

 **MASSEKHET**  
say to wisdom, thou art my sister  
In Memory of Esther Aumann z"l

*Women of the Jewish World*

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The Fanya Gottesfeld Heller Center for the Study of Women in  
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# MASSEKHET

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**Ramat-Gan**

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*Massekhet* is a periodical established in *Matan, Women's Institute for Torah Studies*, in memory of Esther Aumann, one of its first students. Esther, who devoted her life to her home and to raising her family, began attending *Matan* at the age of sixty-two and for the first time in her life delved into the depths of Bible, Talmud and Jewish-thought studies. Six years later she passed away of cancer. The story of her life epitomizes the revolution undergone by women's Torah studies in the last generation.



*The Fanya Gottesfeld Heller Center for the Study of Women in Judaism  
Bar-Ilan University*

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## Marriage and Childbirth in Exegeses of Chazal on Miriam the Prophetess

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*Bracha Elitzur*

An examination of the *drashot* (exegeses) of Chazal that relate to Miriam the Prophetess reveals a unique common denominator ascribing to her the role of encouraging childbirth and fighting asceticism. Examples of this include the midrash that identifies Miriam with the Hebrew midwives, the *drashot* listing the seven prophetesses and attributing to Miriam a prophecy she proclaimed before her mother, 'My mother is destined to give birth to a son who will redeem Israel'; the *drasha* describing Miriam as decrying her parents' conduct 'Yours (your deeds) is harsher than Pharaoh's' and leading them to publicly remarry, and naturally, the different *drashot* explaining the reason behind Miriam's complaint about 'The Cushite woman he (Moses) took' in which Miriam protests Moses's withdrawal from Zipporah and his abstention from sexual relations.

The aspect common to all the *drashot* is an unfamiliar phenomenon in rabbinic literature as it relates to an element of personality that lacks substantive textual support, leading us to search for their underlying common thread. This essay will propose three factors that led to this unique design: The social factor, which explains the choice to limit Miriam's scope of action in issues related to family management as stemming from a social perception of women's purpose and the nature of their desired conduct; The family factor, according to which these *drashot* combine with other broad traditions that encourage fulfillment of the commandment to be fruitful and multiply and evolved against the background of a decline in childbirth; And religious factor, that seeks to characterize the *drashot* as debating one of the central points of dispute between Jews and Christians – the relation to the body and the act of marriage. Jesus, Paul, the church father, Ephrem the Syrian and others, encourage a life of asceticism and even declare

it a prerequisite for attaining closeness to God. It would seem that Miriam's battle for the continued existence of married life, and primarily that of Moses, is part of a polemic with this Christian outlook.

Nevertheless, the question remains as to why Chazal attributed these polemic *drashot* specifically to Miriam the Prophetess rather than to other biblical figures to whom the text refers as having been active in this field, such as Hannah who struggles to be delivered from infertility, Leah who overcomes her affront and buys her sister's night in their husband's bed in exchange for mandrakes, and others. This essay will propose that the *drashot* about Miriam are in fact a counter-claim to the Christian exegeses which describe the history and attributes of the Virgin Mary.

## **Women in Targum Jonathan of the Prophets**

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### *Miriam (Laor) Kahana*

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Targum's perspectives on a range of aspects regarding women and their place in society. Targum Jonathan's attitude towards women can be clearly discerned in its diversions from the literal translation, most prominently when these are combined and form consistent trends in translating different verses. These trends can be identified in three areas:

- A. Women as spiritual leaders: The Targum emphasizes the value of biblical leaders, views biblical poetry as prophecy and identifies Torah study as a central value and as the role of the leadership. From the Targum's perspective, these messages are more central than the need for separation between men and women, an approach that can be identified in its attribution of wealth to Deborah the judge, the emphasis accorded to the prophecies of Deborah and Channah, and by adding that Hulda, Yael, Deborah, Miriam and other women of their period



engaged in Torah. Even when the Targum suggests gender separation, e.g. Miriam teaching the women, or when women teaching the congregation is perceived as evidence of weakness, it does not rule out the reality of women teachers. The Targum's attitude thereby differs from that of other approaches in rabbinical literature and the overwhelming majority of these interpretations have no parallel in rabbinic literature. Conveying a message that praises women's occupation with Torah is consistent with the Targum's objective of making the words of the Torah more accessible to the general synagogue congregation, including the women.

