Holy Laundry

The Jerusalem Report - Jerusalem
Author: Netty C. Gross
Date: Jul 23, 2007
Section: Cover Story - Israel
Text Word Count: 3638

Document Text

(Permission (c) 2007. The Jerusalem Report)

Does the exploding genre of religious women's inspirational 'chick-lit' reflect the flowering of a new ultra-Orthodox feminist consciousness?

Married and the mother of five young children, Chana (Jenny) Weisberg, age 35, would not call herself a feminist - at least not in the classical sense. A graduate of Quaker schools and liberal Bowdoin College in Maine, Weisberg moved here in 1991, became Orthodox over a decade ago and lives in Jerusalem's picturesque Nahla'ot neighborhood, where she's a proud stay-at-home mom who speaks happily of performing household chores such as cooking, cleaning and doing the laundry.

Yet there's an empowering twist to her honeyed view of domesticity. Raising a family and seeing to their needs are not mere virtues, argues Weisberg, but rather "holy" experiences, steeped in tradition and bathed in Jewish female spirituality.

That faith-based message is gaining a more receptive audience among contemporary women, especially those whose lifestyles are shaped by traditional values but need a second income, as they grow weary of struggling with the multi-pronged demands of home, children, aging parents and high-powered careers, and don't find popular cultural outlets such as shopping, particularly rewarding or therapeutic.

Indeed, when Weisberg became pregnant with her first child, she was surprised that she was unable to find a book on "Jewish pregnancy" or even advice on how an Orthodox expectant mother might enhance the fetus's existence, "beyond taking blood tests and folic acid." On her own, Weisberg discovered that pious women are, for example, careful to provide "spiritual nutrition" for the baby they are carrying, putting extra effort into prayer and charitable acts during pregnancy, "in the hope of nurturing their baby's soul."

Based on what she discovered, Weisberg decided to "write the book I was looking for even though I had never written anything before in my life," and set out across Jerusalem interviewing Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox women about their pregnancies. "I was surprised at the openness. Women really wanted to talk."

In 2004, Urim Publications, a 10-year-old Jerusalem-based Jewish content publisher brought out "Expecting Miracles, Finding Meaning and Spirituality in Pregnancy Through Judaism," which tells of the spiritual feelings and thoughts on pregnancy of 15 Orthodox women in Jerusalem - including an ultra-Orthodox mother of 15, who for reasons of modesty never discussed her pregnancies with her children or even told them when she was expecting, and kept her teenage daughters ignorant about human sexuality until their own arranged marriages. The English-language book has since become a top-seller in the ever-expanding genre of religious Jewish women's literature, which now accounts for a quarter of all Urim's titles. In July, Urim will publish Weisberg's new book, "One Baby Step At a Time: Seven Secrets of Jewish Motherhood," which has a similar narrative-driven format. In the meantime Weisberg's website, www.jewish pregnancy.org gets 10,000 hits a month.

Bubbling quietly beneath the surface for some twenty years, English-language ultra-Orthodox women's writing has now become a veritable cottage industry. Following Weisberg's footsteps, more religious Jewish women are writing and publishing everything from spiritual and self-help guides to Jewish life-cycle events, including head-covering, burial practices and ritual bath immersion; Holocaust and personal memoirs; and adventure novels. Religious Jewish editors of religious books, newspapers, magazines and Internet sites tell The Report that women with an ultra-Orthodox sensibility increasingly want to read - and write - books that are in step with their life experiences, offer solutions that fall within the parameters of Jewish law; and are easy to read. Dozens of such titles are in print, and many are now for sale at trade book stores, as well as Judaica stores.

The genre is financially rewarding. Urim's Tzvi Maur says a non- liturgical religious Jewish book,
which sells between 5,000 to 10,000 copies (the minimum threshold for a trade book) is considered a "good seller." At least three 'women's' books have sold in excess of 30,000 copies each and are available not only in Judaica book stores but in trade chains as well. Self-help books are an American genre and for now, the readers and writers of Jewish religious women's literature are largely English-speakers, although Weisberg says she is considering having her book translated into Hebrew.

