

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe*

by ELISHEVA BAUMGARTEN

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004)

Reviewed by  
Debra Kaplan

*Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe* is a significant addition to extant scholarship on Jewish life in Ashkenaz during the Middle Ages. Although the Jewish family unit is “the most basic building block of the medieval Jewish community,” to date, little research has been conducted on the fundamental issues of parenting, child care, and family structures and values during this time period.<sup>1</sup>

My discussion here will focus on Baumgarten’s sources and methodology. I will draw upon several specific examples from the text as a tool for understanding this methodology, which is what enables her to produce a book of such significance to the field. It must be recalled that before this pioneering work, the subject of the Jewish family, and more specifically, of mothers and children, was not treated extensively in any monograph-length study. Family and family structure affected all members of the Jewish society; this study is thus a crucial lens for any study of Jewish social history.

Using a variety of sources, including responsa, *Sefer Hasidim*, ritual books, *sifrei mitsvot*, biblical and talmudic commentaries, commentaries on *piyyutim*, medical tractates, polemics, chronicles, gravestones and lists of the dead, Baumgarten reconstructs a social and ritual history of Jewish family life, with a focus upon the years between birth and the beginning of formal education, approximated at ages six or seven for male children (17). Geographically, she covers the heartland of Ashkenaz, including Germany and Northern France. While her source materials date from the ninth century through the early modern period, most were composed during the High Middle Ages, between the First Crusade in 1096 and the Black Death in 1348-1349.

Baumgarten’s use of these sources to depict the social realities of the Jewish family—particularly the world of mothers and infants—is remarkable, given that all of the sources were written by, and primarily for, men. While many of these works, such as *Sefer Nitsahon Vetus* and *Sefer*

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*Hasidim* are familiar to the medievalist and to those conversant with medieval Jewish texts, Baumgarten is able to discern women's roles and attitudes within this body of material, allowing previously unsounded voices from the past to be heard; this in itself is noteworthy scholarship. By asking new questions of familiar material, Baumgarten reveals historical data about mothers, fathers, and children, previously unexplored simply because Jewish historians of the medieval period have not extensively studied the history of women, families, and the private sphere. Moreover, Baumgarten is able to overcome the constraints presented by some of her sources. For example, responsa literature often deals with the extraordinary rather than the quotidian and can be problematic for establishing societal norms. Baumgarten displays a meticulous awareness of the limits of her sources and reads them carefully, which only further contributes to her clear presentation of this new material.

In addition to these internal Jewish sources, Baumgarten also consults with canon law, municipal records, medical treatises, and other texts that refer to Jewish family life. She further supplements this picture by comparing the medieval Ashkenazic families to Christian families among whom the Jews resided, a comparison which proved fruitful, as the Christian family unit has been studied with increasing frequency in recent years. While some scholars have argued that the Jewish family was isolated from the local Christians, Baumgarten demonstrates effectively that daily and intimate contact occurred between members of these two communities.<sup>2</sup> While she points to the many differences between Jews and Christians in terms of family life (most strikingly, the Christian theological preference for celibacy), she nevertheless demonstrates that Jewish and Christian neighbors had contacts, discussions, and cultural overlaps with one another.

Baumgarten's book is part of the new approach towards studying the Jews of Ashkenaz and Jewish-Christian relations. As David Berger has described in a previous issue of this journal, recent studies of Jewish-Christian relations have taken demographic and economic realities into account when analyzing historical questions.<sup>3</sup> The Jews of Germany and of Northern France resided in Christian cities, often in streets and neighborhoods located in the city center.<sup>4</sup> Jews and Christians were not only neighbors; they worked together in various capacities and undoubtedly were aware of each other's cultures and rituals. Yet, despite the fact that these interactions took place on a daily basis, they did not obviate the strong polemical relationship between the two faiths. As Ivan Marcus and Jeremy Cohen have argued, rituals and texts

that reflect the influence of external social ideas—a process known as “inward acculturation”—can nevertheless contain deeply polemical aspects.<sup>5</sup> Baumgarten’s work is consistent with this approach and demonstrates the ways in which Jews were simultaneously both a discrete group and a part of the larger society living in the cities of Germany and of Northern France.

Perhaps the most vivid example is the relationship of Jews to Christian wet nurses. Baumgarten explains that many Jewish families, even poor ones, hired Christian wet nurses to breastfeed their young. This, in accordance with halakha, was transacted in the Jewish home, rather than in the home of the wet nurse. As such, Christian women would enter Jewish homes on a daily basis and played an intimate role in childcare. Nevertheless, fears that Christian wet nurses could murder Jewish babies, or that Jewish children could be led towards conversion, are also to be found in the halakhic literature (119-53). This example captures a paradox: the employment and presence of Christians in Jewish homes, which undoubtedly bred familiarity, contrasted with the hostility that continued to permeate Jewish-Christian relations and kept members of the two communities apart.

