

ELISHEVA BAUMGARTEN: MIND THE GAP

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our acclaimed author series, A partnership between HUC Connect, the online learning platform of the Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Book Council featuring conversations with authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards. My name is Joshua Holo, your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and a conversation I've been looking forward to for a long time with my colleague, professor Elisheva Baumgarten. Professor Baumgarten is the Yitzchak Becker Professor of Jewish Studies and teaches in both the departments of history and Jewish history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She is a leading authority on medieval history, social history, Jewish Christian relations, and applications of gender methodology to medieval studies. She's edited and authored many volumes including, for example, Mothers and Children, Jewish family life in Medieval Europe, and Practicing Piety in Medieval Ashkenaz. Most recently she wrote Biblical Women and Jewish Daily Life in the Middle Ages, published in 2022 by the University of Pennsylvania Press, and the subject of our conversation today. Professor Baumgarten, thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Elisheva Baumgarten: Thank you for having me.

JH: In Biblical women and Jewish Daily Life in the Middle Ages, you lay out some governing axioms of the book in your introduction. First, that religious practice teaches us something different from religious theory, for lack of a better term. And second, that practice and theory map onto gender roles in telling ways. Can you spell out this framing for us and explain why it's so helpful in our attempt to understand the historical realities of the far distant past?

EB: Two great questions. So I guess as the first one, I would say that we all know if we think about ourselves, that we don't always do what we believe in and we don't always believe in what we do. And there's... Sometimes there's a gap between what we think we believe in and what we actually express by what we do. And one of the things that really interests me is not what the rabbis who wrote most of the sources that have reached us historically, thought they were saying, recommended for people to believe in or recommended for people to do, but to

understand how Jews, who are not necessarily very learned, not necessarily very committed, how they preserved their identities and their practice. And I have become very, very interested in practice over time, because that seems to be a way to understand how people were expressing both their beliefs, but also living their lives in different ways. And that is really the idea behind that axiom in the book.

EB: As far as gender is concerned, I would say that when I first started my studies, gender really interested me, because I was interested in those people who weren't rabbis and really seemed to be a very good group of people who weren't rabbis in the past. I'm a medievalist, I studied the Middle Ages, we have so many tremendously well-known rabbis and I wasn't interested in knowing what these rabbis thought, but what their families were like. And women seemed a good way to get at that, and of course there was also a feminist motivation behind that interest. But in this book, I would say something a little bit different was happening. Over the past years, I've become interested in all people who weren't rabbis, not just women, but men and children and most of Jewish society were not elite learned rabbis. We are probably talking about 90% to 95% of the Jewish communities. So women were a good way to get at these people as an example. But as I try to emphasize throughout the book, not the only example, there were many others. For anyone who knows some of the Yiddish literature of the early modern period, some of those books start with a saying of for women and for men who are like women. So that's where I was aiming at getting to.

JH: I find that it is very important to communicate to contemporary students of history just how counterintuitively mobile free modern communities were lacking industrial modes of transportation, their ability to crisscross continents, establish relationships and exchange ideas on really a global scale can appear surprising. Why is this mobility so important for understanding diasporic cultures in general, and Jewish culture in particular?

EB: I agree with what you just said completely. I think mobility is very, very important to see how ideas travel and how they take root. But what I would add to that is that there's also kind of a paradoxical locality. So on the one hand, we can see how ideas travel from place to place and at the same time, we can see how specific places have specific ideas. And Jews in those places will have one idea where in a community, maybe down the river, they'll have a different idea and you can actually locate those ideas and identify what place you're talking about. And here, I think I would add something that to me is very important in my work at large, which is that Jews felt like they belonged to the places they lived in and they were in touch, not just with fellow Jews in different places and had ideas communicated to them from those places or passed those ideas on as they were agents going from place to place, but they also were in conversation with their neighbors Christians. And in this book, one of the most important ways I try to express that is by using the Bible.