- B. Female Attributes: Targum Jonathan adds clarifications to the verses based on his perception of female attributes. According to the Targum, a person sitting at home is a woman. Women are characterized by weakness and are unsuited for war; virgins are typified by gentleness and beauty that may lead to sin. These are indicative of the manner in which women were viewed by the author of the Targum and by his contemporaries.
- C. Spousal Relations: With regard to all aspects of laws pertaining to personal status, the targum is committed to rabbinic halakha. In instances when it seems that a verse adopts a principled stance that contradicts halakha, the Targum takes care to reconcile it with the words of the prophecy, even at the cost of distorting its message, regardless of whether it is sympathetic or severe towards women.

Regarding the mentions of adultery and prostitution when described as an historical fact – in contrast to attitude vis-à-vis statements that are perceived as absolute truths, when the Targum understands the Bible to be describing a sin or a diversion from the norm that actually occurred in reality, he usually translates without introducing changes. The central motivation for any changes he does make is interpretative, and in order to make sense of the text, both with regard to the content itself and to its feasibility in reality, and they do not testify to a difference in standard between the Bible and the translation. Most of the changes in Targum Jonathan regarding adultery and prostitution do not concern the historical descriptions rather, the fact that sexual permissiveness was understood as a metaphor for the Jewish People's unfaithfulness to

God. The consistent refraining from literal translation of prostitution in allegorical prophecies is significant when compared to the literal translation of most of the prophecies describing historical reality and would also seem to testify to an interpretative approach more than a moral or halakhic tendency. Nevertheless, the translated text reflects a more positive attitude towards women, the avoidance of images of the prostitute and the adulteress reducing the reference to women as guilty of unfaithfulness and seduction and tipping the scales towards the Jewish People's collective guilt for religious and social sins.

As to his attitude towards gentile women, the Targum finds a fundamental connection between intermarriage with them and idol worship, one that is also indicative of the Targum's attitude to the woman's influence on the family unit. The Targum views normative spousal relations as the base for proper religious conduct, with marriage to an unsuitable woman possibly exerting a negative influence that may even lead to idol worship.

### **The Place of Women in the Philosophical Interpretation of 'And prepared for him from his own self an everlasting edifice'**

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*Ofer Elior*

A widespread view in medieval Jewish philosophy opines that a distinction should be made between men and women with regards to human intellect. According to this view, the man is the form, and is required to focus on matters of the spirit and learning in order to attain intellectual perfection and maybe, even, to preserve his intellect. The woman is the matter, intended only to assist in fulfilling humanity's ultimate purpose in this world, but who may – being completely immersed in the world's physical existence – hinder achievement of this objective if not conquered, even enslaved, as a means towards optimal realization of the power to advance the intellect. Alongside those advocates of this distinction,

there were also those who viewed it as a consequence of the biblical story of creation. In their view, the implied meaning of creation 'in God's image' is the instilling of the capacity to learn, and at this textual level, creation was in fact a discriminating act i.e., God distinguished between the nature of men's and women's intellect and the limits of their reason.

