

Les rites de naissance dans le judaïsme (Birth Rites in Judaism)

Patricia HIDIROGLOU, Paris, les Belles Lettres, 1997, coll. Histoire, 358 pp.

With *Les rites de naissance dans le judaïsme*, Patricia Hidirolou offers us one of the relatively rare attempts, in French, of a truly pluridisciplinary approach in the construction of its object. This entails a complex operation which not only requires bringing into relation various worlds, but equally making explicit the knowledge they convey, as well as making explicit the dynamic(s) through which Jewish society – in this case the Jewish community of France – gives itself to think and from which it draws the basis of its continuity.

The work is based on three types of sources: 1) the texts of the tradition (Bible, Talmud, *midrashim*, halakhic texts, *responsa*, etc...); 2) archives, mainly consistorial (from the French “Consistory” of Jewish religious authorities); 3) interviews with the present-day Jewish population (for whom we would have perhaps liked to possess more information on its definition, including origin and delimitation of the corpus, levels of laity, orthodoxy or orthopraxy).

The transition from one type of source to another bears witness to the acculturation of a large part of the population that practices today these rituals, which do not have the same dissemination, be it synchronic or diachronic. The circumcision, dealt with in the first four chapters (I. Circumcision: between medicine and tradition; II. mohel; III. Rituals and festivities of the circumcision; IV. Common meaning and scientific interpretations), represents the most practiced and most diffused rite, historically and geographically. The majority of Jews continue to practice it, even among the non-practicing. (In Israel, for example, even though the Orthodox do not represent more than 28 or 30% of the population, circumcision is practiced in more than 98% of the time; it remains a very strong sign of identity; which explains why many adult immigrants coming from countries where the rite was not being practiced, for sociological or ideological reasons, have been operated on, in a hospital environment, by a surgeon-rabbi). Circumcision appears, for the male infant, as the sign, *par excellence*, of the alliance (*brit*), which makes the child truly enter into the midst of the Jewish people and inscribes him in the patrilineal descent. The author shows with elegance how the *mila*, through its representations, introduces the symbolic system of masculine identity, of sexuality and of patrilineal kinship. Every social group is confronted with a problem of

equilibrium in the world from the irreducible fact of the anatomical and physiological difference of the sexes. The timing of women follows the biological rhythm and that of family life. Their place in the reproductive cycle confers upon them a real or potential power. This power will have to be canalized. The inculcation of attitudes of submission will be even stricter as their position as genitors – as long as it is not inscribed in an irrevocable manner in the culture's register – situates them in a dangerous proximity to the uncontrollable forces of what is perceived as savage nature. Let us recall that the first of the 613 commandments that regulate the existence of the practicing Jew is that of procreation: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:22, 28) on the fifth day of Creation for animals and on the sixth for man. As early as chapter 3 of Genesis, the fate of woman, *Ishah*, now called Eve, the mother of all the living, is defined, as a punishment for her transgression, by procreation in pain and a sexuality that is defined through her domination by man: “Undo the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; sorrow thou shalt bring forth children and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.” (Gen. 3:16). The control of this potential power of women will thus be double: through the laws of ritual purity on one side, but also through circumcision of the male infant. As the author stresses, the *brit-mila* takes place on the eighth day, at the time when the woman comes out of a state of maximum impurity to enter a secondary level of impurity. It is precisely the moment where the child, fearing no more the contamination of the blood of severe impurity, can be taken away from the woman's world to be integrated, by the shedding of masculine blood, considered pure, into the men's world.

The other chapters of the book juxtapose the rites that the author, referring to the work of French anthropologist Nicole Belmont, has named “rites of birth” and which give its title to the work: the donation of the *mappah*, the redemption of the firstborn, and lastly the laws of immersion associated with the woman's state of *niddah*.

These rites do not have, evidently, the same diffusion, neither do they belong to the same degree of orthopraxy than the first one. The donation of the *mappah* is only attested to, as the author says page 146, in communities originating in western and southern Germany, from eastern France, from Switzerland, from Northern Italy, from Bohemia, from Moravia and from Denmark (in Israel, for example, this rite is almost unknown and only the communities originating in Alsace – and still, only the very recent immigrants – practice it). The *pidyon haben*, the buying back of the first born, is, similarly, much less often practiced than circumcision – already by the very fact that the group concerned is much

more limited. As for the laws of “family purity”, they participate more in the world of sexuality in general than that of birth rituals properly speaking.

What we would like to suggest is that precisely the title of the work itself is somewhat reductive compared to what is actually at stake here, that is, the global symbolic field which puts into play kinship in its entirety, in its dimensions of alliance as well as those of patrilinear descent. It assigns to each actor its place in the system, be it man, woman, child or priestly class. Through the entire set of these rituals, an analysis sketches out social structure on one side and symbolism on the other. The author acknowledges in her conclusion: “Thus, despite the modernization and secularization, a certain *continuum* persists, as much in the functions of the various rituals as in the roles held by each of the protagonists, because the function of these rituals remain eminently social and identity-bound: it means, for the time of a ceremony, to gather with a family, with friends, with a group with whom one has conscious links, even if they are not clearly defined” (p. 275).

What links, finally, the set of these rituals, is their relationship to the transmission of culture. In fact, the reading of the texts of the tradition represents an integral part of it. Judaism constantly introduces verbal material in the non-verbal and non-verbal in the verbal. The donation of the *mappah* is a perfect illustration of this, where the words answer to the body. With the circumcision on one side, the *pidyon ha-ben* and the *mappah* on the other, we are truly in a dialectic of “the words and the things”. The centrality of the text answers in a strong manner to that of the body, put into words in the field of texts, rituals and of their context.

This work therefore offers us the bases of a fruitful reflexion of an anthropology of Judaism which, situating itself from the start in the field of interdisciplinarity, attempts to build a bridge between the texts and the practices.

Florence HEYMANN
(Translation : Lisa Anteby)