



Houses of Study: A Jewish Woman among Books

Ilana M. Blumberg

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To learn was to live, and to learn well was to live well. This was the lesson of both cultures of the Modern Orthodox Jewish world in which Ilana Blumberg was educated, with its commitment to traditional Jewish practice and ideas alongside an appreciation for modern, secular wisdom. But when the paths of Jewish tradition and secular wisdom inevitably diverge, applying this lesson can become extraordinarily tricky, especially for a woman. Blumberg's memoir of negotiating these two worlds is the story of how a Jewish woman's life was shaped by a passion for learning; it is also a rare look into the life of Modern Orthodoxy, the twentieth-century movement of Judaism that tries to reconcile modernity with tradition.

Blumberg traces her own path from a childhood immersed in Hebrew and classical Judaic texts as well as Anglo-American novels and biographies, to a womanhood where the two literatures suddenly represent mutually exclusive possibilities for life. Set in "houses of study," from a Jewish grammar school and high school to a Jerusalem yeshiva for women to a secular American university, her memoir asks, in an intimate and poignant manner: what happens when the traditional Jewish ideal of learning asserts itself in a body that is female—a body directed by that same tradition toward a life of modesty, early marriage, and motherhood?

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