

Helène Aylon, *Whatever is Contained Must be Released: My Jewish Orthodox Girlhood, My Life as a Feminist Artist* (New York, NY: The Feminist Press, The City University of New York, 2012), \$24.95 (350p) ISBN 978-1-55861-768-1

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Helène Aylon, now 81 years old, decided to be an artist at age thirteen but she was discouraged from attending the Music and Art High School in Manhattan. The reason—it might make her late for the Hebrew high school for girls in Brooklyn, where her Orthodox Jewish family lived. She was dissatisfied with her parents' compromise of a correspondence course in art, and it was not until she was married that she pursued her passion. Even then, when she enrolled in Brooklyn College, majoring in art, it was under a pseudonym to avoid shaming the family name of her rabbi husband. When she was 30, he died, and she was liberated, but it was another five years before she had her first exhibition. In her prolific career, she interacted with important Jewish artists like Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Mierle Ukeles, and she embraced feminism, ecofeminism, and anti-war activism. She balanced the burden of being an artist and a mother, and later, the burden of being a feminist and an academic.

The artist's memoir, *Whatever is Contained Must be Released: My Jewish Orthodox Girlhood, My Life as a Feminist Artist* was published in June on the heels of books on Jewish artists Gertrude Sandmann, Judy Chicago, and Lee

Krasner. Although Aylon has been included in literature on Jewish artists, such as a chapter in Matthew Baigell's *American Artists, Jewish Images* (Syracuse University Press, 2006), this is the first monograph on her.

Whatever is Contained Must be Released describes Aylon's dual identity that she kept secret until she was 60 years old. This fraught relationship with her Jewishness extends back to her childhood, when she mumbled her prayers but approached her father with pride to get his approval of her homework for Hebrew studies. As the new bride of a rabbi, she had "prayed to believe" (98) but ultimately it was feminism that was her salvation. When she became a widow, she moved away from religion slowly and began to see it objectively. Still, the traditions haunted her, bringing tears to her eyes when she revisited them. Even at the time of writing this book, she could not separate her former religious and cultural identity from her artistic identity, evident in her impulse to write the Hebrew letters for B and H—traditional inclusions at the start of correspondence—in grant proposals.

Aylon admits that her memoir "read[s] like Judaism 101" (286), but this focus may be inevitable for someone so entrenched in the religion that she claims to have "J-dar" (17), the ability to differentiate between Orthodox and secular Jews. Navigating her vivid portrayal of domestic life can be challenging for readers unfamiliar with Judaism, as not all of the Hebrew terms are translated, requiring the reader to discern their meaning from context. Thus, her direct writing style is

appreciated. For example, of being in a coma for 20 days, she writes, "...it wasn't bad" (271).

Scholars of the intersection between religion and feminism will appreciate Aylon's candid critique of Orthodox Judaism, as she cites numerous examples of gender bias. A firstborn child, if it is a girl, is not considered such, and the morning prayer that boys recite gives thanks for not being made female. The virginity (i.e., honor) of a little girl is jeopardized in the case of incest; a woman is sexually 'permitted' to her husband; and a woman is considered unclean when she is menstruating, to the extent that she cannot embrace her bed-ridden husband. A widowed woman is no longer allowed to kiss the Torah when it circulated but she can expect to continue to receive mail in her married name even if she changes her name. In describing these situations, Aylon implores the reader for sympathy. For example, between relaying stories of being separated from boys by her mother for fear of her virginity being lost, she writes, "As if that's not enough, hear this." (83).

Aylon provides irreverent descriptions of the members of her family tree, with no personality quirk overlooked amongst her ancestors or the relatives she grew up knowing. When it comes to the nuclear family she formed, though, the book does not tell the *gensa meisa* (whole story); she's fairly tight-lipped about her relations with her husband and her children. The relationship that is explored most is that with her mother, for whom she started writing the book before her death at age

100. It's a touching gesture in light of the tension in their relationship: Aylon would place her mother's fork upside down on an otherwise perfectly arranged table, and her mother refused to hug Aylon at her son's wedding because she disliked her outfit. She writes that at an exhibition at the Jewish Museum, she felt like a schoolgirl trying to justify her work to her mother. Ultimately, Aylon won the pride of her mother and Aylon admitted to striving to be more like her mother as an artist.

Whatever is Contained Must be Released is a useful complement to Lisa E. Bloom's *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (Routledge, 2006), which argues that Second Wave feminist artists erased their Jewishness to emphasize their gender in a collective movement. Aylon is an interesting case in keeping her identity secret for so long but ultimately using it as subject matter. In this generously illustrated publication, the reader is privy to the clear connection between Aylon's past and her artwork. She has worked extensively with text, combining images with dogmatic passages such as, "That man shall rule over woman" (*The Women's Section*, 1997). She also inserted pink slashes throughout the Bible where the female presence was excluded and struck through negative—namely misogynistic—words. Aylon has staged equally radical performances, like a four-week project in which Jewish and Arab women came together for the simple act of gathering stones and carrying them in sacs to archways. Aylon's art and life are inspiring in equal measure.