Rereading the Sources: New Visions of Women in Medieval Ashkenaz

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Considering the consequences of gender is a significant development in recent Jewish historiography. While historians of previous eras tended to assume that social circumstances and historical transformations affected the two sexes similarly, gender analysis has shown that this is often far from the case.[2] In this paper I discuss three areas in which employing gender as a category of analysis expands our understandings of the lives of Jewish women in medieval Ashkenaz. In my first example, I discuss how Jewish women were objectified as occasions of sexual sin by the Hasidei Ashkenaz, the pietists of twelfth and thirteenth century Germany. My second analysis examines the personal testimonies of R. Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (d. 1238) to demonstrate how Ashkenazi Jewry constructed gender roles that empowered women in the economic and domestic spheres while privileging men's intellectual undertakings. Finally, I describe how medieval Jewish women developed strategies through their bodies to overcome limitations inherent in Jewish legal teachings. In each case, using gender as a category of analysis yields new insights into the social history of medieval Jewish women and men and their ways of functioning separately and together in an inhospitable and uncertain environment.

The Objectification of Women in Sefer Hasidim

A gender analysis of representations of women in Sefer Hasidim and related texts highlights the profound ambivalence towards women harbored by the German-Jewish pietiests of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[3] While Sefer Hasidim places great importance on happy marital relations, its authors also see virtually all other women as potential provocations to adultery. Possible female partners in the illicit sexual activity imagined in Sefer Hasidim include Jewish and gentile women, both married and unmarried; these could be family members, such as sisters-in-law and mothers-in-law, as well as maidservants.[4] At the same time as the literature of the Hasidei Ashkenaz expresses the ubiquity of carnal temptations, however, it also reveals a profound mystical yearning to transcend the physical pleasures of the material world. These spiritual expressions go beyond rabbinic norms in their displacement and objectification of women in favor of devotion to the divine.

In this body of medieval Jewish literature, written by men for a male audience, women's voices are absent. While individual females who are part of the pietistic circle are frequently depicted favorably, even the most pious, simply by virtue of her sex, has the capacity, however unwitting, to tempt a man to sin or sinful thoughts. In an atmosphere so conscious of sexuality, gender becomes a crucial societal determinant uniting all women far more than they are separated by religion, level of piety, or marital and social status. Indeed, portions of such works as Sefer Hasidim and Sefer HaRoqeah of R. Eleazar ben Judah of Worms place great emphasis on sexual violations men commit with women, delineating how atonement may be undertaken by male transgressors, and how repentance may be achieved.[5] How females might do penance for their sexual indiscretions, however, is rarely considered. This consequent reification of women as objects of desire, or causes of sin, but generally not as sinners who are themselves in need of redemption, is a striking and disturbing feature of this literature.

Certainly, from the perspective of rabbinic Judaism, there is little new in Sefer Hasidim's admonitions to avoid women. Rabbinic Judaism, with its acute consciousness of human sexuality's potential for causing societal disorder if strict controls are lacking, particularly as regards marital infidelity and consequent uncertain lineage of children, ordains distinct separations between men and women, the roles they can play, and the social and spiritual status which pertains to each sex. The German-Jewish pietists continue in this tradition by painstakingly erecting as many barriers as possible against interactions between men and women, encounters which appear to have been far more common in the constricted urban milieu of medieval Christian Europe than in the late antique environments reflected in rabbinic literature. As one segment of Sefer Hasidim declares:

> The main strength of the pious man from beginning to end is that although they scoff at him he does not forsake his piety; his intent is for heaven's sake and he does not look at the countenance of women: especially so among other men where women are customarily seen, for example, if he has been in the wedding hall where the women were garbed in choicest ornaments . . . . and he does not gaze upon women at the time when they stand by their wash. When they wash their garments and lift their skirts so as not to soil them, they uncover their legs, and we know a woman's leg is a sexual incitement and so said the sage, 'Nothing interposes better before desire, than closing one's eyes'.[6]

Whether or not any of the sexual liaisons reported in Sefer Hasidim really occurred, or whether such stories simply reflect the didactic purposes (or overactive imaginations) of their tellers,[7] spiritual concerns women may have had about their participation in such indiscretions are not mentioned. Indeed, women appear in virtually all the passages related to sexual transgresions as susceptible, willing, and enthusiastic participants who sometimes initiate the activities. This apparent blindness to the possibility that women are also moral and spiritual beings may indicate the secondary place of women in medieval Jewish thought . It may also stem from rabbinic Judaism's understanding that a woman's primary spiritual duty is to enable her husband to fulfil his religious obligations, as expressed in the Babylonian Talumud in B. Berakhot 17a.

