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Joint Review: *Ageing in Medieval Jewish Culture* and *Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt*

Recent scholarship has revisited medieval Jewish Society in a new light that reflects current questions and concerns about human ageing and gender. This review familiarizes readers with the latest publications in the field of Jewish Studies that delve into the medieval Jewish experience of ageing: *Ageing in Medieval Jewish Culture* (2022) by Elisha Russ-Fishbane and *Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt* (2017) by Eve Krakowski. Both authors look closer at the long-neglected subjects of ageing and gender of Jewish communities in the Islamic and Christian medieval worlds and address how social, legal, and cultural frameworks shaped Jewish identity. Russ-Fishbane's and Krakowski's work contributes to the field's understanding of how age and gender intersected with religious law and social customs during the lives of medieval Jews. Russ-Fishbane focuses on the ethical and communal aspects of ageing, discovering that life stages accumulate as both a spiritual journey for each individual and a challenge for Jewish communities under Islamic and Christian rule. Near to this context, Krakowski concentrates on female adolescence for Jewish girls in medieval Egypt and examines where Jewish and Islamic norms intersect. Together, these books offer insights into a new generation of scholarship that considers trending questions and scholarly concerns in order to broaden contemporary perspectives.

Historical Context and Sources

Both authors consider the historical context in which medieval Jews found themselves and acknowledge cultural conditions that influenced the perspectives of ageing related to gender. Each author pursues the subject of age in distinctive ways suited to investigating the questions they pose. Russ-Fishbane's *Ageing in Medieval Jewish Culture* surveys Jewish perspectives on ageing across the landscape and points to intersections among Islamic and Christian notions of ageing. His

approach provides a comparative analysis of how cultural contexts shaped Jewish attitudes towards ageing and elder care, as he states, “How were definitions of the onset of ageing determined by inherited traditions of scientific theory, literary convention, philosophical theory, or rabbinic law and ethics? At the heart of any theory of ageing is the problem of how closely it adheres to cultural ideals versus the world of experience, and Jewish theories of ageing are no exception” (p. 25). Russ-Fishbane points out that while Jewish communities in the Islamic East emphasized family-oriented elder care, Jewish communities in Christian Europe often relied more on communal support. His broad geographical scope highlights that the reverence for the elderly was widespread in Jewish communities regardless of whether they were in the East or West; and yet, varying factors influenced how Jewish communities provided for the elderly, depending on the social and political circumstances of the region. Russ-Fishbane relies on various textual sources, including rabbinic literature, medieval Hebrew poetry, philosophical texts, medical writings, and documents from the Cairo Genizah. These textual sources allow him to reconstruct the intellectual atmosphere of medieval society and how Jewish scholars and leaders understood ageing as the physical decline of the body but intertwined with potential spiritual growth.

Krakowski’s *Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt* limits its scope to the Jewish community in medieval Egypt under Islamic rule. She takes a closer look at the Genizah documents – legal contracts, marriage agreements, and family letters – to explore the lives of Jewish adolescent girls who were navigating a society dominated by Jewish views of patriarchy under an Islamic state, as she states, “Why focus on adolescence? The months or years leading to a girl’s first marriage set the stage for everything that happened to her afterward in ways that make it a microcosm of the lives of “Geniza women” (p. 2). Her work reveals that society was flexible enough to permit women to have a voice in legal matters, which sometimes contrasted with Islamic societal norms of womanhood but not free from its influence. The records examined present the female transition from childhood to adulthood as legal and social rather than merely biological. Krakowski’s work also benefited from deriving evidence from the vast collection of everyday documents of the Cairo Genizah. By focusing on the Genizah, Krakowski takes a micro-historical approach to young women in medieval Egypt who were shaped by family and community expectations. For instance, she presents the case where girls as young as twelve negotiated along with their family the

prenuptial agreements that outlined the financial protection of the new marriage. Such agreements suggest that despite being subjected to male authorities, young women were aware of Jewish legal norms and defended their economic interests.

Russ-Fishbane: The Ethical and Communal Side of Ageing

In *Ageing in Medieval Jewish Culture*, Russ-Fishbane explores how medieval Jewish culture viewed ageing not merely as the physical decline of bodily function but as a process for achieving wisdom and spirituality. He examines textual sources that express value for the elderly as custodians of family history, communal memory, and ethical values. Russ-Fishbane exposes ethical treatises that depict ageing in a favorable light, suggesting that elders are suited for mentoring younger generations, guiding family decisions, and resolving community disputes. Maimonides, the 13th-century philosopher and physician, determined that the elderly are role models for society and are responsible for contributing to the intellectual and social development of their communities. Maimonides argued that individuals were responsible for not only attending to their physical care as they aged while perfecting their morality; as Russ-Fishbane points out, “Maimonides explained that it is every person’s duty (if not a legal obligation) to maintain a healthy body if the intellect is to function and flourish... Future Jewish writers addressing the question of ageing and elder care drew upon Maimonides’ regimen for healthy living and echoed his optimism on the possibility of growing old without succumbing to the adverse effects associated with old age” (p. 123). Maimonides along with other Jewish thinkers insists that elderly individuals should pursue physical health as a foundation for intellectual and ethical development, a holistic approach to ageing that mitigates physical decline in order to benefit from community involvement later in life.