This vivid depiction is characteristic of Baumgarten’s work. Because of her focus on social history, Baumgarten uncovers vital dimensions of the daily realities of family life, beginning with conception, birth, and rite of passage rituals, including circumcision and *Wachnacht*. Her examination of these topics, as well as of breastfeeding, childcare, additional birth rituals, and attitudes towards parenting and children are richly detailed. Furthermore, her analyses and interpretations of these attitudes and rituals often shed light on greater societal trends. Thus, *Mothers and Children* is a book that has implications beyond its title. Not only does Baumgarten, in keeping with contemporary feminist scholarship, address both mothers and fathers, but in many instances, she is able to draw conclusions about changes in the Jewish community and broader medieval society.

Baumgarten’s treatment of the circumcision ceremony is a case in point. Baumgarten interprets the ceremony, pointing to the roles played by the various participants: the father, the *mohel*, the *ba’alei berit*, the Jewish community, the newborn, and the mother. Baumgarten’s anthropological reading of the ritual elucidates the significance of circumcision. As a rite of passage, the male child, who has been in the care of women—his mother, midwives, and the women who visited the parturient after delivery—is welcomed into the male world that he is des-

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ted to join. As Rashi explains, the circumcision represents a transitional moment. “Since until then, his father does not yet acknowledge him, because he has not left his mother’s hands and entered into the covenant. Henceforth, his father is obligated to recognize him.”<sup>66</sup> It is at this precise point that the newborn is given a “pure, holy name.”<sup>67</sup>

This reading of a familiar ritual allows the historian to glimpse the private sphere of family life, which has often been neglected by scholars. By looking at contemporary attitudes towards the circumcision ceremony, Baumgarten highlights the exchanges between the private, family sphere—often female—and the public, communal sphere—often male, as she analyzes how male children were ushered into the Jewish community. Viewing circumcision as a rite of passage also enables Baumgarten to extract data about the social tensions extant in the Jewish community. By comparing and contrasting circumcision’s *ba’alei berit* (who played different roles in the ceremony, including escorting the baby to the ceremony, holding him during the circumcision, and hosting a party in the child’s honor) with baptism’s co-parents, Baumgarten demonstrates that while Christian co-parenting, performed by non-family members, often fostered ties and neutralized violence between families, Jewish *ba’alei berit*, often relatives of the newborn, performed a somewhat different function. Baumgarten suggests that the father’s privilege in selecting the *ba’alei berit* can be seen as a counterbalance to twelfth century marriage laws, in which the rights of a woman and of her family increased (84). Whereas marriage laws had shifted to favor the bride’s family, “reproductive politics” dictated that the groom’s family play a predominant role in the circumcision ceremony. This helped ease potential tensions between the two families, as the birth of a child was seen as the foregone conclusion of the marriage ceremony (82-85).

Baumgarten also analyzes the ways in which the circumcision ritual was adapted over time. During the High Middle Ages, the circumcision ceremony took place in the synagogue, with the participation of the community members who were gathered there. According to Baumgarten, the location of the ceremony and the ensuing communal participation were integral to the ceremony during this period; during the Second Temple period and the early modern period, circumcisions often took place in private homes (61).

The shift in location was not the only element of the ceremony that did not remain fixed. Baumgarten points to several changes that reflect a decline in women’s participation in the ceremony, beginning in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Various early medieval sources doc-

ument the participation of a *ba'alat berit*, whose role in the ceremony ranged from washing and dressing the newborn in preparation for circumcision to serving as the person who would hold the baby during the ceremony. Subsequent thirteenth and fourteenth century rabbinic sources declare that this type of female participation, specifically the presence of a woman adorned with jewelry in the men's area of the synagogue, was to be prohibited.<sup>8</sup> Contemporary Christian artwork is consistent with this evolution. Earlier depictions of circumcision portray a woman holding the newborn, while later depictions show women standing apart from the main scene.

This shift was contemporaneous with other changes as well. The mother of the newborn, at first present at the ceremony and entrusted with the task of drinking the ceremonial wine, was, by the thirteenth and fourteenth century, relegated to staying at home. While Baumgarten explains that this reality reflects the medical perception that a longer lying-in period was needed after birth, she does note that this is another example of a decline in women's presence and participation in the ceremony (78). Additionally, by the end of the thirteenth century, the prevalent rabbinic attitude in Ashkenaz regarding female *mohalot* was that such activity was not permissible; this marked a change from some earlier positions.