EB: The Bible is holy to both Jews and Christians. We have a lot of shared culture in many places and ideas going back and forth between those places. And at the same time, sometimes, we have very specific ideas that are exact for one place and would not be believed in or held by or even discussed in a different place. And I think that's what makes what medieval people so, so interesting. And as you said, it's counterintuitive 'cause we think about someone who never

left wherever they were born their whole life and then we discovered no, they're crisscrossing the continent and even further throughout their lives, men more than women, but also women to a large extent, and all levels of people from all walks of life.

JH: Let's dive into the Bible a little bit, which as you say, is really at the heart of your book. You take things to point out that the Bible was not then precisely what it is today, even if the words on the page can be considered basically unchanged. In what ways would the medieval Jewish understanding of the Bible appear unfamiliar or even downright strange to us today?

EB: I think there are two important points I would make about the Bible. So one is to do actually with medieval studies and medieval people and the way modern scholars understood them. One of the ideas that's been put out over the years is that medieval Jews kind of, they didn't abandon the Bible, but the Bible became less important to them as the Talmud wounds importance from late antiquity throughout the Middle Ages and into, in fact, the modern Jewish world today, where certainly many Orthodox establishments, you'll see people studying much more Talmud than they actually study Bible. So the Bible has kind of been sidelined in some ways. At the same time, modern scholars have been very interested in the Bible when they wanna understand how those very great rabbis interpreted the Bible. So it's become unimportant in some ways and in other ways important only when the important people are reading it.

EB: And the point I wanted to make was that medieval Jews, and I would say to a large extent medieval Christians, they were brought up on biblical stories. Now, some people might say they're brought up on biblical stories today as well, and that might be true in certain societies. But on the whole, I don't think the biblical stories in our lives today are as current. Sure, if I say Adam and Eve or Noah and the Ark, people will know what I'm speaking about, but they probably won't be able to recite verbatim the verses from the Bible. Whereas in medieval Europe, I think a lot of people could recite these verses and they could tell certain stories and expansions of the Bible. The Bible was really primary storytelling. So one thing that really, really interested me was to say the Bible is important, unlike the way it's been sidelined or marginalized by scholars in different ways, whether by saying it wasn't so important to medieval Jews or whether by saying, we're really only interested in highbrow interpretation.

EB: And the other thing that really interested me was to say these are stories Jews told themselves all the time. And we know from psychology, we know from other fields that the stories we tell ourselves really help shape who we are. And that's why I became so interested in the Bible when I realized that Jews read the Bible, they knew it by heart, they learned it in different ways, and so many medieval Hebrew stories certainly, but this is true also for Christians. And for Latin or vernacular stories, were stories based on the Bible that counted on their listeners to get all the cues and know what the listeners were hearing.

JH: You're pointing out to us that intellectual elites did not enjoy a monopoly on what we might call biblical literacy. Because of this storytelling, and perhaps this omnipresence of the Bible might be something like biblical saturation wherein it imbues even the personalities of people

everywhere. Walk us through a bit how your focus on women plays into this dynamic of biblical saturation in particular.

EB: Maybe I can tell the story in the opposite direction. So I'm very interested in practice, and I'm very interested in how people practice their religion and practice their daily lives. And a topic that I was very very interested in some years ago had to do with charity. When I was writing *Practicing Piety*, I wanted to know more about how women gave charity. And as a scholar, what do you do when you wanna find out about something? You just think about where can you find information about these topics? What can you read? What kind of sources might tell you this? I started looking and I couldn't find anything that I was looking for, and it didn't make sense to me because I knew from reading between the lines that women were giving charity. And then I read a story in *Sefer Hasidim*, the book of the Pious on world compilation from the 13th century written in Germany, and it was talking about a woman who gave charity against her husband's will.

