Amit Gvaryahu Reviews Eve Krakowski’s *Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt*

Eve Krakowski’s masterful new book shows how minority community concerns are not modern preoccupations. One finds similar negotiations in documents detailing the lives of young women who were born, grew up, married, and died in the Jewish Community of Fustā—medieval Cairo. Krakowski’s book uses documents from the Cairo Genizah to offer us patient analyses of the lives of the girls on the cusp of legal adulthood and those slightly beyond. Krakowski opens doors, behind which we see arranged marriages, legal pluralism, and multi-lingual documents in the Jewish community of Fatimid Fustāt.

Krakowski’s book presents an impressive cascade of new insights regarding the Jewish community in old Cairo—their concerns, negotiations, and accommodations with the dominant Fatimid society. But one way in which this book is useful and appealing to those beyond the orbit of Genizah scholarship is that the circumstances Krakowski describes are helpful for thinking about similar negotiations in our own complicated and fraught world—a world which itself often negotiates its identities and fealties on the backs of young women at the cusp of adulthood.

The Genizah is a trove of Hebrew documents that were found largely intact in the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo. For many reasons, the more celebrated part of the Genizah among
contemporary scholars is what we could term its “literary” component: old Hebrew books of many kinds, scrolls and codices, with writings both sacred and secular. Throughout the 20th century, scholars were excited to publish new works of ancient rabbis for instance, or for the first time, their opponents from the first century BCE or the 9th century CE. But the Genizah did not only include literary materials, it was the repository for anything with Hebrew lettering in medieval Fustat. Letters and legal documents abounded. Scholastic interest in this “documentary” Genizah took some time to mature, but its cataloguing and scrutiny in recent decades has yielded a wealth of fine-grained information that medievalists specializing in other geographic areas can only dream of.

The founder of the Princeton Genizah Lab was Shlomo Dov Goitein, a German Jew trained in Talmud and Islam. He emigrated to Palestine in 1923 and joined the newly-founded Hebrew University in 1928 as a teacher of Islam. In 1957, already an established Genizah scholar, he joined the University of Pennsylvania and began his life’s work, the Princeton Genizah Lab. The fruit of this labor would be Goitein’s six-volume *A Mediterranean Society*, which can seem to the uninitiated an exhaustive and detailed study of all aspects of the documentary Genizah. But in fact these six volumes comprise a preliminary survey of the materials, marking the way for others to follow, and their work is turning into a critical mass of studies on various aspects of the Genizah and the creators of its documents, making this one of the most exciting fields of Jewish studies and Middle Eastern studies today.

The technological change from card-file to excel chart has made its mark almost everywhere in the humanities, but here most of all. Goitein’s impressionistic surveys have given way to meticulous quantitative analysis of documents. As Krakowski notes, “Only in the past decade — as a critical mass of document editions and digitization projects has gradually accumulated — have a growing number of scholars begun to emerge from Goitein’s long shadow, using Genizah evidence to write fresh histories that systematically expand as well as qualify his findings, while considering foundational topics that he left unaddressed.” The near-comprehensive survey allows Krakowski to make significant statements based on statistics.

*Coming of Age*, in this sense, is the transformation of a small marked trail in the woods into a comfortable two-lane road, which begins at Goitein’s Genizah lab but ultimately takes a different route. Krakowski set out to study young women in the Jewish Fustat. She amassed lists of personal and official documents on betrothal, engagement, marriage, and divorce. These documents were produced by courts, community officials and individuals, in a Judeo-Arabic heavily tinted with the Talmudic vernacular of Hebrew and Aramaic. Chapter 2, *The Courts and the Law*, is a primer to working with these documents, that offers an exceptional survey on both reading the content of genizah documents and understanding the various legal authorities, Jewish and Muslim, to which they were meant to be relevant.

For specialists, the book is a pioneering work of scholarship. Krakowski is one of a growing cadre of scholars of the documentary Genizah who are bringing to life various aspects of the lives and thoughts of the Jews of Fustat. But this book is important not only for
specialists: Krakowski’s findings offer evidence that should make us think hard about preconceived notions on concepts like “family” and “religious law.”

Many previous scholars seem to think of families as a nuclear unit, neatly composed of a breadwinning father, a stay-at-home mother and 2.3 children. Others have offered a “historical” model of an extended family under the aegis of a patriarch, in which small couple-units are enmeshed in a hierarchy. The first model was termed “European,” the other “Mediterranean.” Goitein declared the Genizah family to be “Mediterranean,” but Krakowski shows that the evidence amassed by Goitein actually points in a different direction. Families in medieval Fustāt resemble in many ways contemporary social ties between men in medieval Cairo. Kin were like patrons and clients of each other. For women, who could not enter into similar social ties with men outside of their families except by marriage, this meant that they were especially dependent on family members for protection. Men come and go, often on business. Blood is thicker than water, but once kinship exists, the precise manner in which one is kin does not matter: families are messy and contingent upon circumstances.

