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Tackling Questions of Orthodox Feminism

Josh Lambert

Seven Blessings: A Novel, by Ruchama King. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003, 256 pp., hardcover: $23.95; paperback, 2004, $12.95.

The Orthodox women at the center of Ruchama King's first novel are hot and bothered. And not just because of their underwear, though the book does reveal that "underneath black, dour Hasidic clothing lurked a pack of slinky sex kittens." King, while maintaining proper *tsnius*, uncovers her characters' deep desires and covert longings, and these run deeper than mere lust.

Seven Blessings follows a handful of Orthodox Jewish characters, both male and female, as they seek spouses through the assistance of the matchmakers of Jerusalem. As the title (which refers to the traditional prayers uttered during and in the days following a Jewish wedding) suggests, King's interest is matrimony: how it happens, why it sometimes doesn't, and what it means.

The book focuses on Beth, an American *olah* at a loose end in Jerusalem. A 39-year-old virgin, "the last time she'd even been touched by a man was nine years ago, by her father." This isolation, the result of her never having married, seems linked to a recent "crisis of faith," which has also alienated her from Judaism — "Not enough to abandon the mitzvahs or her way of life, but enough so that she'd stopped attending Torah classes at a women's yeshiva.... It got to be she couldn't pick up a Bible." As Beth allows herself to be set up on *shidduch* after *shidduch*, hoping to find a man with whom she can finally settle down, she grapples with these religious doubts.

By the end of the book, romantic love has led Beth away from her skepticism and back to the Torah and the women's yeshiva. Symmetrically, a number of other characters learn that by ridding them of their shallowness, solipsism, and spiritual fatigue, religious practice helps them find or enrich their romantic relationships. In other words, the book affirms the value of marriage in much the same way Jane Austen's novels do; except, whereas in Austen's work marriage moderates class divisions and dynamics of economic status, in the religious milieu King describes, faith is the primary currency. It is a truth universally acknowledged, King seems to want to say, that a single *mentch* in possession of Torah knowledge must be in want of a wife. And vice versa.

Alongside the development of this conservative, somewhat banal theme is a more compelling depiction of the growing assertiveness of Orthodox women. King describes an all-female band that performs only for other women, in order not to violate the prohibition of men hearing and looking at women while they sing, but, despite this piety, their message clearly inhabits the awkward space of Orthodox feminism. "In every generation," the bandleader proclaims, "we women pass secrets to each other, wisdom the men don't know, the hidden Torah, the secrets that create a living tradition, that bind us together." Yet one might ask — especially, I suspect, if one happens to be a religious woman in possession of such knowledge and intellectual potential — why this female contribution must be kept surreptitious and limited, while men are celebrated publicly for their learning and leadership.

Some Orthodox women, of course, are happy to concede religious authority to men. Tsippi Krauthammer, an elderly matchmaker in the novel who operates a grocery store so that her husband can spend his days learning, "didn't understand a word of Aramaic," and doesn't mind being ignorant. She feels "nourished" by her husband's Talmud study. Yet even she, by the end of the book, re-engages with the Torah in a small way, while the book's middle-aged female characters learn to see focused pursuit of religious learning as a crucial and inspirational element in their lives.

King develops this theme through a character named Judy Bartosky, an American-born ex-Rebbetsin, whose husband now works as an insect exterminator. This no-longer-practicing rabbi once graced his wife's Shabbat table with wisdom on the weekly portion, but lately he's been too exhausted to bother. Though she had always been content letting her husband serve as the family scholar, she discovers, with some encouragement from Beth, how fulfilling textual study can be. She starts learning Torah at a fictional institute called the Beit Shifra Yeshiva for Women; on her first visit, she is told by the yeshiva's dean that "a woman who doesn't engage in Torah learning dooms herself to spiritual stagnation, non-movement" — an attitude Judy soon comes to share.

Through Judy's experience at Beit Shifra, King shows how valuable Torah learning can be for a modern woman. The intertwining of Beth's romantic life and her intellectual engagement with religious texts also suggests that for a certain type of modern Orthodox woman, the fulfillment that comes with study isn't a luxury, but a necessity. Read in the context of these motifs, the novel's final line — "As one, the women stepped forward" — could be read as a call-to-arms for Orthodox feminists to demand opportunities for Torah learning equal to those of their male counterparts. King doesn't address it explicitly, but the revolution she is calling for won't be a quiet one.

