

Caitlin Allen

REL 281

Memory, Meaning, and Membership

The Ladies Auxiliary, written by Tova Mirvis, illustrates a religious community struggling to reconcile the tensions between the individual's need for fulfillment and the community's expectation for observance. More specifically, the communal, female narrative highlights, challenges and sustains different notions of the female religious experience. In their confrontations and interactions in the book, the women share, compare and change the meaning of memory, imagination ritual, belief and doctrine. Mirvis contrasts Batsheva with the traditions of the women in the Ladies Auxiliary to demonstrate the influence of modernity and change in gender relationships that blurs the community's attempts to maintain "legitimate" group membership.

Although the Ladies Auxiliary and the Memphis Orthodox Jewish community do not provide a direct definition of religion, the community members participate and practice in particular traditions and rituals that constitute the social and religious order. The collective, female narrative is not clearly identified, but, is defined by the religious experiences of the Memphis women and their conflicts with Batsheva. The characters in the novel, however, do confirm the importance of their community and Jewish observance in the South as "a very old and distinguished community" (Mirvis, 96). Even though many characters leave Memphis, every character locates the power of observance, tradition, ritual in the Orthodox Jewish community in Memphis. In other words, the preservation and continuation of Judaism in Memphis provides Mirvis with a reference point of the "perfect" religious community. Ronald Cavanagh provides an inclusive definition of religion that also supports Mirvis' religious framework: "Religion is the varied, symbolic expression of, and appropriate response to, that which people deliberately affirm as being of unrestricted value

for them” (Cavanagh, 19). Doctrine and belief are buttressed by tradition and ritual, which provide community members a consistent history, memory and meaning that define the boundaries and roles of their religious community. The traditions and rituals that provide history and meaning to the Memphis community are challenged by the arrival and immersion of an outsider, Batsheva. Even though Batsheva practices and reinvigorates Jewish tradition and ritual, she is doubted to be a legitimate member of the community. Throughout the novel, Batsheva’s notions of the female religious experience conflict with the established, acceptable practices of the women in the Ladies Auxiliary.

The Orthodox Jewish women in Memphis perform and perfect certain roles and traditions to affirm their religious experience. As a result, Batsheva disrupts their understanding of and meaning behind observance, gender relationships, femininity and motherhood. Each member of the Ladies Auxiliary represent different acceptable approaches to Judaism in Memphis. For example, Tziporah Newburger is known for her pious observance, strict kosher diet and modest dress. Her observance sets up the religious framework to which every woman in the community compares herself against. Mimi, the Rabbi’s wife, represents an ideal of femininity in her gentle manner and uncontested mothering of Yosef. Additionally, Mrs. Levy’s focus on gossiping, cooking and mothering presents another reference point for the definition of the religious female. All of the women’s actions are guided by the need to preserve the tradition and meaning of a Memphis Jewish community. The dwindling numbers of the Torah Academy and difficulty of establishing successful Kosher restaurants are repeatedly mentioned suggests that the Orthodox Jewish community is threatened with extinction. Batsheva studies the Torah with men, has a questionable dress code and mothering skills, does not participate in gossip and is a vegetarian. Every action by Batsheva is outside the norms reinforced by the Ladies

Auxiliary; thus, Batsheva is posited as the threat of modernity to tradition, belief and community membership.

Batsheva's distinct approach to religion and her former experiences in a secular world present the tensions between modernity and tradition. While Batsheva is continually practicing and learning about Judaism, her efforts in religion are overshadowed by her past experiences and mistakes. Her past is a central focus for the women because her past is full of the perceived dangers and threats to preserving tradition in their daughters. Consequently, fractures within the community, like the apathy and disillusionment of the Jewish children, are attributed to Batsheva. While modernity and globalization allows the Memphis Jewish community to access other Jewish goods and communities around the world, modernity tests the strength of tradition. For women, modernity applies different pressures to time-tested ways of life because the community is more open to outside influences, like McDonald's or love relationships with secular people. Batsheva demonstrates a conscious effort to be religious and an active agent in creating her religious community. For example, she:

...said that her learning filled in the moments when she wondered why she had adopted this lifestyle. She said that she never wanted to feel like she was blindly following a set of rules, but that everyday she was actively involved in choosing it again for herself (Mirvis, 112).

