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Women's Liberation in Honigmann's *Soharas Reise*

Ernest Schonfield

Soharas Reise (1996) occupies an unusual position in Barbara Honigmann's oeuvre.¹ Unlike the rest of her work, it is not autobiographical: Honigmann and her family do not appear in the text, not even in a cameo role. This chapter will consider the depiction of Jewish women's liberation in *Soharas Reise*. It will argue that Sohara's 'journey' is, above all, a journey of female self-discovery and self-realization.² Specifically, it is a fable about a Sephardi Orthodox Jewish wife's emancipation from a husband who abuses his (male) authority. The tension between Orthodox Judaism and women's liberation is thus an important subtext in *Soharas Reise*. Jewish feminists have objected to women's exclusion from the *minyan* (the male prayer group), women's exemption from study, and, in divorce proceedings in Jewish religious courts, a woman's rights being in some ways inferior to those of a man.³ There is also the *Kol Isha*, the proscription against women raising their voices in song.⁴ In the USA in particular there have been significant attempts to address gender inequalities within Judaism, for example, by the theologian Judith Plaskow.⁵ The Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), founded in 1997, aims to expand opportunities for women within the framework of *Halakha* (Jewish law).⁶ Blu Greenberg, the president of JOFA, avers that feminism strengthens Judaism

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¹ Barbara Honigmann, *Soharas Reise*. English translation: Barbara Honigmann, *A Love Made Out of Nothing & Zohara's Journey* (2003). Subsequent page references to the German edition in round brackets, and to the American edition in square brackets.

For full publication details of all Honigmann's texts and where appropriate, translations of their titles, please refer to the bibliography, where the primary texts are listed chronologically by date of publication.

² Although the official translation spells Zohara with a 'z', this chapter retains the spelling of the original German edition: 'Sohara'.

³ Judith Plaskow, 'Jewish Feminist Thought', in Daniel Frank, and Oliver Leaman, eds, *History of Jewish Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 785.

⁴ On this topic, see Barbara Borts, 'The Voice in Women: Subjected and Rejected', *European Judaism*, 54:1 (2021), no pagination.

⁵ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990). See also Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes, eds, *Judith Plaskow: Feminism, Theology, and Justice*, Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers, volume 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

⁶ The UK branch of JOFA was founded in 2013 by Rabba Dina Brawer.

‘because feminism is about justice, and incorporating a new measure of justice brings Judaism up to its own best level.’⁷ In a similar spirit, *Soharas Reise* can be seen as an attempt to build bridges between Orthodox Judaism and feminism. This chapter argues that the narrative of *Soharas Reise* tries to mediate between Jewish Orthodoxy and women’s liberation, as Sohara achieves a new level of independence and agency, while still remaining firmly embedded in her local Orthodox Jewish community.

Sohara: Exile and Domestic Oppression

The first-person narrator of the story is Sohara Serfaty, a Sephardi Jew from Oran, who now lives in Strasbourg. Now (i.e., in the early 1990s) she is in her forties and the mother of six children, thus she was presumably born some time around 1950 (45) [107]. She recounts two journeys: firstly, her exile from Algeria as a teenager in 1962; secondly, her search to recover her six children who have been kidnapped by her estranged husband Simon. Although the novel is about Sohara, its themes resonate with some of Honigmann’s central concerns: (Jewish) exile, mother-daughter relations and gender relations. These concerns mesh together, since Sohara is a Jewish mother whose defining experience is that of exile from her childhood home, Oran. Sohara’s story is thus another chapter in the history of Jewish diaspora and deliverance. As Honigmann puts it in *Damals, dann und danach* (1999): ‘auch ich will von den “großen Dingen” sprechen, nur davon, von Exil und Erlösung’ [I too want to speak of the ‘big themes’, exile and deliverance, and only of them].⁸ *Soharas Reise* does indeed focus on exile and deliverance. Sohara’s terrified response to the loss of her children when they are kidnapped clearly resembles the traumatic dislocation of exile, and the connection between these two traumas is underlined at the end of the first chapter, when Sohara tells us: ‘Ohne meine Kinder hatte ich kein Zuhause mehr’ (14) [Without my children I no longer had a home, 84]. Sohara’s sense of belonging is essentially defined by her family. She only ‘belongs’ where her children are.

Like most Algerian Jews, Sohara and her mother and sister were forced to leave Algeria after the end of the Algerian War. After the country became independent on 5 July 1962, as

⁷ Blu Greenberg, quoted in Joyce Antler, *Radical Jewish Feminism: Voices from the Women’s Liberation Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 240.

⁸ Barbara Honigmann, *Damals, dann und danach*, 51.

