reading texts, and if we weren't asking new questions?

KS: As you did in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* (1998).

JRB: What I found in my own work when I began investigating Jewish women in the Middle Ages and also analysing their representations in rabbinic texts was that it wasn't that new texts were being discovered. What was important was discovering new ways of reading the texts that had always been there and recognizing that a different set of questions was required. The questions that I was interested in had not been asked. In fact, as I mentioned, many source books, such as the Marcus volumes [mentioned earlier], presented primary documents connected with women, it's just that we didn't see them until we were looking for them. It was a matter of re-reading our sources, re-reading our texts, realizing that the Responsa literature, for example, is such a rich resource on ordinary Jews. Professor Elisheva Baumgarten at the Hebrew University has recently received a mammoth grant from a European scholarly council to write about Jewish everyday life in the Middle Ages. Although much of our historiography until recently has focused on famous and elite Jews, on the court Jews, on the philosophers, pictures of ordinary Jewish lives can be discovered through the use of Responsa literature, chronicles, Jewish and other non-Jewish literary and legal texts, the Genizah documents, and increasingly, evidence of all kinds from material culture.

So, what I'm saying is it's not research from nowhere; it is going back to our sources and asking different kinds of questions. And, tangentially, I gratefully acknowledge that the work of S. D. Goitein on the Genizah writings was significantly shaped by his interest in women's lives and his sympathy for their struggles. His *A Mediterranean Society* (1967) remains a treasure trove of information and insight about Jewish women.

KS: So in *Women of the Word* (1994) you took a similar approach.

JRB: I did not write an essay for that volume, just the introduction, but after I had completed the first edition of *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* (1991), I realized that it would be useful to look not only at men's representations of women but also at Jewish women who themselves were writers in different eras. We always talk about how difficult it is to find women's voices in the ancient and late ancient literatures. There are little snippets here and there. But by medieval times and certainly by the early modern era there were women who were writing, and so I asked various female scholars and one male scholar, Howard Tzvi Adelman, who works on Italian Jewry, to write about things that women had written, again many of which were known for a long time but had not been studied carefully, and certainly not from feminist perspectives.

KS: This collaborative effort is of interest to me because I'm faced with an academic industry that wants the single author monograph.

JRB: I have written two monographs, as well, and, of course, writing those books was central for my career. However, I think I was interested in a collaboration because Jewish Women's Studies has been such a collaborative effort. What saved Jewish Studies for me was my involvement in Jewish Women's Studies scholarship and the Jewish Women's Caucus of the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS). That's where I found my home at an organization that I had previously found alienating. The Women's Caucus began I think in the early 80s and it began simply with a meeting (now, at every conference there is an early morning breakfast). The goal of the Caucus was two-fold: to provide a place for female Jewish Studies scholars, whatever their area of interest, to meet and network, and to support scholars interested in feminist approaches to Jewish Studies. In the 1980s women would have been perhaps 10-15% of the membership of the AJS; now I believe women are 50% of the members, if not more. I always said, paraphrasing Theodor Herzl who said Zionism was the Sabbath of his life, that the Caucus was the Sabbath of my Jewish Studies career in those years. That's where I found a home, where I found friends, and where we had a collegial approach and still do, I think. Those are my colleagues; it has been a great joy working together with them. Ironically, it was also my involvement with the Women's Caucus that led to my involvement in the Association as a whole, maybe because I was seen - we Canadians are socialized to be nice - as less scary than some of the other women in the Caucus. So the organization leadership invited me to inaugurate an interest area in Gender Studies papers. This involved vetting paper proposals and arranging Gender Studies panels. From there, to my immense surprise in the mid-1990s, I was invited to be Vice President for Program and then ultimately I became President (from 2003-06). I am still involved in the AJS and I feel proud of my roles in making the Association, which is now a constituent member of the American Council of Learned Societies, welcoming to all members regardless of religion, background, sexual orientation, etc. The AJS has gone from being a very narrow little group fifty years ago when it was founded to a broad and diverse organization.