Certainly, deep ambivalence about women who engage in ascetic practices is already present in rabbinic sources. B. Sotah 22a includes unmarried women "who give themselves up to prayer" as among those who lose the world to come. Rashi comments on B. Sotah 22a that such women are witches and adulteresses who only appear to be pious. In the following generation, the Tosaphists cite R. Meir on the same passage to the effect that such a woman pretends to fast only in order to evade supervision. Meanwhile, "She behaves promiscuously and loses her virginity." In an Italian sermon of the sixteenth century, Abraham Yagel explicitly rebukes women who adopt ascetic practices such as daily fasting and prayer. Even though the author admits that these women have good and holy intentions, he warns that through their single minded devotion to God they neglect their more appropriate duties to husband and home.[8] While such fears of familial disruption may play a part in the absence of women among those in need of repentance in the literature of the Hasidei Ashkenaz, it may also be the case that this pietistic community unquestioningly assumed that the intense human/divine relationship for which they struggled was only possible for men.

Similarly, the gender concerns raised by these pietistic texts lead to questions about cultural influences. Are there some realistic bases for the German-Jewish pietists' virtual obsession with sexual transgressions? German towns in the thirteenth century were undergoing intense social changes in which Jews also participated. Significant female mobility and public visibility, as well as crowded private spaces, allowed for frequent encounters of all kinds between men and women; prostitutes abounded. Husbands were often absent for long periods of time on business trips. At the same time Christian clerics preached the evils of carnality and the virtues of celibacy. It seems likely that the pervasive influence of Christian concerns with sexual sin as well as frequent male-female interactions inside and outside the home heightened sexual tensions in everyday life and may have led to increased levels of illicit sexual contacts. It is not surprising the Hasidei Ashkenaz attempted to amplify the traditional tendency towards separation of men and women inherent in rabbinic Judaism.[9]

I have discussed these issues in more detail elsewhere, but I raise them here to demonstrate how a gender analysis of the objectification of women in a body of Jewish pietistic literature can lead to reconsiderations of aspects of medieval Jewish social and religious life in general and the realia of Jewish women's lives in particular.

Memorializing Women of Valor

Late in 1196, Dolce, the wife of R. Eleazar of Worms, and their two daughters, were murdered by intruders in their home. Following this horrific event, R. Eleazar, also known as the Roqeah, wrote a prose narrative and poetic elegies that describe the murders in detail and eloquently communicate a husband's profound sense of bereavement. Since Eleazar's elegy also describes his late wife's activities in detail, in a poetic adumbration of Proverbs 31, these documents also preserve a vision of what the Hasidei Ashkenaz, at least, saw as most fitting and praiseworthy in an outstanding woman of their milieu.[10]

In the well known poetic elegy, the Roqeah details Dolce's economic, familial, religious, educational endeavors, relating how his wife not only provided for all of the manifold physical and emotional needs of her large household of family and students, but also served as a religious leader and spiritual model to the women in her community. In the words of remembrance for his slain daughters Bellette and Hannah, the Roqeah provides insight into their educations and gives poignant glimpses of medieval Jewish family life. The less cited prose description of Dolce's and her daughters' deaths adds details to the elegy's vivid portrayal of the arenas in which a woman of this realm was empowered. From it we learn that Dolce supported the household financially by serving as an agent who gathered sums from others and lent them out at interest to Christians, receiving commissions in return for her efforts. Moreover, close study of the Roqeah's description of the murders appears to indicate that the intruders who entered his home were initially received on the assumption that they had come to transact business with Dolce. Contrary to much earlier scholarship attributing Dolce's murder to Crusaders, her attackers were certainly not part of any organized crusading force bent on attacking the Jewish community of Worms as a whole: they were two scoundrels acting independently, motivated by greed, not anti-Jewish fervor. Either their intent had been villainous from the start, since they were aware that there were likely to be valuable objects in the house of such a prominent businesswoman, or they turned to violence when they could not negotiate an acceptable loan. Whatever the case, it was Dolce's business reputation that attracted the miscreants to the Roqeah's home, and it was Dolce who was the central target of their wrath. That their actions were also seen as reprehensible by the Christian authorities, is evident in R. Eleazar's report that at least one of the attackers was quickly pursued, captured, and executed.[12]