French citizens, Algerian Jews were 'repatriated' to mainland France, along with the French colonizers, the so-called *pieds noirs*.⁹ Sohara describes how, the day before they left Algeria, they went to the graveyard to say goodbye to their father's grave, and the graves of their grandparents and ancestors (40) [104]. Exile is thus figured as a traumatic dislocation in the life and continuity of the Jewish family. Exile had a traumatic effect on her mother, who cried almost constantly for three years after leaving Algeria (43) [106]. On one level, then, as Jeffrey M. Peck argues, *Soharas Reise* is a story of exile.¹⁰ On another level, as this chapter will seek to show, *Soharas Reise* also tells a story of female solidarity, emancipation and rebellion against patriarchal injustice, as embodied by Sohara's husband Simon.

The trauma of exile has left wounds in Sohara's family life that cannot be healed. The three women have become profoundly isolated, and their relationships seem dysfunctional. When they settled in Amiens in northern France, Sohara and her sister found it extremely hard to begin a new life, because their mother did not allow them to spend any time with their schoolfriends after school: 'Sie hatte schon Angst, wenn wir aus ihrem Blickfeld gerieten' (44) [She was afraid to let us even out of her sight, 107]. This passage shows that Sohara has had no autonomy in her life. Her attempts to develop her own agency as a teenager are crushed by her controlling mother, who begs the rabbi in Amiens to find her an Algerian Jewish husband, albeit to no avail (29) [96]. After her sister gets married and moves to Paris, Sohara goes on a date with a young man called Jehuda, but then he marries someone else (31) [97]. Sohara is left alone with her mother who seems, unfairly and irrationally, to blame her for all of her woes: 'Dann habe ich wieder alle Abende allein mit meiner Mutter zu Hause gesessen, habe mir die Klagen über ihr verlorenes Leben angehört, über die zerstörte Familie [...]. Wir stritten viel, und ich weinte viel und fand, daß meine Mutter mir nicht die Schuld an allem geben sollte' (31) [Then I sat at home, alone in the evenings with my mother, listening to her complain about her wasted life, about her destroyed family [...]. We quarreled a lot and I cried a lot and thought that my mother shouldn't blame me for everything, 97]. After Sohara marries Simon and has children, her mother stops blaming her for everything and rages against her fate and against the Arabs who drove them out of Algeria (46) [108]. Unlike

⁹ In 1963, newly independent Algeria passed a Nationality Code, which restricted nationality to those with Muslim ancestry, and extended the right to naturalize only to persons who had participated in the struggle for independence.

¹⁰ Jeffrey M. Peck, 'Telling Tales of Exile, (Re)writing Jewish Histories: Barbara Honigmann and Her Novel, *Soharas Reise*', *German Studies Review*, 24/3 (2001), 557-69.

Honigmann's own mother, Litzi Friedmann (1910-1981), who talked very little about her experiences of exile, Sohara's mother talks of very little else. The defining experience of exile seems to dominate every conversation. This is very different to Honigmann's own childhood, where access to her Jewish origins was effectively prohibited, both by her parents and by the East German state.¹¹ It is also very different to another novel about Algerian Jews in France, Marlène Amar's *La femme sans tête* (1993) [The Headless Woman], where the repression of exile and the desperate desire to assimilate into French society leads to pathological illness.¹²

For Sohara, in contrast to Honigmann and to Amar's characters, there has never been any question of the effacement of her Jewish identity. On the contrary, Sohara has been firmly embedded in Orthodox Jewish traditions since her early childhood. For seven years in Oran, her uncle taught Sohara and her sister the weekly sections of the Torah, together with Rashi's commentary of them (34-35) [99-100]. Although Sohara's father died when she was a child, her uncle thus played an important role in maintaining the continuity of Jewish religious practice; however, he has also helped to maintain what Lucille Cairns calls 'Maghrebi patriarchal tradition', as the daughters effectively pass from the 'despotic rule' of their parents to their husbands' authority.¹³

Sohara only escapes her overbearing mother by submitting to the control of her authoritarian husband, Simon. Both Sohara and her mother are well aware that the notion that a wife should be subservient and 'obey' her husband is unfair, even terrible. Nevertheless, they both go along with this terrible notion:

Meine Mutter hatte mir für meine Ehe viele gute Ratschläge gegeben, du mußt dich deinem Mann unterordnen, dich seinem Charakter beugen, nicht viel fragen, ihn nicht mit deinen kleinen Problemen ärgern, ihm auch zeigen, daß du ihn bewunderst, kannst ruhig ein bißchen Theater spielen. Aber das ist doch schrecklich, habe ich gesagt. Und sie hat gesagt, na ja, ist schrecklich, ist eben so. (59)

¹¹ On this point, see Jutta Gsoels-Lorensen, "'Un drame interdit d'accès": Remembrance and the Prohibited Past in Barbara Honigmann's Generational Texts', *The German Quarterly*, 80/3 (2007), 369-90.