KS: I noticed that the Caucus also did work to not just support scholarship but also teaching efforts. There was a panel "Towards an Inclusive Curriculum: Gender and Jewish Studies" (1989), and then there was *Gender and Jewish Studies: A Curriculum Guide* (1994), which you co-edited. When I look at the *Gender and Jewish Studies Guide*, potentially I would have called it *Women and Jewish Studies* or *Women's Studies and Jewish Studies*. The blurb on the back says "These thirty syllabi and bibliographies about Jewish women by outstanding academics, authors and men and women scholars": that's interesting why mention the men there? It goes on to "emphasize that since women's experiences are different from men's, Jewish history and social science is incomplete", and that is the theme that's running through. Has anybody published inclusive curriculum guides for the exploration of real living men's experiences?

JRB: Not yet, although Jewish constructions of masculinity are now a growing theme in the field. In her essay in *Women of the Word* (1994), Sara Horowitz, who is a scholar of Holocaust literature at York University, Toronto, addressed constructions and deconstructions of male gender in the context of the Holocaust. She was the first scholar that I had read who talked about the unmaking of male identity as one of the byproducts of Nazi oppression of Jews. She opened my eyes to the importance of looking at constructions of male identity. Daniel Boyarin addresses that as well in *Unheroic Conduct* (1997) in his discussions of how men were constructed as effeminate in European literature and thought from medieval times on. But his book came after *Women of the Word*, and Sara was early in expressing those points of view. In more recent years, books have appeared on Judaism and queer studies from a number of different approaches. But certainly, when I first began my career, the emphasis was on women, and we meant gender essentially in terms of constructions of women, the need to include content about women in Jewish Studies scholarship, and the centrality of gender as a category of analysis in our approaches to primary texts. Now, of course, our understanding of gender and its ramifications are far more complex.

KS: What would you recommend now as key scholarly texts?

JRB: If it was an upper-level course on rabbinic Judaism and gender studies I would use the *Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (2007) [edited] by Martin Jaffee and Charlotte Fonrobert; it includes an excellent article by Professor Fonrobert on the making of Jewish gender. For an introduction to women in rabbinic literature, I recommend Rachel Biale's *Women and Jewish Law* (1995), the second edition. It takes a thematic approach with chapters on betrothal, on marriage and divorce, on adultery, on rape, and she traces the material from rabbinic writings broadly through the Middle Ages up into the contemporary era. My book *Midrashic Women* (2002), which takes an approach from the aggadic side but is informed by the halakhah, Judith Hauptman's book *Rereading the Rabbis* (1987), and Charlotte Fonrobert's book on *Menstrual Purity* (2000) are all standard in the field. Other scholarship includes, among many others, Devora Weisberg (2009) on levirate marriage in rabbinic Judaism, Miriam Peskowitz's book *Spinning Fantasies* (1997), which takes an unusual and thought-provoking approach, also the work of Elizabeth Shanks Alexander (2013) on purity issues and Gail Labovitz (2009) on marriage. Central works for the medieval and early modern period include, but are certainly not limited to, books by Howard Tzvi Adelman (2018), Elisheva Baumgarten (2004; 2014), Renée Levine Melammed (1999), Chava Weissler (1998), and Rebecca Winer (2006). Pamela S. Nadell (2019) has just completed a comprehensive historical survey of Jewish women in North America. There are so many books and articles now. I would note that we need more work on the midrash; there are many shorter articles but I think there's much more to be done on aggadic representation of gender and differences from one midrashic work to another, including, of course, further attention to contrasting images in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. Tal Ilan, who is editing a multi-volumed feminist commentary on the Babylonian Talmud, has been a leader in this area.

KS: The *Curriculum Guide* was published by Biblio Press, by the formidable and pioneering Doris Gold. I thought it's important to think about publishing opportunities. The bibliographies that Biblio Press published just simply made it known what is available. And I guess the publishing landscape has changed dramatically.