Israeli ultra-Orthodox women generally listen to audio tapes as a means of gaining inspirational knowledge. In contrast, the nationalist camp, for whom the biblical commandment to procreate is also shaped by a political agenda, favors large conventions as a means to educate and inspire religious adults. In early July, thousands (men and women) are expected to attend religious lectures about marriage and related issues, at a Jerusalem Jewish Family fair sponsored by Binyan Shalem, the Institute for Marriage and Family, affiliated with Rabbi Elyakim Levinon of the West Bank Elon Moreh settlement. In recent years, however, there has been a flurry of books on spiritual/domestic matters authored and self-published by women and based on the American model. Dafina Hisdai's "Spiritual Preparation for Birth" and Naomi Wolfson's "And He Shall Cleave unto His Wife," a religious marriage guide are two examples; both women live in West Bank settlements. The right-wing weekly newspaper Makor Rishon prints "Argaman," a glossy pamphlet for religious women which is distributed in synagogues.

Ultra-Orthodox 'chick-lit' was first identified in an academic study by social researcher Alyse Fisher Roller, who writes that non-scholarly ultra-Orthodox women's literature has "grown exponentially in the past 10 years" in her book, "The Literary Imagination of Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women" (published by McFarland 1999). Although not considered "high" literature, Roller describes this as a unique literary craft ("new, spontaneous and an indigenous outgrowth of a different culture and outlook"), whose value is "less in literary finesse than in what and how it tells us about the cultural mindset in which it is written." Significantly, Roller also notes that the popular non-academic prose of ultra-Orthodox Jews is "dominated by women and writers and readers," and has identified two main centers of production: the United States and Israel, to where many of the writers have emigrated.

Since Roller's study was published, Urim has reprinted such genre classics as convert Tovah Mordechai's inspirational memoir "To Play with Fire"; "Total Immersion - A Mikvah Anthology," edited by Rivkah Slonim, which consists of fifty inspirational essays and stories (by men and women) celebrating the wonders of ritual Jewish Orthdox family law; Lynne Schreiber's "Hide and Seek: Women and Head Covering"; and, most recently, "The Jewish Woman Next Door, Repairing the World One Step at a Time," by observant Debby Flancebaum, of Teaneck, New Jersey, a self-described "wife and mother who wanted to show the beauty and courage all around her." Israel-based Feldheim Publishers, which puts out religious books in both Hebrew and English and caters to a more uniformly ultra-Orthodox audience, (but whose books will soon be available in such trade chains as Barnes & Noble) has published religious inspirational adventure novels by women, such as Ruchomo Shain's "All for the Boss"; Miriam Cohen's "A Daughter of Two Mothers"; and Esther Stern's book about saying amen, "Just One Word," which sold a record-breaking 30,000 copies.

In 2006, Brooklyn-based ArtScroll, an imprint of translations, books and commentaries with an Orthodox Jewish slant, which is owned by Mesorah Publications - the largest name in religious Jewish publishing these days - brought out such titles as "Wish I Was There," an inspirational book by Sarah Shapiro, a ba'alat teshuva (newly religious) woman, and daughter of the late Saturday Review editor Norman Cousins; "Shidduch Secrets," a self-help guide to making a successful match, by Leah Jacobs and Shaindy Marks; "Life Is a Test" by well-known preacher Rebbeztn Esther Jungreis - a best-seller now in its fourth printing; "Happiness is Homemade: A Torah Approach to Personal Growth, Marital Harmony and Child-Rearing" by Rochel Arbus; and "Holy Woman; The Road to Greatness of Rebbetzin Chaya Sara Kramer" by Sarah Yocheved Rigler.