The essay examines these perceptions via a study of three philosophical interpretations of one of the Jewish wedding blessings – 'Asher Yatzar' ('who created man in His image'). The interpretations were presented in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by prominent proponents of Maimonidean philosophy: R. Jacob Anatoli, R. Moses ibn Tibbon, and the anonymous author of *Ruah Hen*. The essay demonstrates that when interpreting 'Asher Yatzar', the three used an interpretive key provided by the Rambam in order to understand the first sentence of the blessing. According to this key, they interpreted 'who created man in His image, in the image of His likeness' as constituting the instilment of human intellect. The three scholars also presumed the existence of a connection between the meaning of this sentence and that of the blessing's second sentence '...and prepared for him from his own self an everlasting edifice.' According to this, they concluded that the word 'prepared' refers to God who gave man reason. The Hebrew word 'from his own self' then refers either to God or to what is granted in the first part of the blessing i.e., intellect or knowledge. In interpreting 'an everlasting edifice', they relied on the philosophical interpretation of the first sentence and the words 'prepared' and 'from his own self', as well as on the philosophical idea that via his intellect, man can achieve eternal life.

In their interpretations, Anatoli and ibn Tibbon mentioned the creation of the woman: Anatoli claimed that the creation of the woman sustains mankind and even enables it to realize its purpose i.e. preservation of its intellect. Ibn Tibbon presented an alternative explanation for the philosophical interpretation according to which it was through the creation of the woman that the man was guaranteed the continued existence of mankind.

These interpretations express a choice to adhere somewhat to the traditional interpretation of the blessing that is identified with Rashi, and which understands 'prepared' as the creation of woman. The author of *Ruah Hen* chose a different approach. He adopted the pure philosophical interpretation i.e., that which views 'and prepared' only as alluding to the possibility of preserving the intellect, and that accords the woman absolutely no place in the marriage blessings. Furthermore, this scholar conducted an explicit debate with the advocates of the traditional interpretation.

### **'A Righteous Woman Raises a Righteous Man': Rebecca bat Meir Tiktiner and the Book *Meneket Rivka***

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*Yemima Chovav*

*Meneket Rivka*, a 36-folio ethical treatise for women, was written in Yiddish in Prague at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and is the first book known to be written by a Jewish woman. The author, also identified in other sources, served as a women's sermonizer. Her book reflects a wealth of Torah knowledge and Hebrew proficiency alongside a remarkable ability to develop her own *drashot* (exegeses) in classical rabbinic style, apparently the result of her familiarity with exegesis literature and her own personal experience as a sermonizer (*darshanit*).

The book is aimed at women, mainly married bourgeois-class women, but also includes passages relating to men out of an assumption that the woman is responsible for the man's religious conduct. The structure of the book and its content identify the woman as the mainstay of the household and as the person responsible for its running and the proper relations between all its members.

The book's first chapters instruct the woman on correct conduct, and how to maintain a proper relationship with her husband, her

parents and her in-laws. The fifth chapter deals with educating children, the sixth with relations between a mother and her married son and daughter-in-law, and the final chapter is dedicated to correct conduct with all members of the household. The author's practical common sense, personal sensitivity, and her intimate familiarity with complex intra-family relations are clear throughout.

The book is therefore a historical source of extraordinary importance, as it provides a direct glimpse of the worldview of a Jewish woman at the beginning of the modern era and her views regarding the religious roles of a Jewish woman. The fact that the book was widely distributed in its time may inform us as to the degree that these views were accepted by a wider female audience.

The essay examines the author's views regarding a woman's role in religious life. Her words reflect an internalization of many of the ideas vis-à-vis women in male rabbinic literature. She identifies a woman's central religious role as assisting the man fulfill his religious purpose, i.e. Torah study. She sets the woman's realm of activity as being within the family arena and home setting. She too emphasizes the importance of modesty as a female value. She gives expression to the notion that values a woman by her connection to men studying Torah. She discerns between stereotypical models of a 'good woman' and a 'bad woman'. She gives expression to the class superiority of the man within the home.

Nevertheless, the tone emanating from her words, as a woman writing for women, is supportive, sympathetic and empowering. She makes no generalizing reference to negative '*female*' characteristics; she blurs the accepted distinction between the religious roles of women and men; she relates to her readers as complex figures in which the good outweighs the bad; she advocates a reciprocal and respectful relationship between husband and wife; she enhances the woman's power as the factor stabilizing the home and its religious and spiritual character.

