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Activism and *From the Breast*

Rebecca Winer

On 5 July 2016, I received a surprising email. Naomi Sallé, a lactation consultant (IBCLC) and graduate of the *Nederlands Israëlitisch Seminarium* in Jewish education was asking me for help in creating guidelines for new mothers in the observant Jewish community in Amsterdam, Holland. She had read my bio as a fellow of the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies¹ and seen a post from RELMIN,² the religious minorities research group headed by John Tolan at the university of Nantes, where I presented the interpretive gains of my article 'Conscripting the Breast',³ *vis à vis* Jewish women. Lactation consultant Sallé wanted to know if I had encountered Talmudic references to supplemental forms of infant feeding that might help observant mothers today who were encountering difficulties breastfeeding to decide if and when to use formula. She was concerned that an absence of discussion in foundational Jewish sources might mean that there were not acceptable or permitted alternatives to breastfeeding that these Jewish women would feel comfortable using although their health and the flourishing of their children might depend on it. I replied that I was no expert in *halakhah* (Jewish law), but that I was aware of a discussion about sustaining a nursing child with 'eggs and milk', a form of coddle for a nursling whose pregnant mother was no longer able to breastfeed, referred to in the Babylonian Talmud (BT) Yevamot 42b.⁴ I suggested that this discussion might be interpreted to support the supplemental use of formula to support infant and maternal health. In her work on medieval Jewish mothers and children, Elisheva Baumgarten had cited this Talmudic passage as it related to restrictions on remarriage for widowed lactating mothers,⁵ thus I had read it years before and learned about the concept of 'eggs and milk'. I then connected lactation consultant Sallé with a friend who is a female

¹ "Rebecca Winer," <https://katz.sas.upenn.edu/who-we-are/rebecca-winer>

² RELMIN, <http://telma.irht.cnrs.fr/outils/relmin/index/>

³ Winer, Rebecca, '[Conscripting the breast: lactation, slavery and salvation in the realms of Aragon and kingdom of Majorca, c. 1250–1300](#)', *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 34, issue 2, June 2008, pp.164-184.

⁴For this text see <https://www.sefaria.org/Yevamot.42b.1?lang=bi> Sefaria is an open-access site for foundational Jewish texts.

⁵ Baumgarten, Elisheva, *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 149.

Orthodox rabbi actively working with Jewish women on such issues in Israel and an endowed chair of Jewish History, Literature and Law at Yeshivah University who located a European rabbi who wanted to help. The policies Ms. Sallé drafted incorporated all our ideas and supported lactating mothers getting the information to make the feeding decisions they and their children needed. It was a formative moment for me, as well as a realisation of my hope that research into the breastfeeding of medieval Jewish women could dovetail with my feminist aspiration to support parents today.

When the University of Birmingham PhD students, Cannon Fairbairn, Department of Classics, Ancient History, and Archaeology, and Agni Agathi Papamichael, Department of History, with a focus on Byzantium and medieval Scandinavia, asked me to attend and participate in the year-long seminar series and workshop, *From the Breast: Interpretations and Representations of Breastfeeding and Infant Feeding in Pre-Modern Cultures*, I was delighted but I did not realise this would develop into another such moment. I did not appreciate the potential activist energy *From the Breast* might generate. My initial concern had only been to further these graduate students' development. *From the Breast* has constituted an insightful and ambitious new chapter in contemporary feminist history of the study of pre-modern breastfeeding and wet nursing that transcended the academic and is contributing to building bridges with those striving to improve the lives of lactating mothers in the UK and beyond.

Made possible through the vision of the organisers and the post-pandemic academic culture where an international workshop was ready to commit to regularly convening over Zoom, the group's pre-modern focus allowed for comparisons, fostered connections and exchanges which deepened the members' research, and supported health professionals seeking to address an urgent call for breastfeeding knowledge in the UK, where more support for lactating mothers is sorely needed.

At the same time, I have been at work on a monograph entitled *Sweet Milk? Wet Nurses, Mothers, and the Medieval Jews and Christians of Catalonia and Beyond* and had read the newspaper headlines in 2022 concerning baby formula shortages in the United States

with a discouraged realisation that without better education and support for lactation for American women many who want to breastfeed, pragmatically, could not make that choice. I am very grateful to Cannon, Agni, and co-organiser Ambika Raja, University of Warwick, Department of Languages and Literature, for all the work they did in proposing, organising, and chairing the sessions, particularly in the final workshop, on 12 May 2023, an indispensable platform for new and creative dialogue across disciplines, time periods, and regions. In the panel I was part of, 'Relationships between Communities and Breastfeeding', I was introduced to the work of physician Amy Thompson, of the Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust, aiming to foster better General Practitioner-Patient relationships for mothers breastfeeding their children beyond the first year, and to photographer Lisa Creagh's *Holding Time* project, whose affecting images of nursing mothers and their children have a similar goal. At the beginning of the day, we went into break-out groups to discuss objects proposed by the participants, and I saw my first colostrum syringe. This medical instrument is widely used in UK hospitals; and I later learned from my English friends and relations that they do not feel happy about it. After the birth of our first child, my husband and I were so anxious that he was not getting enough of the precious colostrum as I was recovering from my 54-hour labour and C-section in a hospital in Pennsylvania, without the added anxieties of the colostrum syringe. Just looking at its image filled me with concern about how post-parturient English women may be experiencing it.

