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"A DISGRACE FOR ALL JEWISH MEN"
 PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF
 WIFE-BEATING IN JEWISH HISTORY



The study of medieval Jewish wife-beating focuses on the nature of discourse in rabbinic literature and occasionally involves archival case records or literary references. These finite materials are not accurate reflections of the extent of wife-abuse in medieval Jewish society.

Several articles about wife-beating in Jewish history and law have recently appeared, mostly in Israel. I have developed an alternative model for explaining

medieval Jewish wife-beating. 2 Two factors motivate my research. First, given the chilling findings about extensive wife-beating today among all types of Jews, any attempt to present Jewish men as gentle enough or the rabbis as powerful enough to limit such violence must be revised. Second, women who are the victims of violence in Jewish homes must know that they do not suffer alone, knowledge which may make it easier for them to get help. Writers who argue that the abusive husband constitutes an aberration and the rabbis have opposed violence may in fact sustain wife-beating. It requires coercion by others with authority and power to eliminate it.

Thus my methodology involves tendentious and polemical aspects, which I hope will not lead to a lack of balance in my research. I offer a reading of the primary materials which may disturb accepted notions about the role of the family, about the authority and the power of the rabbis, the qualities of Jewish ethics, the nature of the Jewish community, the methods of Jewish survival, and what many view as the essence of Judaism.

The fundamental texts of rabbinic Judaism, namely the Bible, Mishnah, Midrash, Talmud, never condemn wife-beating, and marital cruelty is never a cause for divorce, which can only be granted by a man. One of the methodological challenges to the study of medieval wife-beating is unraveling the question of when a man can be forced to divorce his wife, about which there are competing traditions. In Catholic Europe the rabbis are influenced by Church teachings on the indissolubility of marriage and usually oppose forcing divorce on violent husbands, often preferring an arrangement that resembles the Catholic separation from bed and board, without any hope of either remarrying. Under Islam, however, Jewish women can initiate divorce, although to do so they usually forfeit their marriage settlements, following the Islamic Khula divorce.

Another major question facing a study on medieval wife-beating is whether the rabbis have the authority to implement the punishments they propose, such as cutting off the hand. Rabbis indicate explicitly that they do not have the power to do so and that a determination is up to the government. The fact is that rabbis in medieval Europe as well as in Islamic countries do not take wife-battering seriously. Indeed they often encourage it as a way for a man to guide his wife toward proper behavior.

In the sixteenth century, among the rabbis of European and Mediterranean countries a new zealotry for husbands to discipline and to control their wives emerges, often based on their use of selective and altered quotations from earlier rabbis.

In general, extreme abuse against women does not preserve the patriarchal order of society, as is often claimed. In fact, it constitutes a nuisance to a male dominated power structure by raising questions that seriously threaten the social order, such as whether a woman can initiate a divorce, whether a man can be forced to divorce his wife, and whether the rabbis have the power to force divorce. No matter what their apologists may say today, and there are many, medieval rabbis protect what they see as the proper order of families rather than ameliorate physical abuse, including even the most extreme violence against women. The growing need the rabbis feel to articulate a hierarchical order among the sexes constitutes further evidence, 3 that women are engaging in behaviors, of a religious, intellectual, social, and economic nature, and are raising legal questions in Jewish and gentile courts, that the rabbis see as threatening the proper order. Ironically, medieval women are able to seek relief from abusive husbands with the aid of protective, patriarchal families. Differences between Catholics and Jews, if any, may be

due to the effects of varying consanguinity regulations. Catholic policy discourages the marriage of relatives, making the woman an outsider to her husband and his family. Among Jews, wives who are members of the same extended family enjoy the protection of a finite and interconnected group of people, making it unlikely that men, unless seriously disturbed, persist in extremely violent behavior. Expanded travel and marital opportunities, particularly in the early-modern and modern periods, make women outsiders and financial commodities in their husband's families and eliminate many of the local checks on violent behavior.

In most cases the rabbis defiantly undermine precedents for forced divorce. While some medieval rabbis express disapproval of wife-beating and suggest punishments, they nevertheless rely on the voluntary cooperation of violent, abusive, and unbalanced men, who, along with the government, are the ultimate arbiters of power in the Jewish community.

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GENDER AND VIOLENCE IN THE NORTHERN FRENCH FARCE



If asked to give a thumbnail sketch of the trickster plays written in Normandy, Ile-de-France, and Picardy between 1450 and 1550, when the farce was at its most popular, most literary specialists would probably allude to the violent nature of the genre, as well as its broad humor and stereotypical characters and situations. While students of the farce have traditionally considered this genre to be purely ludic, in spite of the moralized conclusions terminating most of these plays, farce violence is by no means purely gratuitous, even if not "politically correct" by today's standards. Instead, the violence in the medieval and early modern trickster drama performs a moralizing function, punishing