



Ruth Lamdan. *A Separate People: Jewish Women in Palestine, Syria and Egypt in the Sixteenth Century.* Leiden: Brill, 2000. viii + 307 pp. \$173.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-11747-1.



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A Book Which Opens Up Incredibly Interesting Material

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As a specialist working on the history of the Islamic world and interested in documentary material, I had eagerly awaited this book, a book which would continue the chapters on Jewish women in Goitein's magnum opus on the Jews of medieval Cairo based on Genizah documents.[1] What we now have is, indeed, a colorful insight into the world of Jewish women of sixteenth-century Palestine, based on an impressive corpus of thousands of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *Halakhic Responsa*, i.e., normative answers scholars in Jewish law (*Halakha*) issued. Minor sources are reports of journeys, letters from travellers, etc. Lamdan has worked through all this material and presents it in fifteen chapters. These are (1) "Women through the Eyes of the Sages," (2) "From Childhood to Marriage: 'The Burden of a Daughter,'" (3) "The Extended Family," (4) "Married Life," (5) "Motherhood," (6) "Daily Life" (i.e., dressing and jewelry), (7) "Education and Sources of Livelihood," (8) "Social Norms versus Reality," (9) "Polygamy," (10) "Marital Disputes," (11) "Women and Divorce," (12) "Widowhood," (13) "Deserted

Wives (agunot)" (i.e., women who were deserted and because they had no letter of divorce were not allowed to remarry), (14) "Levirate Marriages" (i.e., compulsory marriages with one of the deceased husband's brothers), and (15) "Regulations Concerning Women." The book opens with an introduction and closes with a conclusion, followed by a glossary, an appendix with brief biographical surveys of sages, a bibliography, and two indices.

Lamdan opens our eyes to the possibilities lying in this material and we have to be very grateful to her for all the interesting details she presents in the book. To quote a few examples: Marrying off a daughter was considered as throwing away one's property, marrying off a son as a safe investment (p. 26). Before the wedding took place bride and groom openly displayed their affection and in some cases even had premarital sex (p. 37). Marrying off girls of less than twelve years was quite common; from the age of twelve girls were considered marriageable (p. 46). Girls were often married before puberty, but this was frowned upon (pp. 52, 146). Orphan girls had the prerogative of refusing marriage contracts (p. 51). Women who found their husbands repulsive were, at least according

to some scholars, entitled to a divorce (p. 173). Widowhood was a passport to freedom as it freed a woman of the tutelage of both her own and her husband's family (pp. 196). Women were appointed by their husbands as trustees for their property (pp. 69, 197), they acted as sureties for their husbands, occasionally for a son, son-in-law, or other relatives (p. 115), and we know of divorcees and widows who acted as guardians of their children (pp. 69, 90). Women took their place as businesswomen (p. 116), and acted as money-lenders both to Jews and non-Jews (p. 117) and as brokers for noble Muslim women (p. 119).

Although Lamdan draws a colorful picture and deserves our thanks for offering these insights, there are a number of serious shortcomings. These are her insistence on the inferior status of women, her lack of distance from the sources, the superficial character of most comparisons with Muslim and Christian women, and her lack of interest in the research on Genizah documents mentioned above.

Lamdan focuses from the very beginning and throughout the book on lamenting the inferior status of women up to the twentieth century. This approach is based on a projection of modern Western conceptions of life back onto the Jewish society of Palestine four hundred years ago. Lamdan, thus, argues that conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law were common and that child marriage resulted in an increase in wife-beating (p. 56). But as probable as this sounds, there are no sources. That "parental interference in the young couple's life did little to enhance the wife's independence or self-confidence" (p. 57) is obviously true for our societies. But Lamdan stresses that in those times, women who wanted to be divorced were "particularly in need of their family's psychological and economic support" (p. 60), she gives many examples of this in the chapter on divorce (p. 171), and says that support by the woman's family was crucial when a husband deserted her and had to be tracked down (p. 204). That childbirth was dangerous until the end of the nineteenth century (p. 78) was true for the Western world—in other societies, it still is.

But there is a problem at a deeper layer, too. Lamdan's main sources were written by men, by scholars with their peculiar interests (p. 2). Unfortunately, Lamdan follows them so closely and uncritically that her book does not deal with "Jewish Women in Palestine" but rather should have been titled "Views of Palestinian Jewish Scholars on Women." These scholars' views were deeply influenced by the dual structure of the Muslim so-

ciety they were part of, i.e., of the parallel existence of two worlds, a world of men and a world of women. Lamdan herself points to this fact when she describes the existence of a separate world of female economy (p. 120 n. 52).

