Schor on Vilmain (2018)


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Vincent Vilmain asserts that feminism and nationalism both emerged in the nineteenth century in separate realms and that feminist histories and nationalist histories continue to reflect that separation. Specifically, Vilmain’s concern is with historians who have failed to address women’s agency when focused on nationalist theories; he notes that women played a minor symbolic role in nation building, which was essentially founded on the principle of brotherhood. Having identified a lacuna in historical research and writing—the actual role of women in the construction of nationalist ideas—Vilmain sets out to fill in the gap with regard to the role of Jewish women in the political Zionist movement.

Zionism, like socialism, relegated improving women’s condition as a secondary interest to be achieved after nationhood. Unlike socialists who denounced the exploitation of women throughout history, Zionists praised the traditional feminine virtues, aware of the need to retain the support of both modern Jews like Chaim Weizmann and Max Nordau as well as the support of Orthodox Jews. Zionist women, like their socialist contemporaries, were not offered opportunities to lead their respective movements; rather, they agreed to achieve goals that placed the needs of women on hold until some future time.

Vilmain describes the emergence of political Zionism from the Jewish emancipation movement of the nineteenth century beginning with the efforts of Isaac Markus Jost and Salo W. Baron to develop a national story for the Jewish people. In addition, organizations like the Alliance Israélite Universelle and an active Jewish press brought communities of Jews in trouble in distant places to the attention of western Jews. In 1897, Theodore Herzl, energized by meetings with Jewish students and journalists in Paris in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair, wrote *The Jewish State*, which advocated a diplomatic approach to achieving Zionism. Simultaneously, a group of Eastern European Jews not interested in emancipation and acceptance by western leaders advocated the immediate immigration of Jews to Palestine. These labor or practical Zionists advocated bodybuilding through physical exercise to develop pioneers for a life on the land. Neither group demonstrated interest in women’s role in the movement.

Some emancipated Jewish men advocated secular education for girls as a way to improve Jewish social conditions. But, by the end of the nineteenth century other Jewish leaders lamented the fact that Jewish women were in the forefront of assimilation. Vilmain, however, points out that some educated Jewish women responded to emancipation by writing prayer books for women and children; among them, Penina Moise, Grace Aguilar, and Fanny Neuda. By the end of the nineteenth century groups of Jewish women organized advocating equality within the Jewish community.

This complex story arrived at an inflection point in 1898 at the Second Zionist Congress with the publication of “A Call to Jewish Women.” The message of this document: “It shall be incumbent on her to raise our children in the spirit of love for our religion and our people.” Thus, women like Myriam Schach, the author of this document, subsumed their independent identity to support the Zionist cause. Born in Lithuania, fluent in French and German in addition to Yiddish and Hebrew, a graduate of the College Sévigné in Paris, she lived in England for two years earning a living as a teacher. Schach returned to France where she was admitted to the École Normale Supérieure. She became a high school German teacher, and was naturalized as a French citizen in 1897. Despite a lifetime of agency, her message to women was to become mothers and to protect Jewish (patriarchal) tradition.

Vilmain recognizes that the support of Schach and other educated, middle class women was obscured by Zionist historiography that elevated the role of the woman pioneer. He shows that there was substantial interaction between the bourgeois women’s groups in Western Europe and the pioneering women in Palestine. The Organization of Jewish Women for the Advancement and Progress of Cultural Work in Palestine, opened in 1907, pressured Zionist authorities to provide supplementary funds for women pioneers struggling to survive. These women recognized the crucial role to be played by pioneer mothers and teachers who would instill stories of Jewish origins in their children to bolster the Zionist message.

Vilmain observes that the lack of support among Zionist leaders for feminist ideals was carried over in the early years of the Jewish state. Despite its strong socialist positions in the area of family law (marriage, divorce, and custody of children), religious authorities maintained control. Vilmain’s history is an important addition to the historiography of political Zionism.