JRB: When Doris Gold initiated Biblio Press there were few publishers for books about Jewish women. She published *Written out of History* (1978), one of the very first efforts to write about Jewish women's history. She published the book *Miriam's Well* (1986) by Penina Adelman that is about ritual, and she also published our *Curriculum Guide*. I actually just looked up Biblio Press recently and it's been taken over by another publishing house following her death. She was a formidable woman, a wonderful woman. What happened to Biblio Press and led to its demise was that suddenly at the end of the 1990s, publishing houses, both scholarly and mainstream, started publishing books about Jewish women and Biblio was increasingly eclipsed. I should say that a new edition of *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* is in the works, edited not by me but by two of my colleagues, Federica Francesconi and Rebecca Winer, in my honour, which is very moving to me. It will have 24 essays, some by the original authors and some by younger scholars, as well, and should appear late in 2020. Wayne State University Press had been after me for about 10 years to do a new edition but I wasn't able to take it on, and, in fact, I think it appropriate that a new generation is now assuming leadership.

KS: We must briefly touch on the relationship between academy, community and wider society in your engagement. Back to the 'Women and Religious Vocation' paper, and also in 1983 you wrote 'Prenatal Testing for Tay-Sachs Disease.' I wonder whether that was prompted by changes in your own family set-up around that time?

JRB: People ask me to do things and I say yes. I always said I should have a “just say no” sign on my desk. This invitation was just by chance from someone whom I met who had been having a hard time finding someone to write on *Tay-Sachs* for this journal issue. But of course, the minute you get into a topic it becomes extremely interesting. It was fascinating to look at perspectives that remain relevant today. There is widespread testing of young people in the Orthodox community, for example, on the view that it is better to find out if you’re both carrying the gene prior to committing to a marriage.

KS: Going back to your actual beginnings, to Temple Anshei Sholom. You wrote about your own bat mitzvah there, that there were some limitations to girls’ participation and that the service was only always held on Friday nights: “Immersed in the system as we were, however, neither I nor any other female ever thought to question these nonsensical strictures” (1998, 34). So who gets to define oppression?

JRB: It’s very difficult when you’re socialized within a community or society to step outside and see that perhaps something is non-egalitarian, that something is oppressive.

My father was early in liberal Judaism in North America in introducing bat mitzvah; this was around 1961 or ’62, at a time when very few girls participated in Hebrew school. Hebrew school took place during the week and generally only boys attended to prepare for bar mitzvah. Religious school was held on Sunday for boys and girls and culminated in confirmation at age 16. Introducing the bat mitzvah was revolutionary enough, I think, so the Friday night limitation was probably intended to mollify those in the congregation who were uneasy with this innovation. Bat mitzvah girls read Torah on Friday night, as well as an additional biblical reading such as Proverbs 31 (the woman of valour) or Proverbs 8 (wisdom personified as a woman), but unlike the boys on Saturday mornings, girls were not permitted to give speeches. So, it was not full blown egalitarianism but it was an ongoing process. Shortly after Temple Anshei Sholom began to offer the option of bat mitzvah, the Conservative synagogue in our city initiated an annual group bat mitzvah on a Saturday evening. The ceremony began with *havdalah* and each girl read something inspiring in English. As I said, it is very difficult to see oppression when one is within a tradition. For example, it took me quite a while to realize my own discomfort with male-oriented liturgical language. One becomes so inured to using “Lord” and “King” in worship that one must be educated about the value of incorporating gender neutral terminology in speaking both about God and about the community of worshipers. Now I am very sensitive about it. I would like to note one other event in my high school years that had a significant impact on my religious and ultimately scholarly identity, and that was attendance in the summer of 1966 at “Torah Corps,” a living and study program run by the Reform movement’s Union of American Hebrew Congregations. There, with other like-minded young people, I experienced serious text study in biblical, rabbinic, and modern writings, fully egalitarian daily and Sabbath worship using traditional liturgical texts, and lots of Hebrew singing, Israeli dancing, and teenage romance.

KS: We have got two participant questions that relate to that. First, are we any closer to obtaining a prohibition against rape, abuse, and the use of violence upon women from all rabbinic authorities, especially Orthodox *batei din*?

JRB: I am going to defer that one; perhaps Lisa [Fishbayn Joffe] or another of our colleagues might like to address it since I am not an expert on contemporary changes in the Orthodox community vis-à-vis women.

KS: The second question is: In view of the increasing number of women rabbis since the publication of *Midrashic Women* (2002), has your view that ‘females are anomalous bystanders to the covenantal relationship between God and Israel’ (161) changed?