In terms of its academic contribution, *From the Breast* innovated throughout the year in the presenters' interdisciplinary approaches to the subject matter. The group followed in the footsteps of Jutta Gisela Sperling, who organized and edited *Medieval and Renaissance Lactations: Images, Rhetorics, Practices* , ed. Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Women and Gender in the Early Modern World* ; Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited 2013. As Elizabeth Keohane-Burbridge explained in her review, '[this] work provides a much more comprehensive picture of non-maternal lactation in medieval and early modern European and Islamic societies than available heretofore',⁶ as did *From the Breast* . In terms of its

⁶ Keohane-Burbridge, Elizabeth, review of *Medieval and Renaissance Lactations: Images, Rhetorics, Practices* , ed. Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Women and Gender in the Early Modern World* ; Farnham: Ashgate

efforts to connect to other feminists striving to improve the experience of maternal feeding and care everywhere, *From the Breast* represented an English version of a trend that I am seeing in Europe and which I hope to see elsewhere more frequently in future. I first encountered these initiatives in Switzerland in 2013 with 'Des Nourrices aux Banques de Lait', a Université de Genève research group under the direction of Yasmina Foehr-Janssens.⁷ Perhaps the best integrated of the efforts so far, however, is the *Mother Breast Project*, led by Stavroula Constantinou and Aspasia Skouroumouni, of the University of Cyprus,⁸ with whom I presented at the International Medieval Congress at Leeds 2021 and whose 5-7 November 2021 conference 'Lactating Breasts: Motherhood and Breastfeeding in Antiquity and Byzantium' at the University of Cyprus produced a pathbreaking collection of essays, *Breastfeeding and Mothering in Antiquity and Early Byzantium*, published by Routledge with open access.⁹ The *Mother Breast Project* began with research into motherhood and breastfeeding in the Hellenistic and early Byzantine cultures (323 BCE-650 CE) and grew to include participation by the Paediatric Society of Cyprus and the Cyprus Breastfeeding Association 'Gift for Life'.

There are additional contemporaneous academic-activist efforts afoot. This past summer Hannah Skoda convened a research group to explore the implications of breast-feeding in the global medieval and early modern periods at St. John's College, Oxford. These scholars are drafting an edited volume and a public-facing statement using pre-Enlightenment Atlantic World and global experiences of lactation as springboards to support the choice of mothers to breastfeed as they wish and as long as they see fit. An established authority in the history of infant-feeding in the United States during the last

Publishing Limited 2013. *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (46) 2015: pp. 262-265.

⁷ One publication of the group is Foehr-Janssens, Yasmina *et al.*, 'Lactation in History. Pour une histoire de l'allaitement maternel: Pratiques, représentations, politiques de l' Antiquité à nos jours' In: *Premiers cris, premières nourritures* [online]. Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 2019 (generated 19 February 2024). Available on the Internet: <<http://books.openedition.org/pup/34628>>. ISBN: 979-10-365-6972-2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pup.34628>.

⁸ Centre for Medieval Arts & Rituals, <https://www.ucy.ac.cy/motherbreast/the-programme/>

⁹ Constantinou and Skouroumouni-Stavrinou, 2023. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003265658/breastfeeding-mothering-antiquity-early-byzantium-stavroula-constantinou-aspasia-skouroumouni-stavrinou?_gl=1*1tsjd1k*_ga*MTY1NDAzNDMzMj4xNjk1NDYyMjEw*_ga_0HYE8YG0M6*MTY5ODMwMjYzMi42LjAuMTY5ODMwMjYzNC4wLjAuMA.

150 years, Jacqueline H. Wolf, Professor Emeritus of Social Medicine at Ohio University, recently reminded me that this was in essence a goal of American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement on breastfeeding, issued in 1997, in its recommendation that 'breastfeeding continue for at least 12 months, and thereafter for as long as mutually desired' by mother and baby. These guidelines were sadly widely misunderstood as meaning that breastfeeding for one year was the maximum goal.¹⁰

When I was 12 years old, my mother was breast-feeding my one-year-old brother, and I learnt about infant mortality from formula mixed with water from sources that infants could not tolerate. I stopped eating all Nestlé products, since some of it was manufactured by that global conglomerate. This was my first activist effort. I felt it as a sacrifice, but it did not make any kind of dent in the armour of an international problem. Right now, we have an opportunity to support activists by helping more people understand that historically women have faced many challenges to breastfeeding, as well as had a panoply of options in terms of age at weaning and sharing of breastmilk, and that therefore today parents should feel able to choose what seems right for themselves and their children, including breast-feeding them for several years, without feeling like they are bizarre or alone.

Judith M. Bennett has been expressing her concerns for decades 'about an eroding relationship between 'feminism and history'', and in feminists' knowledge of premodern history.¹¹ *From the Breast* has helped roll back that tide as a vital new voice in the emerging chorus I have described here; and its organisers have not even yet finished their doctorates! I cannot wait to see what they accomplish next.

¹⁰ American Academy of Pediatrics Work Group on Breastfeeding, 'Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk', *Pediatrics* (100:6) 1997, pp. 1037. I thank Professor Wolf for this reference.

¹¹ See Bennett, Judith M., *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenges of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 2.

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