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Review Of "Marriage And Metaphor: Constructions Of Gender In Rabbinic Literature" By G. Labovitz

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Gail Labovitz. *Marriage and Metaphor: Constructions of Gender in Rabbinic Literature*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009. x, 289 pp.
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In *Marriage and Metaphor: Constructions of Gender in Rabbinic Literature*, Gail Labovitz applies “cognitive metaphor theory” to the reading of rabbinic sources, in ways that illuminate rabbinic literature in general and rabbinic constructions of marriage and gender in particular. Like Daniel Boyarin’s exploration of intertextuality in midrash and David Stern’s examination of rabbinic parables, Labovitz’s book demonstrates that rabbinic sources ought to be read along with contemporary literary and linguistic theories. Labovitz’s thesis: “A woman is

Acquired' (and the corollaries, 'Women are Ownable' and 'Marriage is Ownership') is a deep, culturally entrenched metaphor in rabbinic thinking, and the central model by which rabbis construct their system of marriage and gender relations" (1) is compellingly argued and ultimately supported at every level of analysis.

The introduction lays out "cognitive metaphor theory" in a lucid and exciting manner. (The chapter also discusses some lacunae regarding gender in metaphor theory and introduces the reader to contemporary methods and approaches to rabbinic sources). Citing George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* as her entryway into cognitive metaphor theory, Labovitz explains the importance of metaphoric language for thought: "metaphor is an integral part of our conceptual systems" and "metaphors are not primarily located in language, but in thought" (3). Citing the earlier work of Ricoeur, Labovitz also describes the "paradox" of metaphor, how "the metaphorical 'is' at once signifies both 'is not' and 'is like'" (3).

Chapter 1 discusses M. Kiddushin 1:1, the text that contains the word that served as the impetus for this study, *niknet* (is acquired): "A woman is acquired in three ways, and acquires herself in two ways." Here Labovitz engages previous scholarship that addressed the question, "Are women property in the rabbinic system of marriage?" (32, 251). Labovitz finds this underlying question in need of reconsideration, writing, "To ask 'are women property in the system of the Mishnah,' and the broader spectrum of rabbinic literature as well, with the expectation that an answer of either yes or no (or even yes in some situations and no in others) can be reached, is to ask for something that cannot be forthcoming. Rather, the *kinyan* of M. Kiddushin 1:1 is a paradox, a purchase and not a purchase, both and neither, all at once" (39). The chapter also reviews other linguistic expressions (e.g., "*ba'al isha*"; "purchase made in error"; and even "*nissuin*") that attest to the underlying metaphor of rabbinic marriage: Women are ownable (40–47). The careful linguistic analysis of the chapter thus reveals the hierarchy of rabbinic gender relations surrounding marriage (and beyond) that conceives of men as active agents and women as passive objects (48–49) as "the metaphor of ownership serves to naturalize, and thus reproduce, this gender imbalance in the very structure of the language in which rabbinic texts discuss and construct marriage" (48). The metaphor of "Women are Ownable/Marriage is Ownership," moreover, reveals a "lexical gap" in rabbinic thinking about marriage; "at minimum the metaphor serves to restrict linguistic options" that would allow for female agency or shared agency (52–53).

In Chapter 2, Labovitz explores whether or not the (polysemic) term *kiddushin* provides a countermodel to the marriage-as-ownership metaphor developed throughout her book. At stake in the valorization of the rabbinic use of *k, d, sh* (over and against *k, n, h*) is that *k, d, sh* "encompasses meanings of holiness and sanctification." Thus, *kiddushin* has been read as a positive linguistic/semantic change that reflects a cultural change in rabbinic ideas about marriage (and gender). Labovitz complicates and challenges such a reading, and concludes, "*K, d, sh* as used in the rabbinic lexis of marriage clearly functions as *part of the ownership metaphor* epitomized by the phrase 'a woman is acquired'" and, "we

must recognize as inaccurate, or at best incomplete, the assertion that *kiddushin* as a marriage term must, by virtue of its apparent root *k,d,sh*, impart connotations of holiness and sanctity to the rabbinic conception of marriage” (73; emphasis added).

Chapters 3 and 4 form a unit, each exploring the productiveness, pervasiveness, and internal coherence of the rabbinic marriage metaphor of ownership. Again, cognitive metaphor theory is used to show how a basic metaphor (i.e., woman as ownable) provides many opportunities for expansion and elaboration. Chapter 3 focuses on metaphors of real estate—women as fields and houses. Particularly insightful here is that after treating each metaphor on its own, Labovitz notes the overlap between them: “In a few instances, we even find ‘spill over’ between them and blending of images from the two different source realms” (128–29). Chapter 4 moves on to discuss metaphors that associate women with slaves and their shared status as “outsiders-within.” Here I found her investigation into the rabbinic grouping of women and slaves (and minors) an important contribution to the discussion of these groups’ exemption from Torah study and commandments. Working from the woman-as-ownable (as a slave is ownable) metaphor, she is able to finesse the connections between slaves and women and the differences between those two groups and that of (male) minors.

Chapter 5 analyzes the various monetary exchanges that the rabbis discuss in connection with marriage. Labovitz charts the trend, present in tannaitic sources but culminating in the Bavli, “towards expanding male control over female property in betrothal and marriage” (216). Against those who claim that the *ketubah*, or rabbinic marriage contract, negates the element(s) of purchase in rabbinic marriage by its deferral of payment, and thus reflects a move away from the “biblical” *mohar* (bridewealth), Labovitz writes, “What we have here is not a historical account of the process by which a rabbi or rabbis converted *mohar* into *ketubah*, thereby moving away from a purchase model of marriage, but rather quite the opposite, a cultural construction in which rabbis actively endeavor to indelibly insert and inscribe bridewealth back into the genealogy of the *ketubah*” (233). The metaphor of woman as ownable—marriage as ownership—thus stands undeterred and not really deferred as “the money given and pledged to a woman at marriage contains within itself, as it were, the very means by which it and all her property comes under the husband’s control” (233).

Labovitz’s conclusory chapter reiterates that the dominant—and exclusive—metaphor and/or model of rabbinic marriage is one of ownership. One can catch glimpses of marriage as “partnership,” and spouses as “fellows” (246–47), but nothing challenges the dominant metaphor. She points out that as this metaphor of marriage works to construct women as ownable, passive objects, it simultaneously constructs men as “owners, masters, freemen; in short as socially and culturally dominant” (250). Labovitz ends with a personal discussion of the metaphor *she* married by, which briefly engages with the politics of rabbinic marriage today and provides an eloquent example of how the personal is the political. Here she worries, “If the ritual form of my own and many others’ weddings remains ‘remarkably constant’ with the betrothal and marriage procedures described in classical rabbinic literature, then I have to address the possibility, even likelihood, that

marriage rituals in many Jewish communities today ‘are still entirely amenable to a former, harmful justification that abides conspicuously in canonical sources’” (253). Although this constancy might be true for some, in addition to pointing to Rachel Adler’s *B’rit Ahuvim* ceremony as a starting point for moving forward, Labovitz might also have directed her readers to numerous other wedding or marriage models that have developed over the twelve years since Adler’s work (see, for example, <http://www.ritualwell.org/>). Thus whereas Labovitz finds it “emotionally easier to accept the continued authority of these traditions,” many have not. This is not to criticize Labovitz’s book in any manner, nor her personal reflections. It simply demonstrates the need for critical, engaged feminist scholarship—exemplified throughout her book—and the productiveness both of feminists who remain within an authoritative tradition (as “outsiders-within”?) and those who position themselves beyond such authority.

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