In his description of the intruders' assault, it is striking that R. Eleazar describes Dolce as the one who acted most vigorously against the attackers, writing of the moment of assault, "Immediately the saintly woman (hasidah) jumped up and ran out of the winter quarters and cried out that they were killing us." Dolce was the one who managed to get out of her house in order to summon aid for her family; and it was she who died a combatant's death, cut to pieces in the street by the marauders. Indeed, it could be said that in many ways Dolce's behavior as wage earner and defender of her family more comfortably fits with conventional Western notions of masculine rather than feminine characteristics. As Daniel Boyarin has argued, the physical and political powerlessness of Jews in late antique and medieval times often led to such reversals in the gender roles favored by the majority culture.[13] Thus, Ashkenaz tended to esteem the scholar as opposed to the man of physical strength and action, a persona in any case largely forbidden to Jews in medieval Christendom. Conversely, women were socialized to act vigorously in their economic interactions with the outside world.

While R. Eleazar showed no discomfiture in describing his wife's active role in supporting her family, and in coming to their defense, it seems that this strong portrayal of the Roqeah's wife was disquieting to later generations becoming uneasy with traditionally defined Jewish gender expectations. Some of this apparent anxiety over what constituted appropriate and inappropriate female and male behaviors is expressed in a account of the attack on the Roqeah's family found in the seventeenth century Ma'aseh Nissim (1670), a collection of tales and short stories in Judaeo-German based on legends that arose around the city of Worms and its distinguished Jewish figures, attributed to R. Juspe Shammash (1604-1678) of Worms.[14]

In this revised version we find that the murders take place when no men are present. The Roqeah's wife is not named. Dolce is not the focus of the attack nor does she raise the alarm; in fact, no mention is made of Dolce's important role in the household's life. The attackers are now "murderous gentile students" and the Roqeah is wounded in pursuing them. Thus, virtually all of the aspects of the Roqeah's account in which Dolce's activities were pivotal and her husband appeared passive -- characterizations that might have caused discomfort to later male readers from the perspective of appropriate gender behaviors – are deliberately eliminated.

I would argue that R. Juspe's erasure of Dolce's active role in defending her family illuminates an evolving discourse on appropriate female activities as western regions of Ashkenaz slowly begin to encounter the values and gender constructions of early modern Europe.[15] Boyarin has suggested that it was the process of "'Emancipation' of the late nineteenth century which produced both the pain and the difficulty of Jewish (male) identity."[15] However, R. Juspe's seventeenth century retelling of the attack on the Roqeah's household suggests that Jewish men's ambivalence about traditional Jewish gender roles was felt and expressed significantly earlier.

Disputed Bodies: Men, Women and Miqveh

My third example of the benefits for feminist scholarship of rereading medieval texts demonstrates how gender analysis and attentiveness to the discourse of the body can illuminate the ways in which medieval Jewish men inscribed their piety on the bodies of their wives. A consideration of medieval legal discourse pertaining to hilkhot niddah, the laws pertaining to the menstruating woman, also raises interesting questions about what women did as opposed to what halakhic texts prescribed.

