

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

Women of the Jewish World

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MASSEKHET

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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.

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English Abstracts

“It is Prohibited to Impose Excessive Fear”: Verbal Violence toward Women in the Talmud and in the Mussar Literature

Noga Rubin

This article addresses a literary unit, whose source is in the Talmud, and in its eight post-Talmudic manifestations in Hebrew and Yiddish. The set of stories addresses the prohibition to impose excessive intimidation in the home by those of authority upon their subjects. Other than one Yiddish version, which is included in the well-known collection of stories, *Ma’aseh Buch*, all the other versions appear in prominent Mussar works in the two languages.

The authoritative figure, who imposes excessive fear, varies between the different versions, although in all versions a *woman* is mentioned as the one who suffers as a result of this conduct of excessive imposition. All the authors express empathy toward the suffering women, and they are opposed to all of the abuse done to these women.

As stated, the story appears in numerous versions, and it seems that the reason for its repeated republication is a general societal understanding that was passed down through the generations that this phenomenon of imposing excessive intimidation upon women endures and needs to be uprooted. To our great sorrow, this phenomenon remains with us until this very day.

A Murder in Ferrara

Moti Benmelech

The tension between interior and exterior factors, in the interrelationship between the majority non-Jewish society and the minority Jewish one, is one of the outstanding features of Jewish existence in the Middle Ages. The story of the murder of a Jewish maiden who was romantically involved with a gentile, killed by her brother, that took place in Ferrara in the spring of 1577, which is the focal point of this article, clearly exemplifies this tension, and

of an infiltration of outside values (family honor, struggling with an affront to its honor to the point of carrying out murder in order to protect it) into Jewish society. This severe case is appended to other evidence that is indicative of the centrality of the value of honor, which is typical of Mediterranean cultures, including the Jewish Mediterranean one.

The attempts by Azariah Finzi, father of both the murderer and the murder victim, to justify the murder after the fact by attempting to translate the value of honor, which originates in the majority non-Jewish society, into internal Jewish terminology (from “protecting the honor of the family” to “protecting the integrity of the family lineage”), highlight the opposite extreme, namely the great difficulty that Jewish society has in adopting external societal norms, even when they lack distinct religious significance. And thus, we see the attempt to justify this adoption by “converting” or “translating” these concepts into internal Jewish concepts.

The harsh criticism expressed by the Italian Sages to whom the father turned, both regarding the murder and the attempt to justify it, expose the centrality of Ashkenazic custom in matters of halakhic ruling in Northern Italy. Jewish society in Northern Italy is portrayed as a society which is socially Mediterranean, but halakhically Ashkenazic. An analysis of this critique teaches about the possibility of maintaining common anti-ecstatic approaches in Jewish and Christian-Reform religious leadership during the course of the sixteenth century, and brings us back to our starting point – the tension between adopting values from the surrounding society and a desire to maintain value-based and religious exclusivity.

Dona Gracia – The Jewish Image of the Former “New Christian”

Abraham Gross

Much has been written over the course of the last generation regarding the biography of Dona Gracia Mendes Nasi (1510-1569). Indeed, much has been explored and researched about her, starting with the route of her journey, which lasted for many years, under Christian cover, which led her from Lisbon, via many of the major

European centers, eventually arriving at her final station in the Ottoman Empire. Her developing of world-class business dealings, as well as relationships with the rulers of Christian Europe, alongside family rivalries and clashes, have also been studied at length. And yet, the questions of her inner identity still require further examination and study.

This article suggests a new evaluation of the final stage of Dona Gracia's career, after she openly returned to Judaism in the Ottoman Empire, reflecting back on the earlier period of her life as a "New Christian" in Portugal. In order to put things in proper perspective, the article compares her throughout to the character of a contemporary named Solomon Molkho, who also grew up in Lisbon, fled Portugal and eventually returned to full-fledged Judaism.

In order to properly grasp the process of return from Christianity to Judaism, the article investigates the state of Jewish identity in Lisbon in the second generation following the forced conversion of the Jews of Portugal (in 1497) on the one hand, as well as the process of their acceptance by Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire on the other. This then provides an explanation for Dona Gracia's significant activity following her return to Judaism in an open manner and full lifestyle following her arrival in Turkey.

A major issue that faced the scattered Jews expelled from Spain was the anticipation of redemption. The immediate need to address the crises that followed the expulsion, the massive conversion to Christianity and the establishment of the Iberian Inquisitions jointly led to the development of Messianic hopes. The article analyzes the sensible perception of Dona Gracia, in contrast to the Messianic, apocalyptic perspective of Molkho, which ultimately led him to the stake.

The imposition of sanctions by this Jewish woman upon the port of Ancona of the Papal States, like her pragmatic support of Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel, were strategic novelties put forward by Dona Gracia, which was then picked up by other Jewish leaders only in the nineteenth century, three-hundred years later – can also be explained by the link to the biography of a woman who grew to prominence outside the more limited, rigid Jewish frameworks of the Middle Ages.

