CHAPTER 11

Gender, Religion, and the Search for a Modern Jewish Identity in “La rabina” by Silvia Plager

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I don’t want that silent way / of being a woman.

MANUELA FINGUERET

I want to pray / but I do not know how to pray / . . . /
For years I have spoken in a language that is not mine.

GLORIA GERVITZ

The main interest of the novel La rabina (‘The Woman Rabbi’) by Silvia Plager (Argentina, 2006) lies in the fact that its plot brings together themes that are seldom seriously dealt with in most Latin American literature by Jewish authors—Jewish religion, in its institutional aspects too, and Israel both as setting of the plot and as the expression of (a new or different) Jewish identity. In La rabina these themes are deeply linked to questions of gender, namely the position and possibilities of choice of a Jewish woman in the last decades of the twentieth century. I shall begin by a brief description of those components as the general context in which this novel inscribes itself, and then discuss the way they are represented in the text.

Latin American Jewish writing has been best described as the literary representation of a hyphenated identity, in which the hyphen signalizes a dynamic articulation between, on one hand, national belonging and, on the other, Jewishness as a supra-national reference (Sosnowski, 1985). In order to build or reexamine the Jewish side of their identities, authors and/or their characters often explore Jewish history as an identity source, be it the history of an individual migrant or sections of the general history of the Jewish people, including variable degrees of input from the Shoah, Zionism, and the State of Israel.

The place of religion in this literary corpus is very limited, and reflects the fact that for most Latin American Jews, religion figures mainly as the visible mark of difference vis-à-vis the general Christian majority, and less frequently as an effective practice in everyday life. In most cases it constitutes the background of traditional customs that may include Jewish food (not necessarily
kosher), celebration of holidays, and the performance of basic rites such as *brith milah*, *bar* and *bat mitzvah*, *chupah* and religious burial, all of which are experienced as tokens of collective belonging. Religious faith, in accordance with the prevailing liberal outlook in Latin American societies, is considered mostly a personal experience and not necessarily linked to formal practices. While I am of course aware of the revival of Jewish religion in its different currents (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform) in Argentina, Brazil and other Latin American countries in recent decades, to the best of my knowledge these developments have not yet been reflected in literary works. Argentinean poet Santiago Kovadloff expressed this double feeling epigrammatically in the last line of his poem “A Man in the Synagogue:” “Here inside the synagogue, the absence of God matters little” (Kovadloff, 1985: 33) (*all translations from Spanish to English are my own*).

Though issues of gender regarding the place of women in Judaism have become an important object of research, debate, and literary writing within the frameworks of the different currents in Jewish religion and also in secular thought, both in Israel and in Diaspora, they still stand far from general consensus (Levitt, 1997; Fishman, 2007). The problem becomes even more complicated when the debate engages with women assuming rabbinical or community leadership functions. The broadening of this subject is beyond the scope of this chapter, and certainly beyond my expertise. Still, there is one reference I find particularly relevant for the novel that will be discussed here. In 1982, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the ordination of Sally Preisand, the first woman rabbi of the Reform Movement, the American Jewish Committee convened a consultation meeting, the proceedings of which were published in the brochure *The Role of Women in Jewish Religious Life: A Decade of Change, 1972–1982*. In spite of the fact that in 1982 there were already “sixty-one ordained women rabbis in the United States—forty-nine Reform rabbis and twelve Reconstructionist rabbis” (*The Role*, 1982: 4), the “Discussion and Comments” section stresses as a problem “the lack of role models for women rabbis and cantors” (*The Role*, 1982: 20) and, more generally, “the paucity of role models for women in Jewish religious life” (*The Role*, 1982: 23).

As in other contemporary literatures, an important section of Latin American Jewish literature, mainly by women authors, includes gender issues and discussions on the role and position of Jewish women. In texts where formal religion and/or religious feelings combine with gender, Judaism is perceived as a patriarchal worldview in which woman’s role is all but secondary. The two epigraphs at the top of this chapter express this attitude: Fingueret addresses God saying “I don’t want that silent way of being a woman” (Fingueret, 1992: 16); Gervitz protests she does not really know how to pray because she