The Nizzahon Vetus, which David Berger has described as a virtual anthology of twelfth and thirteenth century Jewish-Christian polemic in northern France and Germany,[16] preserves the following Christian attack on Judaism and the recommended Jewish rejoinder:

> The heretics ask: We baptize both males and females and in that way we accept our faith, but in your case only men and not women can be circumcised. One can respond: Women are accepted [as Jews] because they watch themselves and carefully observe the prohibitions connected with menstrual blood.[17]

It is fascinating that medieval Christian anti-Jewish polemic claimed that Judaism was inferior because women were excluded from essential Jewish rituals. It is equally instructive that the defining ritual through which Jewish women are said to affirm their Jewishness and attain merit is conscientious attention to halakhic legislation by the niddah, the menstruating woman. This assertion is a noteworthy departure from the talmudic dictum of B. Berakhot 17a that women attain merit through enabling the men of their family to study. As such, it represents a signal indication of the importance the sages of medieval Ashkenaz placed on Jewish women's observance of hilkhot niddah. Indeed, emphasis on the laws pertaining to the niddah and to miqveh immersion, and male anxieties concerning women's fulfilment of them, constitute a central motif in the construction of women and marital life in Ashkenaz. Medieval rabbis are no less convinced than their predecessors that women gain merit through enabling male endeavors. The difference is the extent to which they have rewritten their own purity on the bodies of their wives. As a consequence, any personal, spiritual, or intellectual benefits women might gain from their actions must be made a reflected glory at best, as befits their secondary place in the halakhic system.[18] When R. Eleazar of Worms enumerates the appropriate acts of penance for those who have transgressed the prohibition against contact between a man and a niddah in the Hilkhot T'shuvah section of his Sefer HaRoqeah, he takes it for granted that these acts of atonement, which include extensive fasting, lashing, and immersion in icy water, apply only to men. The need for the women who were the sexual partners of these atoning men to expiate their wrongdoing is, once again, subordinate to male concerns.

Among the dominant themes in the Ashkenazic sources referring to niddah is the frequently expressed maxim that women must be taught to be as expeditious as possible in observing hilkhot niddah in order to maintain domestic harmony between husband and wife. Documents connected with the Hasidei Ashkenaz, a community whose teachings were highly influential for subsequent Ashkenazic practice, articulate that any delay on the part of the wife in immersing in the miqveh as soon as legally possible may increase her husband's sexual frustration, leading perhaps to sinful thoughts and even illicit sexual activities. One text directly links expeditious miqveh immersion with the dilemma of a man who wonders whether or not he should teach his daughters to write. While on the surface these two activities would seem to have little connection, both were connected with significant male uneasiness about the risks of female autonomy and the dangerous potentialities of human sexuality. The father's predicament is expressed as follows:

> If they do not know how to write, they will be forced to request men to write their receipts for pledges when they lend money. They will be alone with those men who write for them and they may sin, and this will be my fault. . . .And even if they do not sin, they may think about it. He taught them to write receipts for pledges, and he taught them that whenever it was time for their immersion that they should not delay, for when her husband desires her she should be ready so that he will not engage in bad thoughts and so that she will preserve him from all such fantasies.[19]

This passage not only expresses its author's conviction of the potential for sexual provocation in every male-female encounter, but also reveals debates over appropriate levels of female education.[20] Teaching one's daughters to write is reported here as something unusual which requires justification. And the justification, while based on women's business needs, is not directly related to them, but to fears of sexual indiscretions, whether actual or imagined, which may follow from a woman who cannot write asking a male neighbor for secretarial aid. It is the duty of the father to construct barriers to sin, and in this instance the dangers connected with female literacy, well recognized and documented in many medieval literatures, both Jewish and Christian, as leading to unchastity, are outweighed by the more immediate hazards of frequent female-male propinquity. Moreover, while it may appear at first that the writer is concerned with his daughters' spiritual well-being, it is no accident that he immediately goes on to stress that the most important thing a father can teach his daughter is her duty to make herself accessible to her husband's sexual needs as speedily as halakhah allows, so that he will not succumb to inappropriate thoughts, possibly prompted by encounters with other women. The daughters, literate or not, are essentially seen as the objects which can occasion sin in men, and satisfactory marital sex within halakhic guidelines is presented as the only possible antidote.

The problem for Jewish men, of course, was that the observance of the laws pertaining to the niddah and miqveh immersion obviated readily available sexual relations within marriage. As Sefer Hasidim asks elsewhere, "Why is womanhood compared to the moon? Just as the moon waxes for half a month and wanes for half a month, so a woman has a strong attachment to her husband for half a month and is isolated from him for half a month during her niddah."[21] The Hasidei Ashkenaz naturalized this enforced separation; just as women should be diligent in observing the phases of their cycles, so it is in the order of things that they should be as expeditious as possible in immersing in the miqveh so that their husbands will not be deprived a moment longer than necessary of the marital relations that preserve them from sin.