JRB: *Midrashic Women* analyses representations of women in a body of literary writings. Therefore, in terms of what the literature of the rabbinic period says and how it has been understood historically, my view has not changed; the attitudes I discussed in *Midrashic Women* are inherent in the texts. What I found very interesting in reading the three papers that we will be discussing later in the day was that all three of them approach modern confrontations with these attitudes from different points of view. Is it possible, as scholars including Judith Plaskow, Rachel Adler, and Gail Labovitz have advocated, to change liturgy and ritual to be fully inclusive of women while still within the bounds of Jewish tradition; can egalitarian marriage ceremonies be created within a halakhic framework? Are there interpretive ways to overcome the inherent patriarchy embedded and embodied in Jewish tradition? I am not optimistic about significant change within halakhic communities. I believe that the traditional view of the divine image is a central problem in this dilemma. If, as I have argued, the rabbinic system constructs the divine image as essentially male, and men are like God in their virile ability to create new life, how can women be viewed as equals? The fundamental conviction of the separateness and otherness of women in Judaism's foundational writings is what I and many other feminist scholars have demonstrated. This is what contemporary feminist theologians continue to struggle with. Now, with our larger understanding of the varieties of human sexuality, we must also address how Judaism will cope with the range of gender diversity that is now recognized by much of the larger society. The answers for many, including myself, are to be found in progressive, innovative, and thoughtful forms of Judaism and Jewish practice outside the traditional halakhic model.

KS: At the end, let's focus on the future outlook. What is still missing? What is the exciting new thing?

JRB: As a Jewish woman, I'm personally excited about what's happening in contemporary feminist theology, with ongoing egalitarian changes in Jewish practice, liturgy, and ritual, and with our growing communal ease with women rabbis and cantors and female leadership. However, as an historian and a reader of texts, I'm intellectually engaged in the kinds of textual, historical, and archival work that female scholars are undertaking to expand our knowledge of how and why women are represented in specific Jewish writings and of how Jewish women lived in past times and places. The work of Elisheva Baumgarten and her students on everyday Jewish life in medieval Ashkenaz, and particularly their attention to the evidence of material culture, is a major advance; similar work on the evidence of the lives of women in the Cairo Genizah documents is yielding fascinating results. Federica Francesconi, who studies the archives in Modena, is among a number of scholars working on women in early modern Europe. My Oxford Bibliography, "Women and Gender Relations," highlights some of the most important scholarly books. In my career I have been essentially a generalist. I began my work in a relatively untrodden area of study. Now female and male researchers who accept the centrality of gender as a mode of scholarly analysis are being trained to focus on specific texts, places, and time periods, and to read the sources in new ways. In going back and seeing the ways that women have been represented, they will find female voices that have been overlooked. In the coming decades I look forward to their important and insightful scholarship.

As a final word, and in response to another question, I am deeply concerned about the impact on young scholars and their research of decreasing resources in the academic world, especially in the Humanities. One indication of this is the frequent failure of universities to replace senior people who are retiring in these fields, as is, in fact, the case with my own position at the University of Oregon. You also mentioned, Katja, the peripatetic nature of the lives of many young scholars due to a ubiquitous decline in long-term academic positions and the consequent negative effect on their personal lives and their ability to focus on research. This is a disconcerting and upsetting situation with potentially disastrous consequences for scholarship on Jewish women in particular and in Jewish Studies, in general. There are so many wonderful young scholars who are doing excellent work. Will there be appropriate places of employment for them and support for their research?

KS: Thank you. We have barely touched on the richness of your academic journey. Thank you so much for offering us your story.

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DISCUSSION POINTS FOLLOWING THE INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH BASKIN

What are the implications of some scholars working in Jewish Studies and gender linking academia with practice in the Jewish community?

Women scholars and/or scholars in gender studies experiencing unprofessional hostility that seems to be gender-based and/or subject-based: is it good advice to anticipate this hostility and to offer it no room for attack by disseminating only the strongest possible work? Does it depend on the forum?

Backlash in some Jewish communities against a perceived feminist threat; an example of this dynamic is the cancellation of the global conference on the *agunah* in 2006. How can feminist voices influence development of halakhah and practice on the ground in religious communities today?