¹² Marlène Amar, *La femme sans tête* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993). For a discussion of this novel, see Lucille Cairns, *Post-War Jewish Women's Writing in French* (London: Legenda, 2011), 146-61, and Nancy Arenberg, 'The Effacement of Jewish Identity in Marlène Amar's *La Femme sans tête*', *Expressions maghrébines*, 16/1 (2017), 237-50.

¹³ Cairns, *Post-War Jewish Women's Writing*, 162.

[My mother had given me lots of good advice about my marriage: you have to subordinate yourself to your husband, adjust to his personality, not ask too much, not upset him with your little problems, and show him that you admire him as well – do a little bit of acting. ‘But that’s awful,’ I said. And she said, ‘Well, yes, it’s awful, but that’s the way it is.’] [119]

The phrase ‘gute Ratschläge’ (good advice) is profoundly ironic, for this ‘good advice’ proves to be a recipe for disaster, when Simon turns out to be a fraudster. He claims to raise money for charitable causes, but in fact he always keeps the money for himself. By obeying him constantly, Sohara exposes herself and her family to terrible risks. Sohara’s mother looks critically at Simon from the start, but nevertheless she does everything she can to facilitate the marriage (37-38) [102]. Much later, after many years of marital oppression by her husband, Sohara fears that she is becoming a replica of her mother: ‘Wenn ich [...] mein Spiegelbild zufällig in einer Schaufensterscheibe erwische, sehe ich statt meiner jetzt immer öfter meine Mutter, und ich frage mich, ob ich mich bald ganz in sie verwandeln werde, mein Gesicht, mein Körper, mein Wesen’ (49). [Sometimes when I [...] happen to catch a glance of my reflection in a display window, I see my mother more and more often instead of myself, and I ask myself whether I’m soon going to turn into her entirely – my face, my body, my being; 110] Like her mother, she risks becoming a passive victim who simply acquiesces, as her life is destroyed by external forces beyond her understanding or control.

Simon’s tyrannical oppression of Sohara is shown when he destroys the brand new, expensive family dinner table in a fit of rage. He does this when he catches Sohara changing the baby’s nappies on the table. He is outraged: for him, the table is a sacred space where he reads his holy books; Sohara has desecrated it with the baby’s bottom and the nappies. He fetches his toolkit and hacks the table into pieces, and throws it into the rubbish (63) [121-22]. This is an intimidating act of symbolic violence, since the table is the space where the family come together to eat their communal meals, which Sohara, of course, prepares. His extreme response emphasises the patriarchal division of labour according to gender: the space must be reserved for the man’s Torah study, while he expects the woman to take sole responsibility for the domestic chores.

From this point, relations deteriorate between the couple, and Simon becomes an absent father. He gives no religious instruction to the children, he only gripes at them (61)

[121]. He disappears for long periods of time, and never tells Sohara where he is going. He no longer sets foot in France, and only ever meets up with his family in Kehl, on the German side of the border. Although the thought of getting a divorce does not occur to Sohara, nevertheless she comes increasingly to resemble a kind of *agunah* (Hebrew: 'anchored', 'chained'), a Jewish woman who is stuck in her marriage as determined by *Halakha* (Jewish law), because her husband has left on a journey and has not returned.

Sohara's feeling that she is trapped is exemplified by her recurring dream of imprisonment: 'Ich träume manchmal, ich bin gefangen. Tage-, jahrelang. Nur in den Nächten bin ich frei' (84) [I sometimes dream that I'm a prisoner. For days, years. I'm only free at night; 139]. This dream is so important to her that she begins to write a record of her dreams: 'Soharas Traumbuch' (85) [Zohara's Dreambook; 140]. This is an obvious attempt to develop her own agency, and Simon ridicules her for it, and tells her to concentrate instead on soaking the chick peas for the *dafina* (the traditional stew served on the Shabbat). Yet Sohara refuses to give up her dream diary. She will keep a record of her dreams, in the hope that one day she will be able to interpret them.