Similar recognition of the desirability of expeditious spousal reunion is also evident in the following responsum tentatively attributed to the late thirteenth century authority Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg: "A woman is permitted to cohabit with her husband immediately after her immersion in the ritual bath, even if such immersion took place in the daytime [of the eighth day]." The responsum goes on to note that this decision disagrees with the stricter ruling of R. Tam who holds that a woman is not permitted to immerse herself in a ritual bath during the daylight time of Sabbath even if it be her eighth day.[22]

Significant evidence suggests that concerns about timely immersion were well founded. A wife's refusal to visit the miqveh in a punctual way played a central role in some marital disputes by providing women with a strategem for the assertion of power and sometimes a way out of an unhappy marriage. Perceived female propensities to delay immersion for ulterior motives are expressed in several documents from medieval Ashkenaz. Sefer Hasidim, for example, assumes that a wife's refusal to immerse can constitute a form of marital blackmail, and advises as follows:

> A man who is about to give his daughter in marriage must instruct her never to delay the time of her immersion in the miqveh. She must never say to her husband, "I will not immerse unless you give me such and such a sum of money, or a certain object." Rather, if the two of them devote their thoughts to heaven when they are intimate, their sons will be good and righteous.[23]

Indeed, the recognition of the desirability of spousal reunion as soon as possible following miqveh immersion, together with evidence that a wife's refusal to immerse could be a source of serious marital tension, is also evident in several other responsa attributed to Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg. One of these discusses a woman who has returned to her father's home and, claiming illness, refuses to resume marital relations. Her husband demands that his wife return to him. R. Meir rules that even the woman is sick, she must immerse herself in a ritual bath and cohabit with her husband.[24] If she refuses to do so, she is considered a moredet, a rebellious wife, and if her rebellion persists for twelve months her husband is entitled to divorce her without returning her marriage portion. In this instance, where the wife and her parents may be willing to forfeit her ketubbah, it seems that a woman's refusal of ritual immersion could provide a means to extricate herself from an untenable marriage.

Similar issues over the financial stakes in ending an unhappy marriage appear in a passage in Sefer Hasidim which also raises questions about the degree of compliance with hilkhot niddah by ordinary Jews in Ashkenaz. Here, a husband accused his wife of adultery and also admitted his own complicity in her failure to observe hilkhot niddah, since he "cannot live without a woman." His accusations, however, were not accepted by the rabbi of his community as grounds for divorce and his wife's relatives refused to allow him to divorce her without returning her ketubbah. The rabbi advised the man to move to a distant land and send his wife a divorce document from there. He may remarry only after informing the leaders of the [new] community of the whole story so that they will not say it is forbidden for him to remarry since he already has another wife. "And if she accepts the divorce document, that is good, but if she does not, he has not committed a sin in remarrying since he knows that she has been wicked, whether through adultery or through flouting hilkhot niddah. But if she accepts the divorce document, he must send her the amount of her dowry specified in the marriage contract."[25]

As is evident from these examples, refusal to immerse in the miqveh obviously played a central role in domestic quarrels in this milieu, sometimes providing a wife with a strategem for the assertion of power, and even with the means to end an unhappy marriage -- although with a significant financial cost. Similarly, accusing a wife of laxness in this area might enable an unscrupulous husband to escape from an uncongenial marriage without having to return his wife's ketubbah payment.