Between Stirring Hope and Dumb Despair:

Disorders and disparities in the life and work of Anzia Yeziarska

Carina Alexandrov Pinhas

At the turn of the 20th century, a vibrant Jewish community arrived on the shores of America, most of them settling in New York. The first decades of the century brought millions of immigrants to America from Russia and Eastern Europe, all striving to re-evaluate their national and religious identity; their attitudes to an ancient tradition in the face of the renewing modernity, as well as a bitter past they escaped vis-à-vis an intriguing new future. In 1928, the writer and editor Ezra Korman published an anthology of Jewish-American female authors entitled *Yiddisheh Dikhterins - Antologie*; the interested reader will not find the name of Anzia Yeziarska listed there. Unlike other writers in this legendary anthology, Yeziarska left writing in Yiddish behind and composed her works in English, deliberately and proudly publishing her stories in broken English, the tongue-tied language of immigrants. American literary editors found the authentic writing style fresh and original, praising Yeziarska for her courage and genuineness. The fragments of English phrases, interspersed with typical vernacular Yiddish ones, became Yeziarska's hallmark and led her straight to Hollywood, to the innovative film industry.

The story of Yeziarska's life, as well as her literary creations, were never presented to Israeli readers. Unlike her famous American Jewish colleagues, such as Celia Dropkin or Anna Margolin, her work was never translated into Hebrew. This study offers a rectification; it introduces the Israeli reader to a glimpse into the work of an intriguing and relevant American Jewish writer. Yeziarska's writing serves as an agency for the "voiceless" ones, as she herself declared. The literary trope of misery and hardship, characterizing the immigrants, the unfortunate ones, and the hardships of society, is a leitmotif in Yeziarska's stories. It emphasizes the chasm between the rich and the destitute, young people and their elders, distant family members and their loved ones. Yeziarska's characters are more relevant than ever, presenting vignettes to a reality that, although it took place across the ocean a hundred years ago, reflects universal and humane

truths. This fact makes Anzia Yezierska intriguing to contemporary Israeli readership, and deservedly so.

Diary of a Jewish Nurse on the American Zionist Medical Mission of Hadassah to the Land of Israel, 1918-1920: A Case Study

Zipora Shehory-Rubin

This article exposes one of the rescue operations carried out by the Hadassah organization in the Land of Israel in the years following the First World War. The war left the settlement in the Land devastated: much of the population died from a combination of plagues, diseases and famine. Families were uprooted from their homes, and thousands of orphans and widows were left behind in difficult conditions with tremendous deficiencies. Hadassah sought to provide aid to the settlement and sent a medical mission which included doctors, twenty nurses, staff members and modern medical equipment. One of the nurses was a woman named Rachel Ray-Malin, a 29-year old certified nurse from New York. Malin accompanied the journey by writing a diary in which she documented her impressions and experiences in Yiddish, starting from the departure from New York, via all the intermediate stations in European cities, and up until their arrival in the Land of Israel. But the most critical point is that she described the tremendous work put in by the members of the mission to rehabilitate the health of the settlement. While the diary seemingly tells Malin's own story, a minor story that reveals a portion of the life-story of an individual woman, it reveals more than a personal history. Rather, it is a tale integrated into the general history, as it gives insight into the story of the mission, and contributes to piecing together a fuller picture.

This medical mission was well documented in the medical historiography of the Land of Israel. Yet, the historical research has almost entirely focused on issues related to the medical components, along with the organizational, political and historical implications, setting aside everything relating to the internal worlds

of the medical staff themselves. By way of Malin's story, one can blend in the story of the twenty otherwise-unknown volunteer nurses – their motivations, the difficulties they faced, their efforts, and especially their joint contribution to the establishment of a health and nursing system in the Land of Israel, as well as their joint contribution to bringing the modern nursing profession to the Land of Israel. The diary opens a window into the personal and professional lives of these nurses, thereby enabling the painting of a rich picture, not only of the daily work lives of the nurses, but also facilitating a description of the historical background that led to the establishment of a nursing school in the Land of Israel. This also gives the nurses a platform through which to make their voices heard, to empower them, to tell their professional tale and to give them a place in the historiography of nursing in the Land of Israel.

My goal is thus to shed light “from below” on a medical-Zionistic-pioneering story, to add another unusual perspective, and to provide missing data to the medical-nursing historiography of the period; to shed light on the events that befell the medical mission from the unique perspective of the “simple” people who volunteered to come and help the settlement establish a modern medical system, and thereby to add a unique, different dimension from the known historical description, which described the history “from above”. This was the novelty and contribution of my research.

