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In memory of Esther Aumann z"l
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**'And Manoah followed his wife' –
The Status of Women in Biblical Society**

Uriel Simon

Women in the Bible, as in all pre-modern patriarchal societies, hold secondary status in legal, social, and economic terms. The fundamental equality between men and women before the law does not mean equal rights. Among other things, the woman does not inherit from her father or her husband; the father is even permitted to sell his minor daughter as a maidservant. On the other hand, the ruling that a daughter inherits from her deceased father who has no sons, and that the vows of a divorcee and widow cannot be abrogated, but remain binding like a man's vows demonstrate that the secondary status of women is social rather than essential. That status is the result not of natural deficiencies, but of the patriarchal structure of biblical society. Thus, it is very significant that there are two areas in which biblical women hold an advantage over men: motherhood (giving life and nourishment) and saving lives (embattling death). A literary analysis of the miraculous birth of Shimshon (Judges 13) shows the prominent spiritual aspects of the woman's role in the domain of motherhood: the angel reveals himself to her rather than to Manoah, and throughout the story she is more perceptive than he in realizing the meaning of that revelation and its implications. Hence he follows her not merely with his feet but with his heart as well.

Nuptial *Piyyutim* and *Haftarot*

Shulamit Elizur

Marriage, celebrated in Jewish communities in a series of festivities and ceremonies, reaches the synagogue as well: the groom's arrival on the Shabbat during the first week after his wedding is traditionally marked not only with an *aliyah* to the Torah, but with remarkable changes in the Torah reading, the *haftarah*, and the liturgy. Special *piyyutim* are read. In some places, the *Shabbat hatan* occasions the reading of a special Torah portion, '*And Avraham was old*' (Gen. 24:1 ff.), which recounts the happy '*shidduch*' of Yitzhak and Rivkah. More common, and still practiced today, is a special *haftarah*, usually beginning with the verse, '*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord... for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation... as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels*' (Is. 61:10 ff.). In this essay, two *piyyutim* in honor of the groom, found in the Cairo *genizah*, are published for the first time. They point to an ancient custom (preserved among Italian congregations until today) to begin the same *haftarah* one verse earlier: '*And their seed shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples: all that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the Lord has blessed.*'

**A Study of the Image of Queen Esther in
the Piyyut 'Esther veMordehai Libam
Nitakh' and its Midrashic Sources**

Eden Hacoheh

This essay considers the way in which an early Palestinian *payytan* depicted Queen Esther and her relationship to other figures in *Megillat Esther*. Although Esther is the heroine of the *Megilla* tale, the biblical author recounted little of her feelings or her inner world. In *midrashim*, the Rabbis sought to describe those aspects of her personality missing in the biblical account. Following in their footsteps, the *payytan* created a poetic dialogue, 'Esther veMordehai Libam Nitakh' dramatizing an extensive exchange between them. The result is a brilliant interweaving of biblical and *midrashic* elements which touch on Esther's orphanhood, her loneliness in the palace of Ahashverosh, and a dispute with Mordechai over the question of who is responsible for the danger threatening the existence of the Jewish people. Nevertheless the *payytan* did not feel bound to these pre-texts, and this article emphasizes those instances when the *payytan* freed himself from *midrashic* sources and gave expression to his own creative insights.

The *Ketubah*: The Origin and Meaning of a Legal Obligation

Hanital Ofan

Is the *halakhic* status of the *ketubah* (marriage contract) biblical or rabbinical in origin? What implications does this issue have on the essence, meaning, and text of the *ketubah* itself? These questions are considered through a close reading of the talmudic dispute in the tractate *Ketubot* 10a, based on a study of biblical paradigms, *midrashei halakhah*, parallel *beraitot*, and Talmudic discussions. The commentaries of several *rishonim* are considered in light of the original Talmudic context. The two primary purposes of the *ketubah* as a fundamental document: 1) establishing the marital connection between man and woman and 2) stating monetary obligations in order to deter hasty divorce are seen as expressing two very different conceptions of the *ketubah*.

As a result of her analysis the author offers us an alternative solution to the primary question posed in the Talmudic passage which sheds light on the essence of the *Ketubah*.

Creative Interpretation

Body and Movement as Spiritual Experience

Devorah Nov

This essay considers the vital connection between body and soul, and the unique importance of movement and dance in enhancing that connection. We examine that connection in the hope of reaching internal harmony. Movement and becoming in time are perceived as a fundamental aspect of human development and essential in creating a dynamic relationship with God; dance is a renewing force, a path to the revelation of hidden inner powers, a means, through transformation, to raise and re-work various spiritual states. Movement enables integration in time on the personal and inter-personal level; dance leads to a sense of an underlying unity, and an understanding of the individual's place in that unity. A variegated aspect of worship, dance can enable *devekut* on many human levels. Appreciating the unique role of movement and dance in connecting with God would enhance our perception of the Torah as an actual way of life.

Current Issues

**On Human Rights and Prayer Groups
at the Western Wall**

Ruth Gavison

This discussion of women's prayer groups at the Kotel is part of a comprehensive attempt, initiated by the author and R. Ya'akov Medan of Alon Shvut, to foster agreement among Jewish factions on a range of religious and political issues. These include rights of return [*shvut*], registration, conversion, the laws concerning marriage and divorce, Shabbat, *kashrut*, burial, religious councils, and other subjects. The work is based on joint proposals for arrangements, and detailed explanatory texts written by the authors, in which these proposals are explained from their different perspectives. This article discusses the proposal on regulating prayer at the Kotel by putting it in the broader perspective of human rights talk, showing both the strength and the limitations of such discourse.

Source and comment

**Philosopher and Writer – Can the two walk
together unless they be agreed? An Introductory
Article on Blanchot's Philosophy**

Rav Daniel Epstein

This essay is an attempt to introduce the enigmatic literary thinker, Maurice Blanchot, to the Hebrew-speaking public. The friendship Blanchot shared with Emmanuel Levinas was mutually enriching – philosophy, especially the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, not yet translated to French, permeated Blanchot's world via Levinas's consciousness as thinker and Jew; French literature and culture made their way into Levinas's thought via Blanchot. The extreme abstraction of the Hegelian system collapsed in the late nineteenth century, making way for a new philosophy of existence, which rejected vacuous concepts in the search for the soul's nourishment, for its very survival. Blanchot, though suspicious of ethics and theology, speaks of the threats to the individual engendered by atheism, nihilism, and market society, and counters them with essential Jewish values concerning the other, the stranger, dialogue and speech. Appended is an essay by Blanchot, translated from French to Hebrew by the author. Its subject is 'the everyday' and the phenomenon of modern alienation from self, world, and a fundamental sense of moral responsibility.

Book Review

The Bride as She Truly Is

A review of 'Pious and Rebellious – Jewish Women in Europe in the Middle Ages' by Avraham Grossman

Aviad Hacoheh

The subject of this essay is Professor Avraham Grossman's recently published Hebrew book, *Pious and Rebellious – Jewish Women in Europe in the Middle Ages*. Set in the context of both the general interest aroused in recent decades for 'Women Studies', and the social, political and religious status of Jewish women in particular, the book is described as distinctive on a number of accounts. Themes of the book outlined in the essay include: the image of the woman as a partner or 'other'; matchmaking and betrothal; the 'rebellious' wife; participation in business; phenomena of *pilagshut* and prostitution; the role of women in Torah study, prayer, ritual and religious life; conjugal violence; divorce, *agunah*, *mamzerut*; the 'silence' of the sources. Despite the formal framework of the book as historical research into medieval Europe, 1000-1300, its relevance for the present and hopes for the future of Jewish women find cogent expression.