Baumgarten links these shifts to larger social trends within the Ashkenazic community. She explains that during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the participation of both women and young children in public rituals declined in Ashkenaz. For example, while boys who were not yet of school age donned *tefillin* in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, by the thirteenth century, this ritual act was limited to boys who had started their formal education and who could control their bodily functions. Thus, the shift in women's participation in circumcision may reflect a larger trend in regulating participation in Jewish rituals. Moreover, trends delaying ritual participation until adolescence have been identified in the contemporaneous Christian society, suggesting a parallel between Jewish and Christian notions of ritual performance (90-91).

The parallels between Jewish and Christian societies and their respective rites of passage are also explored by Baumgarten in other contexts. Baumgarten discusses two lesser known rituals following birth: the *Hollekreisch*, a ceremony in which the baby, male or female, was given a secular name, and *Shabbat Yetsi'at ha-Yoledet*, a ritual designed for the mother, who, several weeks after giving birth, reenters the public sphere through a ritual trip to synagogue. In both of these

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instances, Baumgarten compares the Jewish ritual to similar Christian practices. In the case of the *Hollekreisch*, such a comparison sheds light on the nature of the ritual and its purpose. In both Jewish and Christian versions of this ritual, a baby was named during a ceremony in which the words “*Holle Holle*” were cried aloud, in an attempt to protect the baby from a witch-like baby snatcher, known in German as Frau Holle, who resembles the figure of Lilith. The similarities between the Jewish and Christian rituals, based more in popular culture than in theology, point to the strong connections and networks linking Jewish and Christian women. As wet nurses, midwives, and neighbors, these women had daily contact and shared traditions and medical knowledge about the birthing process.<sup>11</sup> This comparison also underscores the fact that these women all lived in the same physical environment. Not only did they share resources, but they also all faced the inherent dangers of childbirth. Their shared experiences of the threats that childbirth posed to both mother and newborn led to contacts beyond the medical sphere. Supernatural fears and techniques to ward off evil resonated with women across the lines of faith (93-99).

Baumgarten’s analysis of *Shabbat Yetzi’at ha-Yoledet* also explores the similarities between Jewish and Christian rituals. The reintegration of a woman into the synagogue a few weeks after childbirth is paralleled by two Christian rituals: churching and the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin. Here, however, sharp theological differences between Catholic and Jewish rites are evident—most ostensibly, the Christian commemoration of Mary and the display of Marian devotion. Unlike the *Hollekreisch*, a comparison of these rituals highlights the distinct communities of Jews and Christians. As is the case with a comparison of circumcision and baptism, these rituals display the strong theological rifts between Judaism and Christianity.

Aside from the comparison to Christian tradition, Baumgarten’s analysis of *Shabbat Yetzi’at ha-Yoledet* explores the symbolic aspects of the ritual. For example, the mother wears Sabbath finery underneath shrouds on her way to the synagogue. When entering the synagogue, she removes the shrouds. This symbolic dressing and undressing in clothes of death and of life reflects contemporary sensibilities about the perils of childbirth. Quite literally, the parturient had entered a realm in which death was near. Having escaped that danger, she reenters her normal life, resuming her household and conjugal duties. Though medieval women’s experiences at childbirth were inaccessible to the men who authored the sources that remain today, for only women visit-

ed the birthing bed, by describing the symbolic language of this ritual, Baumgarten allows the reader a glimpse into the private world of the *Kindbetterin*, the parturient.

Baumgarten's book accomplishes several distinct and significant goals. *Mothers and Children* opens the world of the Jewish family to the student of history, enabling this crucial element of Jewish life to be explored. What emerges is more than a rich picture of life in the private sphere. Baumgarten, like other historians before her, challenges the arguments set forth by Phillipe Ariès, who claims that medieval parents were indifferent to their children and to high rates of infant mortality. Such challenges to Ariès's thesis have already been presented with regard to the Christian society. Baumgarten's scholarship demonstrates that not only are these conclusions invalid with regards to the Jewish family, but that the Jewish and Christian families had much in common, even while remaining two distinct communities. The methodology of social history enables Baumgarten to place the Jewish family into a context of community, ritual, and geographic reality. As such, her exploration of the family reveals other trends within the Jewish community, including social structures and networks, changes in ritual life, and Jewish-Christian relations. *Mothers and Children* is a critical work for understanding the medieval Jewish family and the daily realities of the Jewish experience in Ashkenaz during the High Middle Ages.