Russ-Fishbane’s work also encompasses practical challenges faced by elderly individuals within his survey of Jewish communities, including physical decline, financial insecurities, and possible isolation from society. He demonstrates that elder care in Jewish communities often relied on family and communal support, sometimes more than the other. For instance, he discusses the roles of communal associations and community charity funds organized and collected to support elderly individuals lacking familial assistance, as he explains, “In a culture that privileged the ethic of filial responsibility, those individuals lacking this support system discovered a range of alternatives

that, while imperfect, constituted a mainstay of elder care in medieval Jewish society” (p. 226). Such safeguards would often provide burial services, and sometimes other welfare services; such activities expose a shared sense of ethical responsibility in the community to care for the elderly with dignity and respect. Russ-Fishbane’s analysis of these texts illustrates that medieval Jewish communities held an ethical vision of ageing and practical methods for caring for the elder members of their community.

Ageing in Medieval Jewish Culture illustrates that elder care was not solely a family obligation but a communal concern as well, and surveys texts that testify to communal activities, such as charity funds that provided elderly individuals without families financial and medical support. The texts covered in the book provide much more than legal information and records; the text provides genuine encounters where community members took it upon themselves to visit the elderly and assist them with their daily needs. Such research emphasizes communal responsibility in elder care, which has previously been unexplored. It informs of an ethical framework of medieval society that regarded all its members, regardless of age, as integral to the community’s moral fabric. Russ-Fishbane concludes, “For all the technological and medical breakthroughs of the modern era, the chasm between their reality and our own is not so vast as we might imagine [...] the lessons of history are every bit as present as they are past” (p. 352).

Krakowski: Womanhood and Representation

In *Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt*, Krakowski demonstrates that adolescence was a socially significant stage with legal commitments for young Jewish women. She explores how Jewish girls often took active roles in their legal and social lives rather than the passive roles that historical narratives seem present. Krakowski describes how these girls were involved in their marriage negotiations, family obligations, and community expectations with a surprising level of agency that was previously ignored in scholarship. For instance, some documents include prenuptial agreements where young women imposed conditions on their dowries, household management, and property rights. Krakowski proposes, “Geniza women took part in this social order first and foremost through their fathers, brothers, uncles, and male cousins; less visibly but still discernibly through their mothers, sisters, aunts and female cousins; and finally, through the minority religious community to which they belonged, and within whose courts of law they ratified many of their

transactions” (p. 294). These documents suggest that adolescent girls were more involved than previously thought in the marital negotiations and asserting their rights within the patriarchal structure of the Jewish community. Such conditions on marital contracts suggest that Jewish families in medieval Egypt recognized the vulnerability of adolescent girls entering marriage and sought to secure their futures through legal protections.

Her analysis of such documents challenges previous views of patriarchal dominance and, in specific contexts, demonstrates that adolescent girls were permitted to influence their own legal and social status. She further investigates the concept of “replacement kinship,” where young girls without immediate family would be supported by a household, as she explains, “With few exceptions— themselves mostly forms of replacement kinship, such as slavery and informal adoption [...] women seem not to have created recognized social relationships with nonrelatives, or at least none that are visible in our sources— except, of course, with their husbands, who did not count as kin in the same way” (p. 15). It becomes apparent from the Genizah that girls without paternal support in medieval Egypt often depended on communal assistance or directly from a surrogate family. Krakowski illustrates that these adolescent girls relied on local women or extended family members to assume responsibility and support them with basic needs, vocational training, and advisement. Replacement kinship demonstrates that the Jewish community of Egypt prioritized protecting and integrating those lacking strong family connections into society.

Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt presents the medieval Jewish community of Egypt as supportive of their young adolescent girls, especially those without immediate family. The Genizah documents Krakowski reviews demonstrate that communal leaders and Jewish courts actively protected young girls within the legal system; for instance, she shows that leaders would intervene to resolve marriage disputes, secure dowries, and care for young, orphaned girls. In one case, a local woman successfully petitioned the Jewish court to provide food and housing for two orphaned sisters lacking familial connections; in response, the court provided funds to support the girls. These case studies reflect community responsibility in their ethical efforts to safeguard young women’s well-being and social integration. Krakowski concludes, “the very survival of the law itself required that these rights remain contingent: that how this paper could be used, and the weight it carried, depended not only on what it said but on the people using it— the individual fathers,

mothers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins on whom women relied in every arena and at every stage of life” (p. 303).

Final Thoughts

While Russ-Fishbane works on a comprehensive overview of ageing and Krakowski focuses on female adolescence in medieval Jewish communities, both scholars reveal the importance of communal support and shared responsibility in Jewish society. Both scholars demonstrate how their work contributes to understanding medieval Jewish society, especially regarding family structure, gender roles, and community ethics. Their work not only connects intellectual history with cultural studies but advances the interdisciplinary approach of Jewish studies as well. It examines the implications that the view of ageing had on societal development, not only as philosophical ideas but manifested in practical realities. Aspects of gender studies also influence their approach while reviewing historical records, where they consider the perspectives of ageing from both male and female roles. The novel focus they take in their research provides fresh perspectives that enrich the study of medieval Jewry in light of everyday life, allowing such scholarship to become more relatable to readers.