“Mira the Rose, The Bees were Her Children”: Mira Bernstein,
The Teacher from Vilna

Benny Mer

Die Lererin Mire (Mira the teacher) is one of the best known and most beloved characters in Yiddish Shoah (Holocaust) literature. This can be credited particularly to the Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever, who eternalized her in his various writings, especially in a poem which bears her name, which was “a symbol of Jewish eternity.” In contrast to this, the historical-biographical character of Mira Bernstein (1901-1943), a teacher at the elementary school adjacent to the real gymnasium in Vilna, which she eventually directed, subsequently becoming one of the founders of an

underground educational system in the Vilna Ghetto, is much less known. Her date of birth is generally noted incorrectly, and five different tales have been told regarding her death. This article seeks to fill in those gaps and to depict her historical figure, which stands in contrast to her myth and hagiography. This article also seeks to address questions related to the memory of the Shoah: why is her character primarily familiar as a myth, and why is its popularity limited to those cognizant of Yiddish culture, while remaining obscure in Israeli culture? One answer proposed in the article is that the small-scale world that Mira helped shape and develop, of Yiddish existence in Vilna – “the Jerusalem of Lithuania” – especially the Yiddish educational system – was a parallel world, even one in competition with, that of the Zionist settlement in the Land of Israel.

The article is based on newly discovered archive materials, including citations where Mira was mentioned in research literature and in the press, mainly in Yiddish, and it analyzes texts written by Sutzkever. While Mira is primarily mentioned in the context of the Shoah, the article presents her educational approach and ideology from before the war as well, emphasizing the secular-socialistic Jewish education, with its links to nature and environment, developing in the child a self-confident awareness of his status. Similar to the pedagogic novelty of Janusz Korczak in Warsaw, Mira also applied a child-centered approach. This background information is critical to help understand her activity in the Vilna Ghetto, where she succeeded, along with her friends and colleagues, to establish an educational system that was attentive to the needs of the child, even while his life was in danger.

The First Female members of the Israeli Knesset and their Feminist Agenda

Margalit Shilo

The first Knesset had eleven female Knesset members (MKs). A similar number of female MKs served throughout the first fifty years of the establishment of the State of Israel. A glance at these

first legislators sheds light on the unique contribution of women to the work of legislation in the State of Israel.

This article presents: A) a collective profile of the first female MKs who served in the first Knesset – their immigration to Palestine, their marital status, their education levels, their communal activism and more. B) Analyzes these women's contributions to parliamentary activity. The most prominent of these was Rachel Cohen-Kagan, the sole representative of the women's party WIZO, which presented feminist-interest issues as they related not only to the female gender, but to all weaker segments of the population. In the first Knesset, three laws were passed of special interest to women: the law of marriage age, the law of security service, and the law of equal rights for women. C) Analyzes the positions taken by all of these MKs regarding the role of the woman, her place in the Jewish nation and her status in the State of Israel. The woman was perceived simultaneously as maintaining a family-centered role as well as contributing to communal life.

The article emphasizes the special contribution of the female MKs to fields that were considered feminine and secondary in importance at the time – medicine, social welfare and education – all fields whose actual importance to civilian life is utmost in significance.

Women in Ritual and in Mitzva Observance: Modernity and Conservatism in the Worldview of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef

Anat Feldman

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef was the most significant, revolutionary ideological halakhist of our time. His novel halakhic rulings in many different realms were addressed to the Sephardic population, ranging from the traditional to the ultra-Orthodox segments thereof. His rulings emphasized the unique Sephardic approach to Halakha, often standing in contrast to the halakhic rulings and customs of Ashkenazic rabbis and practices. Yet, little is known of how he related to the status of women.

This article relates to Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's worldview regarding the status of women in religious ritual. It lays out a broad picture of rulings that present the manner in which Rabbi Ovadia Yosef applied Halakha to contemporary women – an educated, independent group, women employed in a variety of professions, who are interested in living a strictly observant religious lifestyle. At the same time, he also needed to deal with men who sought to exclude women from religious ritual.

The moderate approach that Rabbi Ovadia Yosef followed in the application of Halakha, and his accepting approach to modern society, have their sources in major Sephardic rabbis who preceded him, who also needed to face the challenges of modernity in a traditional community. Generally speaking, Sephardic-Mizrahi society, from the middle of the nineteenth century, was more accepting in its approach to integrating modernity and the changes of time together with faith than was its Ashkenazic counterpart. Furthermore, most of Rabbi Yosef's supporters come from the traditional community. As such, he needed to address halakhic issues that characterize religious people who live a modern lifestyle.

The research reveals that Rabbi Yosef's rulings tend to be inclusive of women who were not fully observant of *mitzvot*, with his overarching goal being the establishment of an ultra-Orthodox Sephardic society. At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef remained as a sole lighthouse to enlighten the heavens of Sephardic halakhic rulings and to adapt them to the *zeitgeist*. In the social role that he took upon himself, he stood out in halakhic rulings that were inclusive and that took modernity into account.