Sohara's situation gets even worse when Simon becomes physically abusive towards her. He uses physical violence against her, hitting domestic objects out of her hands (65) [124]. This is when she loses all of her respect for him. Finally she starts to regard him as her enemy, and she recalls a terrible saying that she heard in Oran: 'Denk daran, du heiratest [...] deinen Feind.' (66) [Remember, you marry [...] your enemy; 124]. Having no access to modern feminism, she thus relies on traditional folklore in order to oppose her husband's cruelty. Sohara's efforts to liberate herself culminate in her final meeting with Simon before the kidnapping occurs. By this time, Simon no longer sets foot on French soil, presumably because he is wanted by the police. He orders Sohara to bring the children to meet him in the station in Kehl, the town on the German side of the border. At this point, Sohara finally confronts Simon and tells him what she thinks of him: '[...] habe ich ihm ins Gesicht gesagt, was ich seit langem dachte. [...] Simon, ich glaube, daß du ein Betrüger bist.' (66) [I told him to his face what I'd been thinking for a long time. [...] 'Simon, I think you're a fraud'; 124] In response, Simon shouts an Arabic curse and runs away up the stairs to the train platform. His violent reaction confirms that her accusation is true: Simon is a fraud, a criminal. The next time Simon appears, he has already made his plan to punish her by taking the children away from her. This traumatic event forms the beginning of the narrative. When her children are abducted,

Sohara weeps for three days and three nights, and this is the opening line of the text: 'Drei Tage und drei Nächte habe ich geweint' (7) [I cried for three days and three nights; 79]. Why does she not tell anyone about her situation? Many pages later, we learn that she is too ashamed: 'Und niemandem wollte ich davon erzählen, ich schämte mich ja viel zu sehr.' (67) [And I didn't want to tell anyone about it – I was just too ashamed; 126] The narrator never fully explains why she is so ashamed. Is it because she left Simon alone with the children for half an hour? Or because her marriage has broken down? In her community, marriage takes precedence over everything else: 'Das Heiraten war doch das Wichtigste von allem' (100) [Getting married was really the most important thing of all; 152]. Or perhaps Sohara is ashamed for having married him in the first place? Or is she ashamed for having been his 'Komplizin' (110) [accomplice, 159] for so long? In any case, Sohara's emancipation begins when she meets her neighbour Frau Kahn in the stairwell, and tells her what has happened (7) [79]. From this point onwards, and throughout the narrative, Frau Kahn, a Holocaust survivor with a number tattooed on her forearm (22) [90], plays a crucial role in supporting Sohara through the crisis. In this way, Sohara's liberation occurs primarily through moments of female solidarity. The women in Sohara's life (particularly her unnamed sister and her neighbour, Frau Kahn) are a support network and help her to escape from Simon's domination.

Secular Judaism: The 'Cercle Wladimir Rabi'

The middle section of the novel celebrates progressive, Enlightenment traditions: Bastille day and the republican values of liberty, fraternity and equality. These values inform the Enlightenment Jewish tradition exemplified by Moses Mendelssohn, known as Haskalah, to which Honigmann's great-grandfather David Honigmann belonged,¹⁴ and they also resonate with modern feminism. Religious practice can coexist with enlightened attitudes, for the Enlightenment does not necessarily imply hostility to religion itself, as Ritchie Robertson points out.¹⁵ Enlightened perspectives are represented in the novel by Frau Kahn and her

¹⁴ On David Honigmann, see Honigmann, *Damals, dann und danach*, 40-2.

¹⁵ Ritchie Robertson, *The Enlightenment: The Pursuit of Happiness 1680-1790* (London: Allen Lane, 2020).

friends in the 'Cercle Wladimir Rabi'. When the kidnapping crisis occurs, Frau Kahn supports Sohara and encourages her to defy her husband. Frau Kahn plays a key role in liberating Sohara from her husband's authority, for example, when she laughs out loud when Simon claims he is the 'Rabbi of Singapore' (25) [93], and she delivers a devastating verdict on Simon's charitable fund-raising activities: 'Schnorrer nennt man so was' (32) ['Schnorrer', or 'scrounger', is what they're called; 98]. She perceives that Simon is a 'Schnorrer' (Yiddish: 'freeloader' or 'sponge'). This solidarity between an Orthodox Sephardi woman and a secular Ashkenazi woman is the enabling condition of Sohara's liberation. It is significant that Frau Kahn is an active member of the 'Cercle Wladimir Rabi', an actual, non-fictional association of secular Jews based in Strasbourg. The association is named after the French magistrate Wladimir Rabinovitch (1906-81). He was born in Vilnius (at that time, in the Russian Empire) and moved to France as child. Under the name Wladimir Rabi, he published several books and articles on Jewish affairs in *Le Monde*.¹⁶ In the 1970s he defended the left-wing extremist Pierre Goldman. He also played a key role in the 'Finaly affair' of 1945-53, which centred on two Jewish children from Grenoble whose parents had confided them to a Catholic institution, before being deported and murdered in a Nazi concentration camp. After 1945, the children's Catholic guardian refused to return the children to their Jewish relatives, on the grounds that they had been baptised. The affair caused considerable tension between Catholic and Jewish communities in France, and the children were not returned to their family until 1953.¹⁷ Later in life, one of them, Patricia Finaly, wrote an ironic account of her displaced youth, *La Gai Ghetto* (1970).¹⁸ The historic child custody case resonates with Sohara's own story, and it anticipates the ending in which Sohara's children are restored to her.