U.S. born Rigler, 59, who was on a North American U.S. book tour in mid-June, is something of a superstar among frum literati. A graduate of Brandeis University whose spiritual journey took her to India where she lived in an ashram and taught Vedanta philosophy for 15 years, Rigler turned Orthodox and lives in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem with her husband and two children. She says her book is about "making choices. Jewish women today want to grow spiritually." Now in its seventh printing, and ArtScroll's No. 2 best-selling biography out of 82 in print, "Holy Woman" is an inspirational bio about Kramer, an obscure Holocaust survivor from Hungary who evolved into a saintly Mother Teresa type in post-war Israel. "It's a religious book-publishing sensation," enthuses Rabbi Nehemia Coopersmith, chief editor of www.aish.com, an arm of the Aish Hatorah yeshiva, which caters to newly religious English-speakers, and claims
to be the world's largest Jewish content website with 2.5 million hits a month and 260,000 e-mail subscribers. Rigler is one of his most popular columnists. "She knows how to inspire," Coopersmith observes. Reviewing the book for an Internet site, New Yorker Ariella Marcus wrote that "Holy Woman" has helped get her in touch with her "own inner tzaddekes" (righteous womanhood.)

Other Jewish media have also nurtured the boom in religious women's writing. Inspirational articles and columns by women fill the pages of English- and Hebrew-language versions of ultra-Orthodox print media publications such as the Hamispacha weekly magazine and Hamodia and Yated Ne'eman daily newspapers. Aish's Coopersmith says the majority of submissions to his site are by women, and articles about women and spirituality are a predominant theme. (Chana Weisberg is also an Aish.com contributor.) Coopersmith believes the Internet has further stimulated the phenomenon. "Religious women writers now have an outlet and are producing quality inspirational literature," he says.

The genre reflects several interlocking trends: the growing popularity of religion and religious books; increased writing and computer literacy skills among religious women and the increasing number of newly-Orthodox women who are writing. But the most tantalizing question to emerge from the genre's rapid evolution is whether - despite its best efforts to reject mainstream feminism - these works are actually emblematic of a new conservative feminism, which is seeking to reclaim the importance of devalued women's work such as homemaking and child-rearing by wrapping it around female spirituality. Roller identified the duality in her study, observing that the ultra-Orthodox authors' resistance to feminism is "sometimes unsuccessful or contradictory... writers condemn feminist ideals while clearly using feminist paradigms. They couch their 'anti-feminist' arguments in the terms of feminist thought, displaying a well-integrated feminist consciousness... despite unconvincing disclaimers otherwise." (Indeed, author Rigler says, "Feminism is a lie. The secret of happiness is in relationships and not in accomplishment - that's a male concept.")

Researcher Roller says ba'alot teshuva writers, who play a significant role in the genre's development and are writing because they are "preoccupied with defining their values," have a stronger feminist awareness than those who are Orthodox from birth, reflecting earlier exposure to conventional feminism. Similarly, these women writers are also imbued with a strong American belief in self-improvement. "The idea that you can read a book and remake your life is a uniquely American cultural experience, which resonates perfectly with a ba'alat teshuva ethos," says Bar-Ilan University Prof. Susan Handelman, citing works by Benjamin Franklin, Ann Landers and Dale Carnegie.

Handelman says the trend toward inspirational women's literature has a parallel development among non-Jewish women writers. For example, she says that the books of best-selling American Catholic poet Kathleen Norris celebrate the "spirituality of womanhood" and reflect a "certain disillusionment with secular feminism which posits that families (and class) are instruments of oppression." Norris relocated from New York City to South Dakota where life on the Plains inspired her bestseller, "Dakota: A Spiritual Geography" (Mariner 1993), followed by "The Cloister Walk" (Riverhead Trade 1997), a meditation on monasticism, and "The Quotidien Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and Women's Work" (Paulist Press 1998). In the latter, she draws a comparison between the repetitive tasks of doing laundry to that of praying, and argues that domestic rituals, though disparaged as dreary and mindless, are actually acts of contemplative, life-giving importance akin to liturgical worship and inspired by love.

When religious Jewish women writers sanctify housework in their books and articles, Handelman says, "They are saying something quite sophisticated. It represents yet another form of feminism, this time with a conservative agenda." But veteran Orthodox feminist Blu Greenberg, who wrote the landmark classic, "How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household" (Fireside 1985) and "On Women in Judaism: A View from Tradition" (Jerusalem Post Society 1981), and is founding president of the decade-old Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, wonders whether the seemingly new spiritual romanticization of laundry and diapers isn't merely a reflection of the "deep yearning for Orthodox rituals to mark women's rites of passage."

