



Aesthetics of Sorrow: The Wailing Culture of Yemenite Jewish Women (Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology)

Tova Gamliel

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The term "wailing culture" includes an array of women's behaviors and beliefs following the death of a member of their ethnic group and is typical of Jewish life in Yemeni culture. Central to the practice is wailing itself—a special artistic genre that combines speech with sobbing into moving lyrical poetry that explores the meaning of death and loss. In *Aesthetics of Sorrow: The Wailing Culture of Yemenite Jewish Women*, Tova Gamliel decodes the cultural and psychological meanings of this practice in an ethnography based on her anthropological research among Yemenite Jewish communities in Israel in 2001-2003.

Based on participant-observation in homes of the bereaved and on twenty-four in-depth interviews with wailing women and men, Gamliel illuminates wailing culture level by level: by the circles in which the activity takes place; the special areas of endeavor that belong to women; and the broad social, historical, and religious context that surrounds these inner circles. She discusses the main themes that define the wailing culture (including the historical origins of women's wailing generally and of Yemenite Jewish wailing in particular), the traits of wailing as an artistic genre, and the wailer as a symbolic type. She also explores the role of wailing in death rituals, as a therapeutic expertise endowed with unique affective mechanisms, as an erotic performance, as a livelihood, and as an indicator of the Jewish exile. In the end, she considers wailing at the intersection of tradition and modernity and examines the study of wailing as a genuine methodological challenge.

Gamliel brings a sensitive eye to the vanishing practice of wailing, which has been largely unexamined by scholars and may be unfamiliar to many outside of the Middle East. Her interdisciplinary perspective and her focus on a uniquely female immigrant cultural practice will make this study fascinating reading for scholars of anthropology, gender, folklore, psychology, performance, philosophy, and sociology.

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