The Cercle Wladimir Rabi in Strasbourg does not have a website, but it has an organiser, Marc-Henri Klein. In December 2001, he spoke at a conference of 'Juifs Laïques en France' [Secular Jews in France]. His paper was entitled: 'Pour une lecture laïque de la Torah'

¹⁶ See his obituary: Casamayor, 'Écrivain, philosophe et juriste, Wladimir Rabinovitch est mort. Un juste', *Le Monde*, 10 April 1981. https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1981/04/10/ecrivain-philosophe-et-juriste-wladimir-rabinovitch-est-mort-un-juste_3044882_1819218.html (accessed 24 July 2021).

¹⁷ Wladimir Rabinovitch, *L'affaire Finaly. Des faits. Des textes. Des dates* (Paris: Editions Transhumances, 2009).

¹⁸ On Patricia Finaly's ironic memoir *Le Gai Ghetto* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), see Cairns, *Post-War Jewish Women's Writing*, 115-19.

[Towards a Secular Reading of the Torah].¹⁹ The French concept of laicity (*laïcité*) thus plays a key role here. In *Soharas Reise*, we read that Frau Kahn regularly attends the meetings of the ‘circle’, which she describes as follows:

In meinem ‘Cercle Wladimir Rabi’ bin ich ganz gut aufgehoben; wir sind atheistisch und keine Gemeinde, aber wir sind unter uns. Wir treffen uns ab und zu, wir diskutieren, wir erinnern uns, wir forschen und hören uns Vorträge an. Pilgerfahrten in die ehemaligen KZs gehören natürlich auch zum Programm [...] (74)

[I’ve found my niche in the ‘Cercle Vladimir Rabi’ – we’re atheists, not a congregation, we just get together. We meet now and then, we discuss things, we remember, we do some research, and listen to lectures. Pilgrimages to former concentration camps are on the agenda too, of course...] [130]

Thus, the association promotes Jewish culture, history and memory, while remaining secular and even atheist in its orientation. The topic of the association’s recent lecture, ‘Die Emanzipation der Juden und die Französische Revolution’ (81) [The Emancipation of the Jews and the French Revolution; 136] is significant, because Sohara celebrates her new-found freedom on Bastille day (July 14th). This sets up a parallel between the historic emancipation of the Jews in Republican France in 1789, and Sohara’s personal emancipation, when she finally escapes from the oppression of her authoritarian husband. Sohara sits on a café terrace together with Frau Kahn and other members of the Cercle, and she wonders how many years it has been since she has been out of the house (82) [137]. She recalls family picnics on the beach in Oran and realizes that since her arrival in Europe, she has always been trapped indoors: ‘Seit meiner Ankunft in Europa habe ich nur drinnen gelebt, in engen Wohnungen und engen Straßen, als habe man mich in eine Kammer gesperrt, ohne Ausgang. Jetzt war ich froh, unter freiem Himmel zu sitzen [...]’ (83) [Since I arrived in Europe, all I’ve ever done is live inside, in cramped apartments and cramped streets, as if I were locked in some sort of chamber without an exit. Now I was happy to be sitting out under the sky; 137]. The theme of liberation is also central to the other lecture held by the Cercle Wladimir Rabi, on the topic of Raoul Wallenberg. Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat who saved the lives of many

¹⁹ <https://www.ajhl.org/rencontrer-juifs-laiques.html> (accessed 24 July 2021).

thousands of Jews while serving as Sweden's special envoy in Budapest in 1944. He was later reported to have died in 1947 in the Lubyanka prison in Moscow. The two lecture topics of the Cercle Wladimir Rabi thus affirm the central theme of the book, namely the liberation of Jews, but this time from a secular perspective, one which emphasises the contribution of Gentiles (i.e. the revolutionaries of 1789 and Raoul Wallenberg in 1944) to the cause of Jewish emancipation and freedom. In this way, Frau Kahn's intervention encourages Sohara to question Orthodox assumptions, and in particular her own subservient role as a woman. Although the final resolution of the narrative is achieved from within the Orthodox community, the secular Jews of Strasbourg play a significant supporting role. On one level, then, the story can be read as a call for dialogue – across the diaspora – between Orthodox and secular Jewish communities, and, especially, as a call for Jewish women's solidarity and liberation.