EB: And it ended with kind of a shorthand like Abigail, and I stopped and I was like, what does that mean? Like Abigail? And so I started looking for and following different cues, I found the combination between the word, charity and Abigail. And lo and behold, I found a treasure. And then I started saying, how can I crack different codes that have to do with women using the Bible? And for a while I thought it was just going to be a number of disparate studies, and in each one I would use some kind of way to crack the code. And in the end it turned into this book, which became very fun to write.

JH: You Presaged my next question, which is this structural problem that you face in writing this book, which is that, one faces the simple fact that there's a relative dearth of primary sources on women in the Jewish Middle Ages. You just gave us one example of how you, as you say, cracked the code and worked through and around the structural problem. But I was wondering if you could give us another specific example of how you read between the lines, or read around and through unexpected sources to get at the experience of women in the Middle Ages.

EB: Over the past six years, I had this tremendous honor and pleasure to lead a group of young scholars. We were all working together using a research grant, and our project was called *Beyond the Elite Jewish Daily Life in medieval Europe*. One of the ways we tried to learn about daily life, which like women, you often don't hear about, because it's so obvious to the people who were writing these sources, is we had a principle that we would never work with only one type of source. So in contrary to kind of classical scholarship, we'll say I'm an expert on liturgy, I work with liturgical sources. I'm an expert on legal issues, I work with legal sources. We said we're going to look for as many sources as possible of as many different kinds. And one of the nice things is when things keep popping up in all these different sources. So when I find Abigail on a tombstone, but I also find her in a story, and in both cases she has to do with giving charity, then I know I'm onto something. So I gave the Abigail example already. I'll give a different example. A very, very interesting passage in the Calendric material.

EB: Talks about how Jews observed the different Equinoxes and Solstices throughout the year. Now, we know that the solar system as well as of course, the lunar calendar was very important

to medieval people. They were big believers in Astrology. When someone was born in the Middle Ages, right away, you know under what star they were born and what time it was, and what the astrological sign was for that month. And in this really interesting passage that I discovered, appeared in almost every calendric manuscript, the sources discussed how at every Solstice and Equinox, water turned into blood, and therefore the water is dangerous, and you can't drink the water during these hours of the Solstice or the Equinox. So of course, worrying about what's going on in the sky during the Solstice and Equinox is not a new thing. So in the Middle Ages, people were worried about that from antiquity.

EB: But as I followed these different sources, it turned out that these sources were all connected, at least in Medieval Ashkenaz, to a biblical story. And they were all connected to the biblical story of Jephthah's daughter in which a father sacrifices his daughter. And then following that story, and the different parts of how this water turning into blood was explained, I discovered, for example, that the Jews in Spain didn't agree with this at all, and they didn't see or read the story of Jephthah's daughter in the way their Ashkenazi counterparts did. Whereas their Ashkenazi counterparts were sure that Jephthah's daughter was slaughtered by her father, something that is suggested by the biblical text, but is not certain, they thought she was simply consecrated as a virgin, kind of like a Christian nun, and put to live in a separate house, an interpretation that also has a grounding in the biblical text, because the biblical text is very, very vague.

EB: Now, why was this so interesting? Because one of the Sephardic rabbis who objected to the Ashkenazic interpretation said, all of this is only old wise tales. These are stories that women are telling. And that to me was kind of a wake up call to try to understand how water was drawn, who drew the water, what the rituals around it were, and what was going on here. So that's another chapter in the book, talking about Jephthah's daughter, talking about water rituals, talking about how Jews and Medieval Ashkenaz saw eye to eye with their Christian neighbors, who also interpreted the story as a story of slaughter. Whereas Jews in Medieval Spain saw eye to eye with their Christian neighbors, who also read Jephthah's daughter's story as one of consecration as a virgin.

JH: How do biblical women play differently between Jews and Christians?