Rabbinic concerns about some couples' lack of compliance in strictly observing complete separation during the seven so-called "white" days between the end of the menstrual period and actual miqveh immersion was also an important consideration in encouragements of speedy immersion.[26] The frequent complaints by rabbinic leaders in Ashkenaz that the seven "white days" were not being stringently observed by women and their husbands were probably based in fact. Sometimes, too, women's actions in the service of their own physical hygiene and comfort during the "white days" appeared threatening to rabbinic authority over the correct implementation of hilkhot niddah. Shaye J. D. Cohen has shown how a twelfth century tosafist, for example, criticized women who took warm baths as soon as their periods ceased, dressed in nice clothes, and served their husbands even though they had not yet immersed in the miqveh. Since they had already bathed earlier, the tosafist feared that these women might not wash thoroughly prior to actual miqveh immersion. He was concerned that such invalid immersions would put their husbands at risk. The tosafist demands that women remain uncleansed and unkempt for the additional seven "white days" in order to erect a fence against possible violation of hilkhot niddah by men.[27] The inscription of male piety on female bodies is clear. So, too, is the rabbinic leadership's desire to preserve power as, in Charlotte Fonrobert's words, the "authoritative interpreters of women's bodies -- in contrast to the women, who are staged as the object of the rabbis' interpretation."[28] As Cohen has pointed out, rabbinic polemics against female menstrual practices, taught by "mother to daughter and woman to woman and observed in privacy," are a political statement of the supremacy of rabbinic hegemony: "Women must consult rabbis to know what to do."[29] The vehemence with which these claims were made indicates that female compliance with male dictates could not be assumed.

Close attention, therefore, to references to the niddah and the moredet in Ashkenazic legal texts can demonstrate the range of women's strategic manipulations of halakhic dictates as well as male resistance to them. Such investigations also reveal many of the major anxieties of medieval Ashkenazic men vis-à-vis sexual politics, female autonomy, and rabbinic discourses on the body and its functions.[30]

Conclusion

In this essay I have demonstrated how an emphasis on the implications of gender has the potential to prompt provocative new readings of old texts that can expand and transform our understandings of Jewish social life in the Ashkenazic milieu. The task has only just begun.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay appeared as "Reading Women into the Sources: Reassessing Jewish Women in Medieval Ashkenaz" [Hebrew] in Renée Levine Melammed, ed ,.Harimi Va-Koah Kolekh (Life Up Your Voice) (Jerusalem: Yediot Ahronot, 2001, pp. 72-84.

2. On the impact of gender studies on the study of Jewish history, see Paula E. Hyman, "Gender and Jewish History," Tikkun 3 (January-February, 1988), and Judith R. Baskin, "Introduction," in idem, ed., Jewish Women in Historical Perspective. Second Edition (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), pp. 15-24. For analyses of the impact of womens and gender studies on various Jewish studies disciplines, see Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, eds., Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

3. For a fuller discussion of this topic, see Judith R. Baskin, "From Separation to Displacement: The Problem of Women in Sefer Hasidim," Association for Jewish Studies Review 19/1 (1994): 1-18; and David Biale, "Rabbinic Authority and Popular Culture in Medieval Europe," Ch. 3 in idem, Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

4. See Baskin, "From Separation to Displacement," for a discussion of the variety of sexual partners imagined in these texts.

5. On themes of repentance and atonement in Sefer Hasidim and related literature, see Ivan Marcus, Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), pp. 41-52.

6. Sefer Hasidim (Bologna version), ed. Reuven Margoliot (Jerusalem, 1964), § 9.

7. As David Biale writes, Eros and the Jews, p. 73, such narratives also function, albeit unconsciously, to arouse erotic excitement: "In the process of resisting the erotic temptations of his culture, Judah the Hasid ended up unwittingly reinforcing it."

8. Abraham Yagel, Eshet Hayyil (Venice, 1605-1606), pp. 18b-19a; cited by Howard Adelman, "Finding Women's Voices in Italian Jewish Literature," in Judith R. Baskin, ed., Women of the Word: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), pp. 54-55. While B. Sotah 22a discusses women who "give themselves up to prayer," the parallel passage in the Talmud of the Land of Israel talks about women "who give themselves up to fasting." Excessive attention to either activity is clearly seen as inappropriate for women.

9. On evidence for this, see Baskin, "From Displacement to Separation," pp. 12-14.

10. Both the prose passage and the poetic elegy survive, with some variations, in two manuscripts in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, Hebrew MS Michael 448, folio 30, and Hebrew MS Oppenheim 757, folios 25-27; they are listed in Adolf Neubauer, ed., Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library and in the College Libraries of Oxford (Oxford, 1886-1906), pp. 762, 798. The Hebrew texts appear in Israel Kamelhar, Rabbenu Eleazar mi-Germaiza, ha-Roqeah (Rzeazow, 1930), pp. 17-19; and in A.M. Haberman, ed., Sefer Gezeirot Ashkenaz ve-Zarfat (Jerusalem, 1945) pp. 164-167. For a recent translation of these documents, see Judith R. Baskin, "Dolce of Worms: The Lives and Deaths of an Exemplary Medieval Jewish Woman and her Daughters," in Lawrence Fine, ed., Judaism in

Practice: From the Middle Ages through the Early Modern Period (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 429-437; and idem, "Dolce of Worms: Women Saints in Judaism," in Arvind Sharma, ed., Women Saints in World Religions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 39-69.