Sohara's Haircut

These modernizing influences pave the way for Sohara's highly symbolic act of self-liberation towards the end of the book, when she removes her headscarf. Hair covering is not a biblical obligation, but is stipulated in the Mishnah in Ketubot (7:6), which states that it can be a ground for divorce if a woman 'goes out of her house, and her head, i.e., her hair, is uncovered.'²⁰ For this reason, most Orthodox Jewish women cover their hair, either with a *mitpahaḥat* (Hebrew: headscarf) or a *sheitel* (Yiddish: wig or half-wig). Sohara explains that she borrowed a wig for her wedding ceremony, and ever since she has worn a headscarf (100) [152]. Removing her headscarf may well be a signal that she wants to get divorced from Simon, although the word 'divorce' is not mentioned in the text. In any case, taking off her scarf is gesture of resistance towards Simon, since he had always insisted that she put on her headscarf first thing every morning, and he always ('immer wieder') tells her the story of a woman whose sons became great scholars and holy men, as a reward for the fact that even

²⁰ The Mishnah, Ketubot (7:6).

https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Ketubot.7.6?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en (accessed 26 July 2021).

the walls of her house had never seen her hair (100) [153]. If removing the headscarf is grounds for divorce, then it seems Sohara would welcome this.

According to David Biale, whose Orthodox grandmother also did this, uncovering the hair is an iconic gesture:

My grandmother was the first Jewish woman in the Polish town of Włocławek to grow her own hair. It was a small but significant rebellion. Since ancient times, the Jewish code of female modesty required married women to cover their hair, either with a scarf or a headdress. [...] By taking off this *sheitel*, my grandmother declared her independence from a long-standing custom and thus, by a female gesture, heralded the beginnings of secularism.²¹

Sohara's haircut is a modern, secularist gesture *par excellence*. Given her fear, when looking at her reflection, that she is becoming a carbon copy of her mother (49) [110], this physical transformation is highly significant. When Sohara removes the headscarf, she also sheds the burden of fear, shame and powerlessness that has oppressed her for so long: 'Meine Angst und die Scham hatte ich abgelegt und das Kopftuch auch.' (97) [I had put aside my fears and my shame and taken the kerchief off my head as well; 150]. Given Simon's insistence that she wear the headscarf at all times, Sohara's gesture seems to indicate a rejection of her husband. It does not represent a rejection of orthodoxy, but it does represent a form of self-assertion, an indication of non-conformity, an assertion of autonomy while still remaining within the orthodox tradition.

For the first time, she enters her local hairdresser's, 'Coiffure Gerard', and orders a wash and a haircut. The hairdresser suggests a variety of hairstyles and Sohara selects the most modest one: 'ich wählte den [Haarschnitt], der mir am wenigsten auffällig erschien' (100) [I chose the one that seemed the least conspicuous to me; 153]. Now Sohara looks at her reflection in the mirror again, and this time, she is no longer a duplicate of her mother. Now she has found herself again. Ever since she left Oran as a teenager, she had not been herself:

²¹ David Biale, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), ix.

Ich sah mich an und fragte mich, was bloß aus mir geworden war. Mir schien, ich war nicht mehr zur Besinnung gekommen, seit ich damals zusammen mit meiner Mutter und meiner Schwester auf dem Schiff gestanden und nach Oran zurückgeschaut hatte. (100-01)

[I looked, and had to ask myself what had become of me. It seemed to me that I had never come to my senses since the day when I stood on the ship with my mother and sister and looked back at Oran.] [153]

This passage conveys an image of Sohara's arrested development as a result of the trauma of exile, her gaze fixated backwards on her lost homeland. This is why her visit to the hairdresser is so important, it marks a symbolic break with her victimhood and her subordinate status. For the first time in many years, she has come to her senses ('zur Besinnung gekommen'). Going for long walks through the city, she feels new strength: 'ich fühlte [...] so etwas wie Mut in mir aufsteigen' (97) [I felt something like courage rising within me; 150]. And this gesture of renewal is repeated when Sohara decides to redecorate the family home. She tears down the wallpaper and repaints the flat. She also receives new support and solidarity from the women in her Sephardi Orthodox community. In this way, the narrative attempts to mediate between Jewish Orthodoxy and modern feminism.