Prof. Lori Lefkovitz, who teaches Gender and Judaism at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, Pennsylvania and is director of its Kolot Jewish Women's Center, agrees with both views - but with a caveat. Noting that the ultra-Orthodox shift to traditionalism is the "fringe of a larger phenomenon" in the modern Jewish community, she observes that "people are honoring domesticity and birthing, but with a difference." More progressive Jewish women are also seeking to honor other female life-cycle events such as the onset of a daughter's menstruation.

Why the turn to religion for answers? A self-described "aging professional Jewish feminist,"
Lefkovitz says many Jewish women are "exhausted" by demands of career and home, and are searching for more "meaningful lives." The Jewish feminist movement, Lefkovitz goes on, is beginning to acknowledge "some of the failures... women got 'equal' opportunity, though men still retained the highest-paying positions, and women still had to take care of home, children, elderly parents... the system did not yield." By comparison, she says, traditional Judaism offered a solution. "Since ethical traditions require a beracha [blessing] before everything we do in order to be mindful of our blessings, suddenly the capacity to do laundry became a blessing and so is changing a diaper," she says.

Lefkovitz also says that disappointment with popular culture, which sends messages of "one's own inadequacy" and encourages shopping as a remedy, has drawn women to Jewish traditions where "time is sanctified; space is holy, one's humanity is honored with life-cycle rituals; materialism is discouraged." Indeed Flancbaum, 50, says she was motivated to write her book in praise of contemporary Jewish heroines after hearing her seventh-grade daughter laugh out loud while watching the stereotypically "jappy" Fran Drescher's character on the popular television show, The Nanny. "I was really angry. I thought it was an awful character."

Still, Lefkovitz acknowledges that "some of this sanctifying of domestic chores is oppressive, of course," and expresses the hope that Jewish self-help will help transform Judaism into a "useful philosophy and way of life" with ritual expressions "that are relevant, but not retro."

Not surprisingly, the Orthodox male book executives, who have given voice to the new religious women writers, have not mentioned feminism as a reason for the booming genre and prefer to attribute the popularity of ultra-Orthodox women's writing to practicalities. (Even though the original non-academic genre of Jewish women's self-help guides were generally authored by men: "The Jewish Woman" edited by Rabbi Leo Jung in 1934, and "The Jewish Woman and Her Home" by Rabbi Hyman Goldin Hebrew Publishing Company 1941.) Neither Art-Scroll nor Feldheim has published scholarly or halakhic works by religious women. Urim's Tzvi Maur has, however; in 2005-2006 he brought out three titles - "Lifetime Companion to the Laws of Jewish Family Life," by Dr. Deena Zimmerman, a well-known Orthodox gynecologist in Israel; "Torah of the Mothers, Contemporary Jewish Women Read Classical Jewish Texts," edited by Prof. Handelman and Ora Elper, and Rochel Berman's "Dignity Beyond Death," about burial and grieving rituals.

Speaking in his Jerusalem office, Maur, a pleasant and soft-spoken 39-year-old immigrant from Vancouver, chalks up the ultra-Orthodox literati boom, in part, to a wave of general interest in religion and religious books. According to the Book Industry Study Group, Inc. (BISG), a U.S. publishing trade association for policy and research, religious books have emerged as the "most impressive growth category" in the $29-billion book-publishing industry over the past four years, ringing up billions in sales. For example, Southern Baptist Pastor Rick Warren's evangelical self-help guide, "The Purpose-Driven Life" (Zondervan), has sold more than 24 million copies and has been translated into 44 languages. The InterVarsity Press' "Lifestyle Guides," which include works such as Dale and Sandy Larsen's "Couples of the Old Testament," an Evangelical marital counseling pamphlet, claim to have sold over 10 million copies. ("May the Lord help you find connection with these couples from history..." it begins.)

