

זרמים
Zeramim

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Applied Jewish Thought*

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A Letter from the Editors

Dear readers,

After completing our first year of publication – a fall issue, a winter issue and a spring issue (preceding a summer recess) – the editorial team of *Zeramim* is very proud to release the first issue of our second volume of our online journal of applied Jewish thought.

Our issue opens with ruminations on birth amidst adulthood: *halakhah* (Jewish law) deems the convert to Judaism “as a newborn child.” Martin S. Cohen reviews legal precedent and suggests an attitudinal approach towards reconciling the reality of full lives lived by converts prior to entering the Jewish faith against backdrop of rabbinically declared “newborn” status.

While the dicta of the sages heavily populate the Jewish oral tradition, Judith Hauptman demonstrates how the Talmud’s halakhic narratives often come to re-evaluate halakhic standards previously instated by earlier rabbinic authorities. Hauptman highlights how Yalta’s practices surrounding travel on festivals deviated from the prescription of the patriarchal rabbinate surrounding her and ultimately influenced the Talmud’s opinion on the *halakhah*.

The ways in which women have continually shaped Jewish society feature prominently in Raysh Weiss’ examination of Women’s League for Conservative Judaism. Approaching its centennial, Women’s League, as Weiss traces, has played several critical and overlooked roles in building Conservative Jewish institutions, communities, homes and leaders.

Despite certain feminist successes in liberal Jewish streams, an inequality of the sexes nonetheless persists in many spaces committed in principle to egalitarianism, and Talia Kaplan shares – based on survey results – research on how gender identities are reinforced, challenged, or overlooked in Jews’ donning of ritual attire. Kaplan examines how Jewish authorities’ and Jewish laypersons’ acceptance of Jewish law and conceptions of gender mold halakhic relationships with *kippot* (skullcaps), *tefillin* (phylacteries) and *tallitot* (prayer shawls).

At the edge of the prayer shawl, Dina R. Shargel gathers her musings on the *tallit*’s unique fringes – its *tzitzit* – and considers the visual and philological guises of the *tzitzit* as remarkably akin to a *tzitz* (a “bud”). The potential and fragility of the *tzitz* beckon the

wearer of the *tzitzit* to contemplate both human potential and the graveness of life's borders; *tzitzit* ought to compel the wearer to pursue sacred meaning despite the limitations imposed by nature.

The fear of death and the fear of harm may underlie why universal practices of contemporary *shehitah* (kosher "slaughter") have abandoned what Yonah Lavery-Yisraeli demonstrates to be one of the most vital laws in *shehitah* as practiced commonly until the 20th century. The jettisoning of the (halakhically necessary, according to all sources between the Babylonian Talmud and the *Shulhan Arukh* and beyond) testing of the sharpness of one's knife (on one's self!) before each and every slaughter has likely prevented many of today's *shohatim* ("slaughterers") from sufficiently (halakhically) understanding the pain endured by animals during *shehitah*.

Focusing more broadly, the reader turns towards Jack Shechter's cogitations over the very acts of reading, studying and learning in traditional Jewish and modern parlances. Shechter proposes a framework through which the pursuit of contemporary values and academic knowledge, alongside Jewish textual study and rituals, complement each other's potential to offer "the faithful modernist" a life enriched by past and present.

New to this issue, *Zeramim* is proud to introduce the inaugural instalment of *Midrash Zeramim*, a section of our journal that, in each issue, examines Jewish text, thought, tradition or life from an artistic angle. Yavni Bar-Yam presents a triad of fictitious, anachronistic scripted dialogues between Socrates and King Solomon. In wittily juxtaposing the teachings that traditions have attributed to these two masters of wisdom, Bar-Yam offers the reader a hint of what the rabbis of Greco-Roman Palestine may have imagined when they heard Socratic teachings and when they read songs, proverbs and collections deemed Solomonic.

Whether you read these words privately, cite them in the academy, share them with your community, or send them to your butcher, we hope you enjoy this issue of *Zeramim*.

With gratitude,

Jonah Rank, Managing Editor & Designer

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Table of Contents

THE CONVERT AS NEWBORN

Martin S. Cohen

p. 5

WHY DID R. NAḤMAN PERMIT YALTA TO BE TRANSPORTED ON A PALANQUIN ON A FESTIVAL? A NEW READING OF BAVLI BEŞAH 25B

Judith Hauptman

p. 17

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN: THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

Raysh Weiss

p. 33

IDENTITY AND EMBODIED PRACTICE: GENDER AND JEWISH RITUAL OBJECTS

Talia Kaplan

p. 47

TZITZ, TZITZIT AND THE BUDDING PLANT

Dina R. Shargel

p. 71

A SNAG IN THE TRADITION OF CHECKING KNIVES

Yonah Lavery-Yisraeli

p. 87

THE FAITHFUL MODERNIST AND THE SYNTHESIS BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Jack Shechter

p. 109

~ | MIDRASH ZERAMIM | ~

SO AND SO: A PHILOSOPHICAL PAS DE DEUX IN THREE ROUNDS

Yavni Bar-Yam

p. 133