The Reaffirmation of Orthodox Judaism

In the final chapter, Orthodox Jewish values are reaffirmed. Sohara is convinced that the rescue of the children occurs 'mit Gottes Hilfe' (104) [with God's help; 155]. Her journey of liberation occurs within, and is perfectly consistent with, an Orthodox Jewish framework. For example, when Sohara is at her lowest point after her children have disappeared, she finds solace when she builds a Noah's ark from plastic Lego bricks belonging to her children (56-57) [116]. The symbolism is obvious: she will weather this storm, just as Noah and his family once survived the flood. And when Sohara boards the plane for England on her mission to rescue her children, she finds strength in the Orthodox prayer which is recited by those who travel (111) [160].

Patriarchal authority is not rejected *per se*; instead, the novel depicts Sohara's deliverance from an aberrant form of patriarchy. In fact, it is only Simon, the 'bad patriarch', who is rejected. The legitimacy of Jewish Orthodoxy is restored and reaffirmed by the positive figure of Rabbi Hagenau. It is significant that Sohara's children are rescued by the Orthodox Jewish community, and not by the secular authorities. The police shrug their shoulders, and when Frau Kahn takes Sohara to see a member of the Cercle Wladimir Rabi who is a lawyer, he is completely unsympathetic: 'der Rechtsanwalt [...] hat es auch nicht begreifen wollen oder können' (89) [the lawyer wouldn't, or couldn't, understand either; 143]. This suggests the limits of secularism. Since the problem involves members of the Orthodox Jewish community, it seems that only the leaders of this community have the authority to resolve it. And so Frau Kahn encourages Sohara to take her case to the Orthodox Rabbi Hagenau. If Simon represents the bad patriarch who misuses his authority, then Rabbi Hagenau represents the good patriarch who uses his authority wisely to resolve the case. Rabbi Hagenau contacts his fellow rabbis all around the world in order to locate Simon and the missing children. When the children are found in the orthodox Jewish community in Stamford Hill in North London, Rabbi Hagenau orchestrates a plan: Sohara will travel to London and rescue her children from the boarding house where they are staying, while Simon is distracted by the local rabbi there. The plan succeeds, and Sohara rescues her children with the help of Mordechai, a Hasid who drives a Volvo (113) [162]. She wonders: Do Hasidim drive Volvos in honour of Raoul Wallenberg? No, they do not. Hasidim prefers Volvos partly because they are big enough for their many children, and partly because they are thought safe.

Sohara's rescue of her children and their flight from Simon is compared explicitly to the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in ancient Egypt, as described in the Book of Exodus. This event is celebrated each year at Passover/Pesach, a holiday that begins, according to the Jewish calendar, on the fifteenth day of Nisan, the first month of spring. As a spring festival, Passover is a celebration of new life as well as deliverance from evil. When Sohara and her six children jump in the car, the Hasid who drives the getaway car cries 'jeziat England!' (115) [Yetsiat England; 164] – in Hebrew, 'Exodus from England'. It is an allusion to the phrase 'Yetsiat Mitzrayim', that is 'Exodus from Egypt', the Biblical escape of the Hebrews from Egypt.

Used more generally, the phrase implies an escape from a difficult situation or a tight spot.²² The Hasid puts his foot on the gas and Sohara affirms the reference to Exodus: 'wir rasten los, als ob uns tatsächlich Pharao mit seinem Heer folgte. [...] Der Chasid hat recht, das ist unser Auszug aus Ägypten' (115-16) [we sped away as if Pharaoh were actually pursuing us with his army [...] the Chasid was right, this was our exodus from Egypt; 164]. These allusions serve to 'other' Simon. Although he is a Moroccan Jew, metaphorically here, he is compared to the Biblical Pharaoh, a tyrannical autocrat. The comparison to Pharaoh (re)figures Simon as the embodiment of the bad, unjust patriarch, and not only that, suggests that he is not a true Jew because of his immoral behaviour, and he should thus be excluded from the community.

It is significant, too, that when the children return home to Strasbourg, they appear numb and traumatised. They are only released from their trauma when they see their old friend, Billy, the dog belonging to their aunt: 'Er [Billy] sprang voller Freude an den Kindern hoch, und da schienen sie aus ihrer Starre erlöst zu sein, sie riefen Billy, ach Billy, unser Billy' (117) [He jumped all over the children for joy, and then they seemed to have been released from their trance and yelled 'Billy, oh Billy, our Billy!'; 165]. Thus the children are 'erlöst' [redeemed, released] from their trauma by a humble animal, Billy the dog. Significantly, Simon had always hated Billy (118) [165]. Billy thus represents a form of natural animal warmth and playful intimacy which is the antithesis of Simon's cold, distant, fake piety. And the condemnation of Simon is completed by Sohara's sister, who concludes that she never trusted Simon because he was far too pious: 'er wäre ja viel zu fromm gewesen, um normal zu sein' (118) [he'd been much too pious to be normal; 166]. Simon, who always insisted on the letter of the religious law, has ignored the spirit of the law. The quotation suggests that *Halakha* (Jewish law) in itself is perfectly acceptable; the problem is Simon's narrow-minded, excessively stringent and ruthless application of it ('wenn man so etwas noch fromm nennen kann', 94) [if you can even call it piety; 147]. Simon used piety as a means to cover up his criminal activities. Rabbi Hagenau takes the opposite approach, for he knows that sometimes you have to bend the rules in order to do what is right. As he puts it, 'die Vernunft geht oft krumme Wege' (95) [reason often follows crooked paths; 148]. The contrast between the two rabbis is striking: while Simon embodies narrow-minded rigidity, Rabbi Hagenau takes a