11. These texts, which record numerous and poignant details of their subjects' daily lives, constitute an important source for the activities of medieval Jewish women in general, as well as a moving tribute to Dolce and her daughters. The epithets Eleazar uses in describing his wife, "pious" or "saintly" (hasidah), three times in the prose account and again at the very outset of the poetic eulogy, as well as "righteous" (tzadeket), tell us a great deal about the qualities for which women in her culture were most esteemed.

12. See Baskin, "Dolce of Worms: Women Saints in Judaism," in Sharma, ed., Women Saints in World Religions, for detailed discussion of the historical context and aftermath of this event.

13. Daniel Boyarin, Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1997), writes pp. 3-5, that "the application of 'feminine' norms to male comportment and the rejection of the 'masculine' ones by traditional Judaism, as well as the cultivation of activity and even aggressivity in dealing with the outside world for women led, of course, to a stereotyping of Jews (male and female) as outside the realm of normal sexuality, as queer, as sexually predatory, or as entirely sexless." He suggests, p. 5, that "it was through this mode of conscious alternative gendering that Jewish culture frequently asserted its identity over-against its surroundings."

14. Shlomo Eidelberg, R. Juspe, Shammash of Warmaisa (Worms): Jewish Life in Seventeenth Century Worms, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1991), provides a dual language translation (Hebrew/English) of the Ma'aseh Nissim with commentary and a photocopy of the original manuscript. The story of the attack on R. Eleazar's household is Story 6, found on p. 66 (Hebrew) and pp. 65-66 (English). R. Juspa was certainly aware of the Roqeah's version of events since it appears verbatim in a document compiled by Judah Liwa Kirchheim who preceded Juspa in recording the customs of Worms. See Eidelberg, p. 26 and p. 91 (English) where Kirchheim's version (which exists only in manuscript, now in Warsaw) appears as Appendix A. Eidelberg appears unaware of the original text of the Roqeah.

15. Boyarin, Unheroic Conduct, pp. 4-5.

16. David Berger, The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), p. 17.

17. Nizzahon Vetus, §237, ed. Berger, p. 224.

18. Rabbinic Judaism understood female observance of the laws of niddah as essential to enabling men to fulfil their obligation to avoid intercourse with a woman in a state of ritual impurity. Observance of the mandated period of separation followed by immersion applied only to married women in sexually active relationships with their husbands. A woman whose husband was absent for a prolonged length of time would not visit the miqveh until just prior to or following his return. (See Sefer Hasidim §874 [Bologna version] , which praises a woman for her expeditious miqveh visit on the eve of her husband's expected arrival.) There is no notion that women receive personal spiritual benefit from immersion. In fact, the rabbinic tradition understands female observance of hilkhot niddah as a punishment and as an atonement for Eve's part in bringing death into the world (see for example B. Shabbat

31b, Genesis Rabbah 17:8, Midrash Tanhuma on Genesis 6:9 and Lev. 15:9). In M. Shabbat 2:6 women are said to die in childbirth for failing to fulfil the three "female" commandments of niddah, separation of the hallah loaf, and lighting the Sabbath candles. Judith Romney Wegner, Chattel of Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 155, writes that since a wife's neglect of these religious duties makes her husband a transgressor, "the sages encourage women to observe them by threatening the worst punishment they can imagine." Positive constructions of the niddah commandments as bringing spiritual benefits to women is a late nineteenth and twentieth century innovation created by the Neo-Orthodox movement of Germany in response to the rejection of normative menstrual laws by the Reform movement. See Tirzah Meacham, "An Abbreviated History of the Development of the Jewish Menstrual Laws," in Rahel R. Wasserfall, ed., Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law (Hanover, NH, 1999), pp. 32-33, on the modern introduction of "Taharat haMishpaha," "Family Purity," as a euphemistic designation for the menstrual laws based on "a philosophy of the elevated state of modern womanhood," "along with the sanctity of her commandment to keep the family pure."

