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Review:

***Ageing in Medieval Jewish Culture*, Elisha Russ-Fishbane**

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Ageing in Medieval Jewish Culture, Elisha Russ-Fishbane (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in association with Liverpool University Press, 2022) pp. 401, £39.60.

Near the end of his magisterial new account of both the experience and metaphor of ageing in medieval Jewish culture, Elisha Russ-Fishbane offers the reader a bilingual immersion into what he calls “one of the most extraordinary paeans to old age in medieval Hebrew literature” (p. 296). The verses, authored by Nachmanides in the thirteenth century, more than bear out Russ-Fishbane’s claim:

How pleasant is old age to those who fear sin,
who ascend and grow in virtue! . . .

Wisdom and discernment, source of the knowledge of creation,
are found in lengths of years.

With his finger, the elder measures
the heavens and the mountain’s mass.

The old man’s heart ascends in the chariot
so as to behold the supernal glory! (pp. 297–8)

Reading these lines, with their seemingly counterintuitive invocation of the desirability of old age and the spiritual glory obtainable only by those who had neared the end of their lives, I was struck by how well Nachmanides’s verses function as a microcosmic prism for the larger questions and ambitions that animate Russ-Fishbane’s strategy in this book, almost as if the preceding three hundred pages have been preparing the reader for this encounter, so that we may recognize the profundity of how Nachmanides refashions human fear.

Perhaps this is just my fancy. But I would argue that this is a book that encourages such flights of imagination, that asks its readers to consider the book’s structure, shape, and choices in the very midst of their reading process. As Russ-Fishbane acknowledges in both the introduction and the afterword of his book, he is not merely trying to present us with an argument about an aspect of medieval Jewish history, but an exemplum of how to do this work: “both a historical study and a model for how to study history” (p. 345). He writes: “I have adopted an integrative, multidisciplinary approach that draws connections between different facets of Jewish culture. I have waded into a thicket of communal records and family letters, ethical and legal directives, medical theory and

practice, literary and intellectual history – united by their common focus on old age in all its complexity” (p. 345).

Russ-Fishbane’s approach is integrative, but also strictly delineated in its presentation. His book is divided into three discrete sections according to methodology. The first section of the book, “Conceptions and Perceptions of Aging”, contains three chapters documenting the “science” of ageing in medieval Jewish thought. In these chapters, Russ-Fishbane teases out a wide assortment of medieval answers to questions such as “does an individual’s lifespan reflect divine reward for personal merit?”, “if long life is a sign of human sanctity, is the lifespan predestined or subject to human agency?”, and, perhaps most importantly, “how old was old exactly?” In recording medieval Jewish responses to these questions, Russ-Fishbane demonstrates a wide acquaintance not only with rabbinic sources, but also with the classical and Islamic texts that were heavily influencing prominent medieval Jewish thinkers. That awareness of the Islamic world in which the medieval Jews of this study were living and writing allows Russ-Fishbane to tease out the intricacies of intellectual genealogies to a remarkable degree in all three sections of the book.

The middle section of the book, entitled “Ageing in Family and Community”, functions as the “social history” component of the monograph. Within these three chapters, Russ-Fishbane works extensively with medieval *responsa* and with documents from the Cairo Genizah, creatively pulling together information from personal letters, pleas for public charity, deathbed wills and custody arrangements, and marriage contracts. He addresses many of the particulars of lived experience for the elderly in the medieval Jewish Mediterranean, from multigenerational households and grandparents caring for children to the intricacies of communal welfare for the aged. Many of the voices he quotes are lively and their situations provocative. The section on parental clauses inserted into marriage contracts, by which daughters-in-law could be promised in advance never to have to live with their in-laws or, on the contrary, a bride’s mother could be assured that she would never be separated from her daughter “even if the young woman should demand it” (p. 146), offers a particularly vital glimpse of the personal relationships which underlie the more ideological and esoteric discourse elaborated on in the two other sections of the book.

The final three chapters, which include the analysis of the Nachmanides poem, are closer to an intellectual or literary history in their methodology.

Here Russ-Fishbane considers the medieval ethical and poetic literatures that arose round the topic of ageing, with particular emphasis on questions of mortality, mental fragility, and the dignity of the elderly. In doing so, he uncovers a rich and extensive, yet understudied, topic of conversation in medieval Jewish texts. Even as the first section of the book addressed the question of whether a long lifespan might offer earthly proof of personal merit, this last section wrangles with the expectations and idealization of the end of life as a period in which men and women might draw closer to God, achieving new levels of sanctity through their own experiences of wisdom and repentance. This refashioning of old age as a time of achievement and opportunity is a fascinating innovation, and Russ-Fishbane offers a persuasive account of how Nachmanides's poem marks a sharp break from an earlier "Andalusian Jewish poetics of ageing . . . [in which] the goal was to awaken the younger reader to a consciousness of mortality so as to cultivate wisdom while there was still time, or to age before ageing" (p. 298). Performing yet another feat of intellectual integration, Russ-Fishbane argues that here Nachmanides was bringing together both Andalusian poetic traditions and medieval Jewish intellectual thought. Perhaps fittingly, such a fusion is also the goal of all three of the chapters in this section, which ends with a consideration of the metaphor of old age as the "Sabbath of life", the time when a person's labours are rewarded with a measure of earthly quietude. The interplay here between the figurative and the theoretical, and the historical human being engaging with them both, becomes a perfect example of how well Russ-Fishbane's integrative approach works to deepen and enrich our understanding of how medieval Jews viewed the ageing process.

Indeed, if there is a weakness to this monograph, I would argue that it is not in its tripartite engagement with methodology, but rather in its blurring of its own geographical boundaries. For while the title speaks of a "medieval Jewish culture", it becomes clear quickly when reading the book that this is primarily a study of the medieval Jewish Mediterranean world. While Russ-Fishbane occasionally references Ashkenazi analogies, the world north of the Pyrenees seems largely absent from this study and when it does intrude, the effect can be a bit jarring, for example when he cites the scholarship of Elisheva Baumgarten on women in medieval Ashkenaz and Eve Krakowski on adolescent girls in medieval Egypt together, without acknowledging the significant disparity of geographic location (pp. 228–9). Likewise, the occlusion of the degree to which this is a book about Jews

living and engaging primarily with the medieval Islamic world rather than that of Latin Christendom does a disservice, I believe, to displaying Russ-Fishbane's skill at integrating Arabic sources into his analysis. The book's focus on Jewish communities between the Iberian Peninsula and Iraq, communities tied together by habits of trade and mobility and marriage customs, like polygamy, not replicated in Ashkenaz, could have been highlighted, rather than somewhat hidden, in the book's title and pages.

Russ-Fishbane has written a genuinely impressive work of scholarship, destined to be an invaluable resource to scholars from a wide array of disciplines. The book's erudite and deep familiarity with its sources, its sensitivity to the heterogeneous varieties of human experience, and its sustained philosophical engagement with questions that reach out from the medieval past to animate the minds of contemporary Jews and non-Jews alike, is a stunning achievement. As Russ-Fishbane notes in his introduction, the questions of how and why and when human beings age is a vital part of the experience of being human, an essential component of the condition of mortality that shapes not only our ends, but our beginnings and middles as well. As he guides the reader through four hundred pages of carefully argued and articulated prose, Russ-Fishbane never loses sight of the urgency of his task or of his reader, themselves inevitably situated somewhere in the process of ageing, perhaps already engaged in reaching out a tentative finger to "measure the heavens and the mountain's mass".

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