Feldheim's David Kahane underscores the fact that critical masses of American ultra-Orthodox homemakers "own word processors" and want to earn a living from home. The ultra-Orthodox experience, he says, "came of age and women wanted to write and read about it." Also, he says, they are filling the needs of an increasingly sophisticated ultra-Orthodox market, which wants non-scholarly literature but that is still "innocent enough" to be brought into the home. "A certain ghettoization is definitely taking place," he says. Kahane is referring to the ultra-Orthodox community's growing desire to closet itself off from the perceived negative influences of modern American pop culture. Ephraim Perlowitz, director of marketing at ArtScroll, says that religious women writers will not hesitate to self-publish in vanity presses, where authors are expected to pay for publication (such as Targum, which is distributed by Feldheim). "It's never been easier to write and publish a religious Jewish book," says Perlowitz who notes that ArtScroll receives a "very large number" of unsolicited manuscripts from ultra-Orthodox women writers, many of which are rejected for publication.

Chana Weisberg grew up in a conservative home in Baltimore, Maryland, a middle child of physician parents. Her search for spirituality, nevertheless, took her to Indonesia, where she was impressed with the religiosity of Muslim women, and eventually to Jerusalem where she studied in Neve Yerushalayim (a well-known ba'alat teshuva yeshiva) and the Pardes Institute, where she met her husband. The pair embraced Orthodoxly slowly. Today, she dons a head covering and is immersed in a "Torah life," she says, as we sit in her living room filled with religious books and
child paraphernalia.

The success of her book and website appear to have fulfilled her dual spiritual and unspoken feminist needs, even providing her, she chuckles, "with something to report back to the Bowdoin College alumna newsletter." Weisberg admires Israeli ultra-Orthodox women she's interviewed for her books, "who don't have to read anything," to gain spirituality or confidence in their life path. When I tell her that my ultra-Orthodox hospital roommate, who had just given birth to her 12th child (when I had my fourth - we were the same age: 35), chirpily described herself (to exhausted me) "as the CEO of her own company," Weisberg smiled and shook her head. "Now that's empowerment."

Resurrected Female Piety

Netty C. Gross

Religious literature, which addresses women's needs, has been around for some time. For example, the "Tzeneh-Reneh," the widely popular late-16th century Yiddish rendering of the Five Books of Moses, the haftarot, and the Five Scrolls, which is interwoven with tales and legends, and which became standard Sabbath reading for Ashkenazi women, is one such work.

But reading a feminist agenda into the "Tzeneh-Reneh" is a modern concept, warns Prof. Avraham Novoshtern, chairman of the Yiddish department at the Hebrew University. Fact is, he says, despite the feminine form of its name (the title is taken from the Hebrew z'e'enah u're'enah, which means "come and see" and is based on a verse from the Song of Songs 3:1), the "Tzeneh-Reneh" was also intended for men ignorant of Hebrew. Indeed the earliest surviving 1622 edition (there are believed to be three earlier editions) bears a frontpiece, which states that "this work is designed to enable men and women... to understand the word of God in simple language." Its author was Jacob b. Isaac Ashkenazi, of Janov, the Polish name for Ivana, a town in today's Belarus.

Novoshtern says men "eventually became embarrassed" to be seen reading the "Tzeneh-Reneh." (Perhaps not surprisingly, the preface to an ultra-Orthodox Hebrew-language edition, published in Bnei Brak in 1974 by Rabbi S.A. Hershkowitz, incorrectly states the books were written expressly "for women"). Subsequent woodcut illustrated editions - a rarity among religious Jewish books - were popular with children. By the 1920s and 1930s, the "Tzeneh-Reneh" was considered to be "grandmotherly" and old-fashioned even by contemporary Jewish women, says Novoshtern, who attributes the trend mainly to the decline of Yiddish. Today only women from certain hasidic sects read the texts, of which there are some 300 editions in print to date.