One instance where the scholars describe this particular world of women was women's bathing, as bathing played an important part in ritual purification, a matter of interest for the scholars. In all matters related to bathing, women were as independent as one might imagine. By stressing that they "showed an unusual degree of independent thought and initiative" in all related matters (p. 77), Lamdan accepts the scholars' axiom that usually women did not act independently. The same is true for the world of embroidery, sewing, peddling, and petty commerce. To state that all this required no special training (p. 125) is somehow strange because it obviously does, however not a training in the men's world, but inside the women's world.

There were well defined occasions where not only individuals crossed the borders, but where the two worlds mixed with each other. Lamdan is right that "mixing with the public ... was considered unseemly behavior for any woman, irrespective of class," yet often was required (p. 125). But we should stress that this was only the view of the scholars and that "the public" meant the men's world—the scholars did not like women mixing with men. Lamdan mentions that such occasions, like family celebrations, meetings before and after the synagogue service, and parties to the city's suburbs, were especially suspicious to the scholars, but does not explain why (pp. 127, 129). The key to the answer might be the scholars' admittance that in some cases giving in to women might be better than losing control over them, which could make them turn instead to the Muslim courts or even make them apostatize (p. 208). The scholars could not control the world of women but they tried to gain power at least on these mixed meetings. The quest for power lies also at the core of their often repeated advice that Jews should not turn to Muslim courts, whereas documents of Muslim courts prove that Jews frequently turned to them in a wide variety of issues (p. 137).

The scholars did not believe in the intellectual ability and morality of women, and thought instead that they distracted men from attaining moral perfection (pp. 17, 19). This makes one think of a kind of concurrence with the world of religious studies, controlled by the scholars themselves, on one side, and the world of women on the other side. We may say that scholars and women

both struggled for the attention of the male public. This becomes clear when the scholars speak out, in general, against midwives “whose hands are soaked in blood and who [are] impure” (p. 86) because they are part of a world which might not be controlled by the scholars.

But individual lives were not only shaped by the dichotomy of men’s and women’s worlds. People were also members of families, and this most probably meant much more than in our individualistic times. Lamdan stresses this point herself when she emphasizes that marriages were arranged by families and that the young couple had no say in the matter (p. 29). But this feature also extends to other cases. Marriages between rich girls and Torah scholars not only helped individuals, but also the families behind them (p. 31). In instances where the children’s father had died, the debate whether they should be left with their mother or with their paternal grandfather was not only a question of the emotional needs of children (and their mother) vs. the economic interests of the paternal family (p. 92), but also a struggle between two families. If the mother remarried, this involved even a third family, the family of the new husband (p. 94).

Lamdan’s comparisons of Jewish customs with Christian and Muslim ones are mostly superficial. This concerns the influence of the Jewish modesty committees on the Spanish Inquisition (p. 131 n. 20), marrying a relative of the deceased husband (p. 217 n. 21), and Spanish influence on inheritance regulations (p. 241). Lamdan is right in saying that most women in the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire were, most probably, illiterate, but why claim that this was different for European immigrants to Palestine (p. 112)? Most Europeans, well into the nineteenth century, were illiterate. And why stress that in both Muslim and Jewish societies polygamy was prevalent (pp. 140, 156, 168)? Should we imagine that most men had two or more wives, something which would have tipped the balance of sexes? The key rather lies in Lamdan’s remark that polygamy was connected to

wealth (p. 153).

Many cross-references are wrong. Lamdan claims that only men having regular sexual relations with their wives were able to study the Torah properly, but the passages quoted say something different (pp. 16, 17). That daughters “represented a heavy financial burden for impoverished fathers” so that they “spared no effort to raise the money required to marry them off” is not mentioned by the passage quoted (p. 26). A long list of people behaving indecently, with two women called prostitutes, is no evidence for prostitution, but refers to promiscuity (p. 135).

The bibliography shows that Lamdan used almost exclusively studies in Hebrew and only a few in English. French or German titles do not seem to exist. Goitein’s magnum opus already mentioned figures in the bibliography, with the sixth volume missing, but has not been used in the book except in a few places (e.g., pp. 120 n. 52, 200 n. 22). Gil’s magnificent book on Palestine[2] should not be quoted in the old Hebrew (p. 290), but in the new English edition.

Many of these Jewish people spoke Arabic at home, supposedly all in the public. But Arabic matters have been badly treated. Read *mathaqil* not *metaqil* (p. 30); *wakil* not *waqil* (p. 120 n. 52); *mu’ayyadi* not *muayydi* (p. 199); *muqaddam* not *muqdam*; and *mu’akhkhar* not *me’uhar* (p. 239). *Mathaqil* are not golden weights (p. 30), but gold pieces. And Hamat is not another name for Homs (pp. 76, 226), but these are two different cities.

Notes

[1]. S. D. Goitein and Abraham L. Udovich, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1967-1993).

[2]. Moshe Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634-1099* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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