## NOTES

1. Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1. The other comprehensive source on family life, focusing mostly on women is Avraham Grossman's *Hasidot u-Mordot*, which was recently translated into English. As is the case with his numerous articles, Grossman's work uses mainly halakhic sources and broadens our knowledge of Jewish women; Baumgarten's study focuses more on the family unit. See Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Europe in the Middle Ages*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2004). Other articles have been written about specific topics concerning the medieval family in Ashkenaz. For data on the size of families in the Rhineland, see Kenneth Stow, "The Jewish Family in the Rhineland: Form and Function," *American Historical Review* 92 (1987), 1085-1110. Ephraim Kanarfogel has looked at attitudes towards children in Ephraim Kanarfogel, "Attitudes Towards Childhood and Children in Medieval Jewish Society," *Approaches*

- to *Judaism in Medieval Times 2* (1985), 1-35. Israel Yuval has studied the rates of divorce in medieval Ashkenaz. Israel Yuval, "An Appeal against the Proliferation of Divorce in 15th century Germany" [in Hebrew], *Tsiyyon* 48:2 (1983), 177-216. A study on crib death has been published by Ephraim Urbach, "On Accidental Cause of Death and Death in the Cradle" [in Hebrew], *Asufot* 1 (1987), 319-32. For anthologies on the Jewish family, see *The Jewish Family: Myths and Reality*, ed. Steven Cohen and Paula Hyman (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986); *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*, ed. David Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Most recently, a workshop tracing issues of gender, women, and family during the early modern period was held at Wesleyan University. Primary sources and the videos from the ensuing scholarly presentations are forthcoming on [www.earlymodern.org](http://www.earlymodern.org).
2. This approach was presented by many of the *Wissenschaft* historians, who separated between Jewish spiritual and cultural accomplishments and moments of persecution. They further argued that the early modern period represented an age of the backward Jew, thereby separating between their own nineteenth century environment and the negative perceptions that surrounded Jews. Even Jacob Katz, whose pioneering works in social history opened the doors to much of the current research, saw the Jews as cordoned off from mainstream Christian society. Jacob Katz, *Ben Yehudim le-Goyim: Yahas ha-Yehudim li-Shekhenehem bi-Yemei ha-Benayim u-viTehtilat ha-Zeman be-Hadash* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1960). Only recently has attention been paid to the daily contacts that occurred between Jews and Christians and to the implications that those contacts had upon both communities. See, for example, Elisheva Carlebach's critique of Katz for the early modern period. Elisheva Carlebach, "Early Modern Ashkenaz in the Writings of Jacob Katz," *Pride of Jacob: Essays on Jacob Katz and his Work*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 65-83. An excellent overview of the dialectics of historiography is presented in David Berger, "A Generation of Scholarship on Jewish-Christian Interaction in the Medieval World," *Tradition* 38:2 (2004), 4-14.
  3. David Berger, "A Generation of Scholarship." For a discussion of the intense relations between Judaism and Christianity, see Israel Yuval, *Shenei Goyim be-Bitnekh: Yehudim ve-Notsrim, Dimuyim Hadadiyim* (Tel Aviv: Alma Am Oved, 2000).
  4. Alfred Haverkamp, "The Jewish Quarters in German Towns during the Late Middle Ages," *In and Out of the Ghetto*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia and Hartmut Lehmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13-28. As Baumgarten points out, the city of Speyer was an exception to this rule. See "Speyer," *Germania Judaica* 1:328 (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1962-) also cited in Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children*, 193 n. 39.
  5. Ivan Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Jeremy Cohen, *Sanctifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
  6. Rashi, *Kiddushin* 74a, as cited in Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children*, 63 n. 44.

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7. R. Jacob ben Gershom, *Zikbron Berit*, as cited in Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children*, 63 n. 43.
  8. I have found a later fifteenth, early sixteenth century source that documents the participation of a *ba'alat berit*. In his *Meshivat Nefesh*, R. Yohanan Loria of Alsace describes a woman—whose husband was a *mohel*—who held the baby as a *sandeket*. He disapproved of this practice. Ms. Opp. Add. 4° 91, excerpt from *Parshat Be-Midbar*.
  9. Baumgarten has explored this thoroughly in another article. See Elisheva Baumgarten, “Thus Sayeth the Wise Midwives: Midwives and Midwifery in Thirteenth-Century Ashkenaz” [in Hebrew], *Tsiyyon* 65(2000), 45-74.
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