But one strand of resurrected traditional female piety, which has sparked a feminist debate, says Novoshtern, concerns Yiddish-language techines, taken from the Hebrew techinot, or supplications, which also gained popularity in the 16th century. These short devotional prayers, typically five or six lines, related to traditional women's activities, such as Sabbath candle-lighting, immersion in the ritual bath (mikve); and ritual preparation of challa bread. The most popular was Gott fun Avraham (God of Abraham), uttered before the havdala service, which marks an end to the Sabbath. Novoshtern says many techinot have been attributed to a Sarah Bat Tovim, a vague figure for whom there are no known details. Novoshtern is doubtful whether such a person existed, and observes that despite the prayers' strictly feminine agenda, scholars believe most techinot were penned by men. Noting that women traditionally once had their own prayer books, in 2005 Mesorah Publications brought out the "Ohel Sarah Women's Siddur," which includes Hebrew translations of Yiddish techines. Reform Jewish feminists have also translated and published techines in their liturgy.

N.C.G.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

Since [Alyse Fisher Roller]'s study was published, Urim has reprinted such genre classics as convert Tovah Mordechai's inspirational memoir "To Play with Fire"; "Total Immersion - A Mikvah Anthology," edited by Rivkah Slonim, which consists of fifty inspirational essays and stories (by men and women) celebrating the wonders of ritual Jewish Orthodox family law; Lynne Schreiber's "Hide and Seek: Women and Head Covering"; and, most recently, "The Jewish Woman Next Door, Repairing the World One Step at a Time," by observant Debby Flanbaum, of Teaneck, New Jersey, a self-described "wife and mother who wanted to show the beauty and courage all around
her." Israel-based Feldheim Publishers, which puts out religious books in both Hebrew and English and caters to a more uniformly ultra-Orthodox audience, (but whose books will soon be available in such trade chains as Barnes & Noble) has published religious inspirational adventure novels by women, such as Ruchomo Shain's "All for the Boss"; Miriam Cohen's "A Daughter of Two Mothers"; and Esther Stern's book about saying amen, "Just One Word," which sold a record-breaking 30,000 copies.

U.S. born [Sarah Yocheved Rigler], 59, who was on a North American U.S. book tour in mid-June, is something of a superstar among frum literati. A graduate of Brandeis University whose spiritual journey took her to India where she lived in an ashram and taught Vedanta philosophy for 15 years, Rigler turned Orthodox and lives in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem with her husband and two children. She says her book is about "making choices. Jewish women today want to grow spiritually." Now in its seventh printing, and ArtScroll's No. 2 best-selling biography out of 82 in print, "Holy Woman" is an inspirational bio about [Sara Kramer], an obscure Holocaust survivor from Hungary who evolved into a saintly Mother Teresa type in post-war Israel. "It's a religious book-publishing sensation," enthuses Rabbi Nehemia Coopersmith, chief editor of www.aish.com, an arm of the Aish Hatorah yeshiva, which caters to newly religious English-speakers, and claims to be the world's largest Jewish content website with 2.5 million hits a month and 260,000 e-mail subscribers. Rigler is one of his most popular columnists. "She knows how to inspire," Coopersmith observes. Reviewing the book for an Internet site, New Yorker Ariella Marcus wrote that "Holy Woman" has helped her get in touch with her "own inner tzaddkees" (righteous womanhood.)

Feldheim's David Kahane underscores the fact that critical masses of American ultra-Orthodox homemakers "own word processors" and want to earn a living from home. The ultra-Orthodox experience, he says, "came of age and women wanted to write and read about it." Also, he says, they are filling the needs of an increasingly sophisticated ultra-Orthodox market, which wants non-scholarly literature but that is still "innocent enough" to be brought into the home. "A certain ghettoization is definitely taking place," he says. Kahane is referring to the ultra-Orthodox community's growing desire to closet itself off from the perceived negative influences of modern American pop culture. Ephraim Perlowitz, director of marketing at ArtScroll, says that religious women writers will not hesitate to self-publish in vanity presses, where authors are expected to pay for publication (such as Targum, which is distributed by Feldheim). "It's never been easier to write and publish a religious Jewish book," says Perlowitz who notes that ArtScroll receives a "very large number" of unsolicited manuscripts from ultra-Orthodox women writers, many of which are rejected for publication.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.