EB: One of the really interesting things about talking about gender and not talking about the Bible for a moment, is that whereas Jews and Christians might have disagreed about a lot of different things, theological and otherwise, they basically agreed about gender. And gender was usually the same in both societies, whether it's the hierarchy, God, men, women, that would more or less be the totem pole with God on the top. And women further along the bottom, of course, with things under women as well, and with explanations of what was the proper way for a society to function and for things to be ordered. So gender is an equalizer in an interesting way. And often, Jewish men and Christian men would probably agree about what Jewish women and Christian women should be doing. At the same time, the Bible was interestingly both divisive and shared. The Christians agreed that the Hebrew Bible was the Old Testament. It was holy to them. It prefigured the New Testament, the Christian Bible, and the Jews, they didn't believe in the Christian Bible, of course, but they deeply believed in the Old Testament

and believed they were interpreting it properly. So the Bible was both a shared belief, and a belief that was divisive between Jews and Christians.

EB: Now, add into that the way they understand different stories in the Bible. Eve is a great example, and what I try to argue in the book is that in both cultures, Eve is to blame for a lot of the bad things that happened to humanity. She certainly was the one who caused Adam to sin. But this is also explained in different ways by each culture and understood in different ways by each culture. Every Jewish woman was a descendant of Eve. In Christian culture, Christian women were also descendants of Eve, but they were also descendants of Mary. And Mary was a holy Christian woman being Jesus' mother, who provided a different kind of path for Christian women. So we can find some really interesting comparisons. For example, a Jewish woman who gave birth without pain was considered someone who was not Eve's daughter. Whereas a Christian woman who gave birth without pain was considered Mary's daughter. And that's how those two things played out. So Eve in some ways became very negative in Christianity with Mary taking on the positive rules. Whereas in Judaism, Eve had a very negative side, but as I try to show in the book, and I think this is often overlooked, there also are positive sides of Eve. 'Cause Jewish women don't have another model. They have the Matriarchs. I have a different chapter about the Matriarchs, but for kind of the Every Woman, Eve is the basic model.

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JH: I wanna move the conversation to a kind of example in your book of a big theoretical attitude and habit among people. I'm thinking of the fact that today, especially in scholarship, but even beyond, we're very conscious of the idea of normativity as opposed to normalcy. Normalcy presumably implies some kind of intrinsic standard that is normal, whereas normativity by contrast describes the artificial norms imposed by the powerful. And the term normativity, I think also implies that this imposition onto society is successful. Indeed, it succeeds to such a degree that these artificial norms pass as if intrinsically legitimate, and people ultimately unthinkingly accept them as such.

JH: In a remarkable example of normativity, you teach us that medieval Jewish culture recast the biblical heroes, Deborah and Yael as examples of modesty and submissiveness, and also in line with heteronormativity. They were widely accepted and understood as such. However, we know that the biblical stories unambiguously cast Deborah and Yael as paragons of boldness and righteous violence. Who were Deborah and Yael in the Bible, and what happened to them in the Middle Ages?

EB: So that was one of my most interesting chapters to write. 'Cause I kept on saying, wow, wow, what's going on here? Basically, I think if you read the book of Judges, Deborah is a

female judge who she leads when men cannot lead. And the Bible even makes that very, very clear in the way they talk of her and praise her.

EB: And Yael was her, I guess, accomplice heroine who murdered the general Sisera, who was the archenemy in a fearless way using the peg of the tent. And the Bible praises her as more praiseworthy than all women in the tent, et cetera. So in the Bible, there are definitely outliers to the way the rest of the Bible portrays women and tries to describe their roles in society. And what happens in the Middle Ages, at least the way I tried to describe it in the book, I think is interesting in both directions. So on the one hand, already in early medieval times, there's a midrash that tries to make Deborah into kind of a very subdued, attentive, and obedient housewife who does whatever her husband wants her to do, and takes the different verses and reinterprets them in ways that show how modest she was. And in fact, in this midrash, which appears in [Hebrew] the end of it is...[Hebrew].