If women start spending five-year chunks of their lives in yeshivas, will they not, sooner or later, demand the respect accorded to men who, by studying for comparable lengths of time, earn *smichah* and the right to be called "rabbi"? Will these highly educated women continue to accept entrenched *halachic* traditions that marginalize them, deprive them of opportunities for religious leadership, and, in some cases, legislate the workings of their bodies without complete understanding of those bodies?

The answers to these questions should already be clear to readers of Haviva Ner-David's memoir, *Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey Toward Traditional Rabbinic Ordination.* Ner-David, a longtime participant in Orthodox women's study groups, is both a traditional Orthodox woman who covers her hair and observes the laws of *niddah*, and a *tallit*- and *tefillin*-

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wearing egalitarian who is attempting, radically, to be the first woman granted Orthodox rabbinical ordination. She is a uniquely committed and brave individual — I can't imagine Judy Bartosky, or even the strong-willed Beth, agitating so forcefully for change — but she is a product of the same social dynamic that inspires the women of *Seven Blessings*: the slow but undeniable influence of modern feminism on even those women in insular, traditional communities.

In addition to the insight it provides into the perspectives of Orthodox women, *Seven Blessings* also studies another sub-group within this society: *ba'alei teshuvah*, Jews who have "returned" to Orthodoxy after having been raised in less observant homes. Noticeably, the novel's two most prominent male characters are both *ba'alei teshuvah*, and though neither of them is a recent returnee, neither has yet fully settled into the Orthodox world. One of them, Binyamin Harris, can't help but remember his "coarse past, his pre-religious days." King stocks him with pop psychology techniques for dazzling his dates and memories of "The Newlywed Game" and Beatles lyrics; these all prove to be distractions and obstacles on his quest to find a wife. Binyamin is so shallow and picky that all the matchmakers of Jerusalem cut him off and refuse to arrange any more dates for him. Meanwhile, Akiva, Beth's sympathetic love interest, turns out to have a twisted God complex. He is convinced that the stress-related disorder he suffers from is some form of quasi-prophecy.

While the *ba'alei teshuvah* aren't singled out as particularly weak — the "*frum* from birth" characters, including Beth and Judy, have their share of problems, too — King's portraits of Binyamin and Akiva are a reasonable contribution to our understanding of the psychology of the newly Orthodox. Why do these people, raised in secular homes, all of a sudden decide to pursue hardline Orthodoxy? And how does Judaism provide them with what they've been missing? Binyamin echoes these questions when he recasts the chorus of "Elinor Rigby" as "All the *ba'alei teshuva*, where do they all come from? All the *ba'alei teshuva*, where do they all belong?" The substitution of "*ba'alei teshuva*" for the "lonely people" of the original works is made here for more than just metrical reasons.

Seven Blessings is valuable for these insights it offers into the perspectives and psychology of Orthodox women and newcomers. King also manages to juggle a handful of subplots effectively to create tension that drives the narrative, making the book pleasantly readable. At the same time, like many first novelists, King stumbles often. Her prose slips into generalities when she tries to dispense wisdom about differences between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews, or between the religious and the secular. Inelegant images, such as when the sun is described as shining "sharp and bright ... like a yellow Frisbee," crop up too often. Attempting to write in the voice of Binyamin, a once-secular man, King hits a few wrong notes: no man, no matter how he has lived, seriously uses the phrase "foxy babes" to describe the women he's known. Most typically for a first novel, *Seven Blessings* nearly self-destructs in its final thirty pages, rushing toward a conclusion and tying ends up much too hastily.

Still, King's novel shows her potential to join the growing ranks of novelists whose inquiries into issues of faith, law, and enlightenment, while set in the exclusive world of modern Orthodoxy, are relevant to everyone. And if, in her future work, she pushes even harder at the questions surrounding the growth of Orthodox feminism, she may play a significant role in a movement that could radically alter Orthodox Jewish life in the twenty-first century. •

GEORGE GERSHWIN AT AUSCHWITZ

SAUL BENNETT

It went like so, anecdote over the radio ...

A prisoner said to whistle tunes with an angel's sooth
his captors ordered to whistle "Rhapsody in Blue,"
as these Nazis loved so *das Judische Lieben.*

How long he was allowed the radio didn't say.
Or if it did I missed. But imagine his final petition,
translated into flawless whistle: Gershwin's long,

lingering,
opening oboe
wail inside that concert chamber?