²² <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-word-of-the-day-yetziat-mitzrayim-1.5235648> (accessed 24 July 2021).

broad-minded, reasonable and practical approach to religious and legal problems. Hagenau, the Orthodox rabbi, is a role model, precisely because he takes positive, practical action rather than insisting on the letter of the law. His actions seem to affirm Rabbi Laura Geller's argument that 'the essence of Judaism [...] is not just holy words, but it is action, deeds in society.'²³

Conclusion: An Unresolved Gender Debate

Soharas Reise has a resoundingly happy ending. Not only is Sohara reunited with her children, but there are general affirmations of solidarity between Orthodox and Secular Jews, between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews, between women and men, and even between children and dogs. Yet the problem of the unequal relationship between the sexes in Orthodox Judaism remains unresolved. The gender inequality in Orthodox Judaism is discussed in *Soharas Reise* during a class where Rabbi Hagenau teaches Jewish women to read the Hebrew prayer book. The women are angry because, in the morning prayer, Orthodox Jewish men are supposed to thank God that they were not born as women (!):

Es war ein Kurs für Frauen, und natürlich brach ein Sturm der Entrüstung aus, als wir beim Morgengebet an der Stelle anlangten, an der die Männer sagen: 'Gelobt seist Du, Ewiger, unser Gott, daß Du mich nicht als Frau erschufst', und wo die Frauen stattdessen sagen, '...daß Du mich nach Deinem Wohlgefallen erschufst.' (92)

It was a course only for women, and a storm of indignation broke out, naturally, when we got to the place during the morning prayer where the men say, 'Praise be unto You, Eternal One, our God, that You did not create me as a woman', and where the women say instead, '...that You created me in a way pleasing unto You.' [146]

Rabbi Hagenau tries to placate the women by arguing that this means that women are actually closer to God than men: 'daß schließlich die Frauen sowieso Gott näher seien in ihrer

²³ Laura Geller, quoted in Antler, *Radical Jewish Feminism*, 230.

verhältnismäßigen Vollkommenheit' [that, as it was, women were closer to God in their relative perfection]; this is how he interprets the phrase 'nach Deinem Wohlgefallen' (93) [pleasing unto You; 146]. But the women are not convinced by this argument, and they continue to argue with him, until finally he shrugs his shoulders and he admits that he does not know what else to say to them. In this way, the dispute ends in a draw. The result is 'one all', because he has failed to convince them, and they have failed to make him lose his composure (93) [146]. The gender inequality remains unresolved, but at least there has been a lively, spirited debate between 'the patriarchy' and 'the matriarchy'.²⁴ After all, there is nothing like a good argument to clear the air, especially if it is conducted in a respectful way.

The moral of the story seems to be that there is an ever-present need for ongoing, informed dialogue and debate within the plurality of Jewish communities. There is no such thing as a community that speaks with one voice. Indeed, as Bernard Kops puts it: 'Take one Jew and immediately you have an opposition party'.²⁵ Opposition is inevitable, indeed, opposition is vitally necessary to the life of any community, but oppositional relationships need not exclude respect for one's opponents. Certainly, in *Soharas Reise*, the Orthodox and Secular perspectives complement each other and co-exist in a relationship of mutual respect. The novel affirms the need for women's voices to be heard, especially within the Orthodox community. Within every Jewish community, there are huge intersectional differences in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, as well as a broad spectrum of religious observances (or non-observance) and differing political views. The great merit of Honigmann's generous, warm-hearted literary works is that she finds a way to accommodate some of these differences and set up a dialogue between them.

²⁴ There is a growing place for matriarchs within liberal Judaism, as progressive Jews now seek to introduce gender parity into the liturgy by adding the names of the matriarchs immediately after those of the patriarchs. On this point, see Jeremy Schonfield, 'Including the Matriarchs in the Amidah?', *European Judaism*, 52:1 (2019), 135-49.

²⁵ Bernard Kops, *The World is a Wedding* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1963), 11.