

Rethinking what Judaism demands from women

By Janice Weizman

ONE OF the central claims of French feminist theorists in the last century was that language itself is a male construct which fails to adequately depict the female experience of the world. They suggested that because consciousness is rooted in the body, women’s writing must draw on a female understanding of physicality, or as French theorist Hélène Cixous put it to women writers: “Write yourself. Your body must be heard.”

Elana Sztokman, a two-time winner of the National Jewish Book Council Award for her scholarly books on gender identity in the Orthodox community, has come out with a new collection of essays which takes up Cixous’s challenge. The collection is comprised of mostly previously published opinion pieces, memoir, and essays, and explores various facets of her experiences as a formerly Orthodox Jew, through the lens of that community’s attitudes towards women’s sexuality, and its precepts regarding the female body.

The pieces make for fascinating, subversive reading, as they consider the demands modern orthodoxy makes on women from a rarely heard point of view. It’s not that Orthodox women haven’t written or spoken out on the subjects of modesty, hair-covering, mikveh regulation and the like, but that in this book, Sztokman has gathered this material together, examined its implications and built it into a comprehensive argument. What emerges is an indictment – a “j’accuse” that calls out the Orthodox rabbinic establishment for its diminishment and neglect of the concerns of half of its adherents.

“So much of what we do in the name of religiousness or Orthodoxy seems to me less about Godliness and more about what men would like to think is Godliness,” Sztokman writes. “The amorphous corps of Jewish legal texts we have come to call halakha is full of human assertions about what is right and wrong for women to be. And I have come to see all these claims not as Torah but as an instrument of male power



Hélène Cixous

over female beings.”

Sztokman’s perspective on these issues is based on her personal encounters with their dictates, as they reflect the problematic dynamic of yearning to play by the rules even when those rules require a submission and suppression of one’s most essential identity markers. There is an urgency to these pieces, as though Sztokman is writing from a place of pain and trauma, propelled by her need to work through her own responses to what is not supposed to be questioned.

About her eagerness to cover her hair as a newly married 21 year old, for example, she writes, “It was arguably a form of rebellion, part of the entire ‘frumming out’ trend in Orthodoxy, in which children wanted to show that we were better than our parents. Its ironic – as religious girls became more educated we were encouraged to study rabbinic sources on the topic, but invariably were taught to adapt the stricter rules on our bodies.”



Elana Sztokman

In an essay examining the problems of the ritual bath, she writes. “No matter how many ways religious leaders – men and women – try to explain the mikveh practice or reclaim it in a zillion new-age ways, there is something sickeningly off about the whole thing. The idea that for the sake of one’s marriage, or for the sake of one’s ‘purity’ or for the sake of being ‘Jewish’ that a woman has to stand naked for inspection... is a complete and utter violation of one’s body. So many of us do this regularly, accepting as ‘normal’ that which is just so completely not normal, and we pretend that we don’t feel the violation.”

As courageous as it may be to speak out against some of Judaism’s most time-honored traditions, it is in the later sections of the book, where Sztokman probes the intersection between Orthodoxy’s attitudes toward woman and the patriarchal dynamic of her own family, that bring on her most powerful epiphanies. As she considers her

lifelong issues with weight and her relationship to food, she identifies practices rooted in her childhood as a source of trauma and eating disorders. “The kitchen was an entirely female domain tightly controlled by my mother. My sisters and I set, served, and cleared, as my father sat, from beginning to end, four hours. We were there as kitchen staff. Men at the table were all served first.”

Years later she reflects, “My father’s table, to this day, feels like a cage. When I sit there, listening to one man control all conversation and thought while women control the serving, I literally cannot breathe. The only thing I can do is eat. I eat and eat and eat, to stop myself from feeling... to stop myself from bolting and running away for good.”

For some, this book may affirm long-held notions about the way that traditional Judaism relates to women. For others, it may make for daunting, uncomfortable reading. “Not everyone is interested in having a conversation about the many limits we accept as normal in our lives,” she concedes. “I understand. It can be scary and very destabilizing. And, as I have mentioned, it comes up against all that God-language. It’s as if, for some people, feminism is going to war against God.”

But Sztokman has walked this difficult route, and in thinking, as Cixous would have it, through the lived reality of her bodily experience, her conclusions are unequivocal. “Women who grew up with and live for decades in a system that continually justifies their silencing and exclusion as the

word of God are forced to make all kinds of internal adjustments to function normally. They may not describe themselves as abused. They may even take offense at this characterization. But the fact is that these are practices of abuse.”

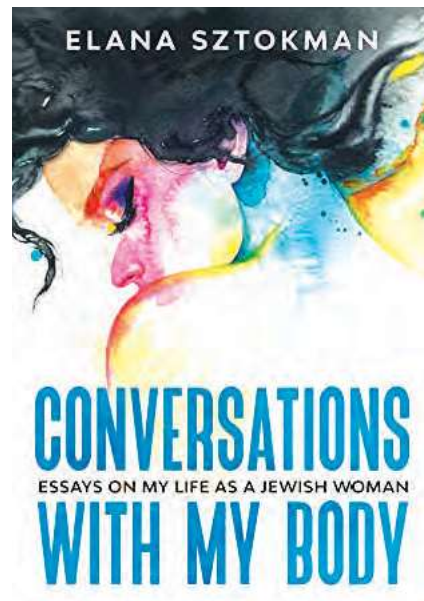
The problems raised in these essays suggest that the ethical and humanistic stance taken up by Judaism since the time of the prophets is failing to address the reality of life in the 21st century. We are living in an era in which, for the first time in human history, women’s autonomy and full participation in the public sphere are recognized in the world’s dominant cultures as essential to a functioning society. Will traditional Judaism continue to insist otherwise? And if so, what does this say about traditional Judaism?

In a piece published last winter in *Lilith*, titled “Amy Coney Barrett and Me: Women who protect the Patriarchy,” she muses, “I know so many women like her. In fact, I could have been her myself. An Orthodox Jewish woman may be the head of the brain surgery department but accept that she doesn’t count in a minyan and her voice can never be heard in public. She may be a brilliant musician while accepting the reality that she cannot sing in front of men, or an outstanding athlete who would never run in anything other than long sleeves and a skirt. I know this stance well, because I lived it.”

The book concludes with a call to action: “What has been missing throughout the history of Orthodox feminism is attention to the inner lives of Orthodox women. The

next vital step in the movement for Orthodox feminism must focus on the healing that Orthodox women desperately need.”

This book, in its endeavor to rethink the meaning of what traditional Judaism demands from women, is a first step. ■



**Conversations with My Body:
Essays on My Life as a Jewish Woman**

Dr. Elana Sztokman
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