EB: A good wife fulfills her husband's commandments or does what her husband tells her to do. So a good wife is obedient, and Deborah becomes an example of this good wife, which is of course ridiculous because we know nothing about her husband in the Bible and all the interpreters who try to make some figure in the story into her husband, it just doesn't make sense. And Yael too is portrayed as promiscuous in different ways and she's really kind of mixed in other ways when the Bible says that she's more blessed than any other woman. So we have real reversals of what the Bible does. So that's one part of the story and that's repeated again and again by the different interpreters in different ways. And they really try to define where these women belong and make sure they don't go out of their proper boundaries, right? So when they try to explain how Deborah was a judge, they say yes, she judged because there was no other man who could judge. She didn't judge in her house. She judged outside.

EB: She didn't actually judge, she just taught, she becomes a teacher rather than a judge. And Jews and Christians do this. So it's not something that just Jews do. There's a lot of similarity between what the Jews do to what the Christians do. At the same time, this idea of Deborah and Yael as the biblical Deborah and Yael persists, and we can see the rabbis kind of fighting against these ideas that come up from anybody who reads the story or maybe thinks about the story or hears the story in some way. And they have to keep on saying, "Remember, these are the modest women." So if I go back to Abigail and I connect it to Deborah, one of the things that led me to Deborah as an interesting character to study is a tombstone from the 17th century actually that says, "Here, a pious woman is buried. She gave charity like Abigail, she was modest, like Deborah..." et cetera. And when I saw that the first time, I thought modest like Deborah, she led people in battles. That's how I got there.

JH: I'd like to close out the interview by asking you one example of what you learned in writing this book that most surprised you or forced you to revise your own thinking about medieval Judaism.

EB: One of the most interesting things for me was that a story that I know how to tell, and I probably would stand still behind a lot of this idea because it's one that has to do with all of Europe, is that European society really went through a huge change as far as women and

women's roles, and women's positions during the Middle Ages. So most colleges would tell you that the 12th century and the early 13th century were kind of like not just the 12th century renaissance, but they were kind of a renaissance for women. The men were out off in the holy land if they were Christians crusaders. A lot of women had a lot of power within the economy, within their family economy. And in ritual practice, we see women taking a larger part in Jewish and Christian ritual practice in different ways.

EB: One of the examples of women being much more vibrant participators during the 12th century during this period of kind of female renaissance was that medieval Ashkenazic women insisted on performing commandments that had to do with holidays that were usually relegated to the world of men. So Medieval Ashkenazic women insisted on hearing shofar and Rosh Hashanah. They insisted on taking the four species over Sukkot and sitting in the Sukka in the tabernacle at that time. And till today, modern Ashkenazic women who observe these commandments, they follow their medieval mothers. And it's really interesting because the rabbis aren't happy about it. They're not thrilled the women are doing this, but they can't fight it. They say if they want to, we should let them, and we should make sure they do it properly. Then the 13th century, where the late 13th century certainly is kind of the backlash century if we use modern feminist terms. And then the 14th century just kind of goes downhill from there.

[laughter]

EB: And what I discovered was that a lot of the ideas that I thought were subdued or repressed, they might've been subdued and repressed in kind of the official Hebrew books I was reading to date, when I got to the Yiddish materials, boy did they appear there. Or when I got to personal materials rather than communal materials, they appeared there. So maybe we wouldn't appeal, let's say to the mothers when we were announcing charity on the Sabbath and we wouldn't say God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. But when we said private prayers, we would still preserve all these different things. And this has really led me to something I've been working on a lot lately, which private prayers people said. And there, I'm discovering so much more of a variety than I ever imagined before. And I'm one of the people who believes in variety, right? But I've discovered that there's even more than I ever imagined. So that for me has been both a wake up call and also something that was a very pleasant surprise.

JH: Well, professor Elisheva Baumgarten, thank you so much for joining us and for the pleasure of this rich conversation. And congratulations on your book.

EB: Thank you very much. Thank you for having me.

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