

BIRTH IN HASIDIC LITERATURE: GENDERED READINGS

Tsippi Kauffman

Carol Mossman has pointed out two broad cultural phenomena that go hand in hand: the cultural silence in relation to birth, and the expropriation of birth from women in the few instances where birth stories do appear.

These phenomena are especially significant because given that birth is a potential source of immense power for women in family, society, and culture, and, consequently, the dominant patriarchal culture has a vested interest in expropriating this source of women's power, even utilizing it as a means of control.

The present paper discusses the place of birth in Hasidic literature: essays and stories. The first section examines four categories of expropriating birth labor. The first is time shifting: concealing birth by focusing on a special moment before, conception, or after, circumcision, as the 'real' birth. The second makes the Zaddik into the midwife. Many stories portray the Zaddik as helping a woman in the throes of difficult labor, which then becomes miraculous instead of natural, usually told from the Zaddik's point of view and taking place in a masculine domain, thus becoming spiritual more than concrete. The third is the birth of the Zaddik in the pattern of the birth of the hero, in order to extol the Zaddik's character or to create a sense of mystery concerning his origins. The fourth is birth as a metaphor for creativity attributed to men, especially in Hasidic *derashot*. In addition to these positive depictions of birth, in some texts birth is connected especially to pain, danger and pollution, and there it is related exclusively to women.

The second section of the paper focuses on subversive texts and subversive readings of other Hasidic essays and stories in order to elicit the broader, hidden potential of Hasidic literature from a feminist-gendered perspective within patriarchal culture.