## **'How We became Socialists': The Story of the Jewish Seamstresses in Czarist Russia in the Yiddish Press**

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*Nurit Orchan*

The accelerated industrialization in Czarist Russia instigated by Czar Alexander II led to urbanization and the creation of a broad class-conscious proletariat with a significant proportion of women workers. Many of the women worked in the textile industry, in factories and sweatshops. The essay examines three main genres in which they expressed themselves in the Yiddish press from the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: letters to the press, articles published in socialist newspapers, and stories, most of which were published in *Der Friend*, a Yiddish newspaper devoid of any specific political angle. All describe the harsh working conditions and abject poverty. It is no coincidence that most of the articles and (relatively few) correspondence emphasizing the seamstresses' struggle were published by the socialist press, a convenient platform from which to express their discontent and issue a call for change.

The stories offer an inside view of the sweatshops, the seamstresses' emotional states, and their thoughts and aspirations, adding to the impressions created by the articles and correspondence. At the same time, they enable the reader to discern a marked difference between two prominent Jewish women writers of that period, both of whom describe the reality of the sweatshop: the pessimistic Rachel Broches whose female characters live on the edge of depression where every attempt to alleviate the situation is doomed to failure, and the revolutionary Rachel Feinberg, whose heroines fight for their rightful place in society, and whose struggles – whether successful or not – form the focal point of her stories.

In today's terms, these two authors can be defined as feminist. Rachel Broches' pessimistic descriptions evoke a desire to change the status of women while Rachel Feinberg's story 'How we became Socialists' focuses on the empowerment of the

seamstresses, though its significance extends further, to all forms of oppression. Her optimistic story is infused with faith, faith that we all have the power to fight humiliation and assume responsibility for our lives.

### **Women Creating Music in the Works of Shalom Aleichem**

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*Oren Roman*

This essay discusses the works of the author Shalom Aleichem (Shalom Rabinovich 1859-1916) about music created by Jewish women. Of all his works, Shalom Aleichem dedicated attention to music performed by women in the trilogy of novels *Stempenyu* (1888), *Yossele Solovey* (1889), and *Wandering Stars* (1909-1911), and this short essay therefore focuses mainly on these three stories. In the essay, the author's descriptions are compared to each other and to the historical reality during the period they were written. This enables the reader an insight into the possibilities, prohibitions and dilemmas faced by Jewish women wishing to enjoy, and mainly to create music in Eastern Europe and in some of the countries to which they emigrated from there in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Shalom Aleichem's realistic account of music created by Jewish women accurately describes both existing phenomena and processes of change in the Yiddish-speaking Jewish society of his era. Presenting the traditional prohibitions against women singing or playing a musical instrument, which occasionally went beyond halakhic constraints, the Yiddish writer also included descriptions of women singing that nonetheless existed in traditional society despite the prohibitive injunctions. At the same time, he voiced critical statements vis-à-vis some of the prohibitions he described, his stance being somewhat reflective of the conflicts and moods common at the time.

Shalom Aleichem's work is therefore of value in the study of the cultural and social history of the Jews in Eastern Europe, most

notably from a gender perspective, in certain cases even shedding light on modern-day Jewish culture.

### **Hebrew Kindergarten Teachers: Pioneers in the Field of Hebrew Education in the Diaspora**

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*Zipora Shehory-Rubin*

The opening of Hebrew kindergartens in Russia and Poland signaled the first buds of the new form of education that began to blossom in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The traditional '*Heider*' education began to decline and, in its place, a new educational format of Talmud Torah and modern Jewish schools teaching secular subjects (in the local state language) alongside Jewish and Hebrew studies, took hold.

As part of the general awakening movement, the first Hebrew kindergartens also began opening during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century together with teaching seminaries for Hebrew kindergarten teachers. This development was the fruition of an initiative of two Warsaw teachers – Yehiel Heilperin and Yitzhak Alterman. In 1917, the 'Tarbut' education network also began establishing kindergartens with the aim of spreading the idea of Hebrew nationalism, of the Return to Zion, and of love for the Land of Israel, and to instill in the children a love for the Hebrew language and its literature.