19. This passage from Hebrew MS 1566, Bodleian Library Oxford, p. 178a, is found in Joseph Dan, Iyunim B'Sifrut Hasidut Ashkenaz (Ramat-Gan, Israel, 1975), p. 140.

20. On this topic, see Judith R. Baskin, "Some Parallels in the Education of Medieval Jewish and Christian Women," Jewish History 5:1 (1991): 41-52; and idem, "The Education of Jewish Girls in the Middle Ages in Muslim and Christian Milieus" [Hebrew], in Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry 82 (2000): 1-17.

21. Sefer Hasidim (Bologna version), §1148.

22. This responsum is collected in Irving Agus, ed., Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg: His Life and His Works as Sources for the Religious, Legal and Social History of the Jews of Germany in the Thirteenth Century (New York: KTAV, 1970), Yoreh De'ah §162, p. 237.

23. Sefer Hasidim (Bologna version), §506; see Sefer Hasidim §873 where a wife refuses to immerse until her husband gives to charity.

24. Agus, Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, Eben ha-Ezer §311, p. 337.

25. Sefer Hasidim (Bologna version), §1117.

26. The extension of the state of niddah by the addition of seven "white" days following the actual cessation of menstruation is a post-Tannaitic rabbinic innovation without biblical mandate. On reasons for its institution see Meacham, "An Abbreviated History," in Wasserfall, ed., Women and Water, pp. 29-32. Indications of concern about lack of compliance with the seven "white days are already evident in the Talmud in B. Shabbat 13a-13b. See Sefer Hasidim (Bologna version), §175, for praise of a husband who observes these rules stringently, and Sefer haRoqeah haGadol, Hilkhot Niddah §318, pp. 205-206, where R. Eleazar lists defective children and losing the world to come among the dire consequences for those who do not.

27. Sefer Ha'Orah, ed. S. Buber (Lemberg, 1905; rep. Jerusalem, 1967), vol. 2, pp.170-71, cited by Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Purity, Piety, and Polemic: Medieval Rabbinic Denunciations of 'Incorrect' Purification Practices," in Wasserfall, ed., Women and Water, pp. 84-87. Cohen's article analyzes medieval rabbinic polemics against women's "incorrect" practices regarding menstrual impurity and purification and reveals the ways rabbinic authorities in Ashkenaz insisted on retaining the sole expertise over what constituted

women's correct observance of hilkhot niddah.

28. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "Yalta's Ruse: Resistance against Rabbinic Menstrual Authority in Talmudic Literature," in Wasserfall, ed., Women and Water, p. 67.

29. Cohen, "Purity, Piety, and Polemic," p. 97. Cohen writes, p. 98, "Two or three centuries after the polemics treated in this essay, R. Jacob Molin (known as the Maharil, d. 1427) implored one of his contemporaries not to write a Judeo-German compendium of the laws of niddah: women (and ignorant men) might read it and foolishly assume that they understood the law. Knowledge was power; ignorant women were powerless to resist rabbinic authority."

30. There are many more issues connected with medieval Ashkenazic constructions of the niddah that could not be discussed in this essay. On one of the most important, the strong influence of the early medieval work Beraita deNiddah which portrayed the menstruating woman as a source of danger and led to an increasing pattern of stringencies in Ashkenaz, including limiting the niddah from access to communal worship, see Yedidyah Dinari, "The Customs of Menstrual Impurity: Their Origin and Development," [Hebrew], Tarbiz 49 (1979-80): 302-24; Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Menstruants and the Sacred in Judaism and Christianity," in Sarah B. Pomeroy, ed., Women's History and Ancient History (Chapel Hill, 1991), pp. 273-299; and idem, "Purity and Piety: The Separation of Menstruants from the Sancta," in Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, eds., Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue (Philadelphia, 1992), pp. 103-115. On portrayals of the niddah in Jewish mysticism, see Sharon Koren, "Mystical Rationales for the Laws of Niddah," in Wasserfall, ed., Women and Water, pp. 101-121.