It is important to note, however, that there is some slippage in Krakowski’s work between is and ought. Nowhere do we see the Jews of Fustāt offering ideas about whose family wives ought to live once married, and with whom. American couples moving in with their parents would like a home of their own, and the privacy that it would accord, but they make compromises. Are the Fustātī Jews making compromises as well? There is little evidence on whether the “messy” living situations so common in the Genizah world were ideal to the young couples.

In medieval Fustāt, women needed male relatives to secure their standing and rights before the Jewish religious courts. Krakowski reminds us that these, too, had a tumultuous history in Muslim Egypt, much of it still unknown to us. But significantly — here she builds on work published jointly with Marina Rustow, one of the leading scholars of the Documentary Genizah today — there was a degree of forum-shopping in Fatimid Egypt, and there was also a degree of deference between Muslim, secular, and Jewish courts. Everyone understood that law was something important to religions and that religious communities had their own specialists who were judges. Personal status was also universally recognized as something important to religions, and people deferred to religious experts on these matters.

These common-sense notions, argues Krakowski, are a key source of legitimacy for Rabbinic judges. It is not only in 20th century America that rabbis are conceived of in terms of another religion’s clergy and change their modus operandi to accommodate that conception. But how were these judges judging? By claim and form, they were applying Jewish law in the most substantive way possible. The rituals of kiddushin, in which the groom gives the bride a symbolic amount of money, and nisu, in which a bride and groom move in together were adhered to. But their adherance was largely pro forma: effort was concentrated, instead, on an extra-legal institution called shiddukhin, or “engagement.” This is where negotiations between fathers took place and where money and gifts were exchanged and recorded.
In another area, Rabbinic literature envisions a complex process of maturation for young women, the upshot of which is that women become emancipated from their fathers six months after their twelfth birthday. After this age, in the Rabbinic system, fathers have no legal authority to marry their daughters off to another, and they are considered adults. But this is not how the Jewish community of Fustāt, laypeople and Rabbinic judges alike, treated its young women. In material terms, in terms of practice on the ground, women were treated as independent agents only after their first marriage. The Rabbinic norms were employed when convenient, and otherwise they were worked around. Krakowski documents other, similar, developments in other areas of personal status law as well.

The Rabbanite Jews of the Genizah community, for the most part, clung to their Rabbis and the law that they represented. But that law was a tool for enforcing and upholding social norms that did not exactly correspond to the norms espoused by the same law. Rabbis and laypeople agreed on both the importance of the Torah and the importance of the social norms in practice on the ground. The prevalent social norms were accommodated, expressed in terms intelligible to Rabbinic discourse, and formulated in Rabbinic court documents.

Thus, Krakowski offers, for the first time, a look into the internal machinations of a community of post-Talmudic Jews, who are bound by heritage and declaration to Rabbinic literature, but who inhabit a world and a society only partially similar to the one this literature envisions. The normative language of the Talmud is their vernacular, and they expect it to be able to describe most institutions they wish to employ. This is true for family life as well as for other areas of law, like commercial law, the subject of a recent study by Mark Cohen. Post-Talmudic Jews cannot emend their Talmud or add to it. They speak its language but are not of the world it creates. Often they use its idiom to express ideas, institutions and practices that the Talmudic rabbis themselves would not even think of.

Sustained theoretical work on this question is in order, but it seems that this is the main mode of religious engagement with established bodies of religious law after its canonization. Life and its circumstances change, but adherents do not see that as a problem per se. More often than not, these circumstances are assimilated into the language of the law even if they are at odds with how the law itself would prefer to have society conduct itself. The Genizah reflects a community of Jews that upheld diligently the forms of halakhah, while applying it to a social order that was quite different from what Rabbinic literature itself envisions and sometimes prescribes. Read this way, Coming of Age is an understated portrait of the power and flexibility of legal formalism, especially in religious contexts.

Krakowski offers thoughtful readers a powerful antidote against essentialist screeds so prevalent in our newsfeeds. Families change. They have always been in states of flux. Social norms also change more often than we were trained to think. Religious law, which can be wielded as a tool for social ossification, might also be employed to offer language and forms for those social changes. The Genizah Jews negotiated dowries and identities over the lives and bodies of their young women, negotiations that Krakowski vividly depicts and explains.
Formalistic solutions and workarounds, often derided by progressives, can be powerful tools for cementing these changes, incorporating them into a stable social order. The book discusses young women for 300-some pages, and yet their own voices are faint, I wish we had more from the young women themselves, more to offer their contemporaries in minority communities from Cairo to Queens.

*Amit Gvaryahu is a Ph.D. candidate at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His interests are the rabbinic legal system, midrashic hermeneutics, the temple and the sacrificial system in rabbinic texts, and redaction criticism.*

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