Instead of receiving her role from her mother or the religious (male) community, Batsheva's lifestyle shows that religion can survive in modern times because women are better able to grasp education and experience that provides meaning behind tradition, belief and doctrine. Unfortunately, her best intentions are perceived as an effort to undermine the history and memories of other women's lives in the Orthodox Jewish community.

Mirvis' attention to women's voices, concerns and practices suggests that women in religion take an enormous role in creating and sustaining the religious community. For Rita

M. Gross in *Feminism and Religion*, the destiny of Jewish communities is central to fixing the social order and gender relationships (Gross, 242). The Jewish women of Memphis struggle to provide an explanation of the importance of their lives. If Batsheva renders their life-long efforts at motherhood and feminine practices as invalid in modern times, then the religious fate of their daughters and Orthodox Jewish community are at stake. Gross confirms the worries of the Ladies Auxiliary by explaining:

On one hand, religion can validate women's ordinary domestic roles, sometimes powerfully comforting them even in highly patriarchal contexts...On the other hand, religious experiences, often compelling and disruptive, can pull women away from their usual activities into more unusual roles as nuns, leaders, healers, shamans and founders of new movements (Gross, 82).

So, the Orthodox Jewish women of Memphis wish to preserve their way of life as well as confirm the importance of their own lives. Religion is one avenue that supports the decisions made by the Ladies Auxiliary throughout their lives. Also, religion provides a way for women to determine the centralization and future of their religion. Gross points out Judith Plaskow's work in *Standing Again at Sinai* because Plaskow notes "that Judaism and feminism both define community as central to being human and focus on community more than on individual selves" (Gross, 242). The communal, female narrative in *The Ladies Auxiliary* can then be understood as a specifically female conception of religious communication. As each woman struggles to articulate religious meaning in their lives, Batsheva is an example of "the other" challenging legitimate group membership – membership that is defined in hierarchical and patriarchal terms, but practiced in female understandings of daily life. Batsheva, then, represents a Jewish feminist interpretation of community inclusion. How the Ladies Auxiliary and community members confront Batsheva's "questionable" behavior illustrates the changing boundaries and definitions of valid female action and community membership.

In *Globalization, Gender and Religion*, authors Jane H. Bayes and Nayereh Tohidi reveal religious communities endeavors to incorporate modernity into tradition. How do women and religions understand female experience? The authors write that “despite religion’s often valuable function of providing a certainty, permanence, and strength especially in times of disruption and chaos, no religion has been able to escape change and transformation” (Bayes and Tohidi, 45). The debate over equal rights in religious contexts is further complicated by the challenge that modernity “brings with it new ideas about gender roles and gender relationships and how women are to be recognized in the society as well as how women perceive themselves” (Bayes and Tohidi, 7). The interactions and confrontations between the Orthodox Jewish women of Memphis and Batsheva illustrate the “competing notions of modernity, modernization and traditionalism” (Bayes and Tohidi, 14). Thus, *The Ladies Auxiliary* is about reconceptualizing the imagination, destiny and terms of Orthodox Judaism in the modern world. Since the modern world has begun to accept women as important actors and creators of communities, the characters within Mirvis’ novel are attempting to make sense of the modern, global infusion of equal rights into traditional social and gender roles. Thus, the controversy over Batsheva’s tattoo or presence at the mikvah is not only about illegitimate and blasphemous impiety, but also about how religious communities and women understand female actions, concerns and self-identity.

The Ladies Auxiliary demonstrates the conflicting themes within religion between women and culture. More specifically, modernity and globalization have recast the terms of debate within religious communities regarding valid religious experiences. Mirvis’ emphasis on conflicting and intersecting female voices, concerns and deeds show the community rearticulating the meaning and relevance of religion in a changing world.

Works Cited

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