The essay seeks to follow the history of the Hebrew kindergarten teachers in the Diaspora who left home and family, traveling vast distances in order to study at the kindergarten seminaries founded by Heilperin and Alterman to train themselves for kindergarten teaching. Upon completion of their training, they dispersed throughout the Diaspora, opening Hebrew kindergartens, and bringing the Hebrew message to the children of the Diaspora. The essay enables a glimpse of the kindergarten teachers' world, their



family and home town, and of their educational-academic background. It presents their lives against the backdrop of their work in the Hebrew kindergartens in the second and third decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and shines a spotlight on the role they played in the history of preschool education and on their contribution in spreading the Hebrew language.

The study is based on primary sources, memoir literature of the kindergarten teachers themselves found in private and public archives, and on autobiographies and other texts that are being published here for the first time. Interviews with the daughters, sons or granddaughters of several of the teachers shed light on their special character from a personal perspective. Newspapers from the period and secondary sources that document the educational-historical period completed the picture. Analysis of the findings and formulation of the research insights were based on a comparison between the primary sources and education history books.

### **'I would very much like to be a rabbi' – Regina Jonas's Pioneering Attempt to Justify Rabbinic Ordination for Women**

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***Tamar A. Avraham***

In 1930, Regina Jonas, an Orthodox Jewish woman from Berlin whose heart's desire was to become a rabbi, wrote the first comprehensive halakhic treatise to discuss the question as to whether a woman can serve as a rabbi. Jonas concluded that Jewish sources contain no real prohibition of a rabbi's functions being performed by a woman. She contended with negative statements about women's intellectual capacities and the stringent requirements relating to their modesty with the principle of 'changing times': women's social status and level of education have

changed dramatically, and many assertions in rabbinic literature are therefore no longer valid.

Jonas reinforces her claim by referring to isolated examples of learned women already active within the patriarchal society, proving that allowing women access to senior religious roles would not constitute a revolution but rather, merely an extension of the existing situation. Jonas adopts the same approach to justify her most halakhically audacious proposal – to revoke the prohibition against women serving as witnesses and *dayanim* (rabbinic judges). Traditional halakha already recognizes cases in which women can be accepted as witnesses and the prophetess Deborah was acknowledged as a judge.

In summary, the background against which Jonas demands that women be allowed access to rabbinic roles is her sincere and ingrained faith in the original order of creation: the creation of humans as male and female in order that both genders participate in building a better world.

## **Intertextual Aspects in the Holiday Songs of Naomi Shemer**

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### ***Nitsa Dori***

Intertextuality is a term coined by Julia Kristeva to express the idea that a text is never a closed entity and is always created by other texts that are present within it. The intertextual and interdisciplinary interpretation deciphers the connections between the primary text and other texts and elements within the primary text. The objective of the interpretation is to identify the intertextuality concealed within the text and to extract from it its connections to former or parallel texts. Via a study of Naomi Shemer's holiday songs, we will attempt to gain insights regarding the ways they use intertextuality out of a connection to the world of Jewish texts and their meanings.

Naomi Shemer (1930-2004) was a songwriter, composer, writer and translator of poems and her songs have been published in dozens of collections. She won the Israel Prize for Hebrew Song and her career spanned four decades. The world of content that is revealed in the songs discussed in the essay abounds with descriptions of a Jewish way of life and a bond with Jewish history and the evolving Jewish life in the Land of Israel. This phenomenon has special significance when set against the backdrop of the prominent secularism of early Hebrew poetry and song.

The essay seeks to provide an intertextual examination of Naomi Shemer's holiday songs. It exposes the inner layers of these songs out of an understanding of the personal process that Shemer experienced while writing them, drawing on the one hand from Jewish cultural sources and, on the other, on her desire to remain faithful to Israeli culture and engage in an intensive dialogue between the two. Eleven representative songs from Shemer's work were chosen for this purpose.