

The JPS Guide to Jewish Women, 600 B.C.E---1900 C.E. ¹

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Description: Discussion of this recently published work by one of its editors.

Cheryl Tallan's area of specialty is medieval Jewish women, and she gives presentations on the topic in general, or on specific areas, such as medieval Jewish women doctors, or medieval Jewish women's writings.

HISTORY

When the book, *Written Out of History: Jewish Foremothers*, was first published in 1978 there was very little women's history available, and certainly no Jewish women's history. That book was the first in the field. In

order to collect material for it, Emily Taitz and Sondra Henry had to track down old manuscripts and check out footnotes in published sources to try and find any incidental mention of women.

Today, some twenty-five years later, things are different. Interest in Jewish women's history has increased. Now there are autobiographies of Jewish women, both modern and early modern. There are analyses of women's status and surveys of legal rulings concerning women for many periods and in many geographical areas. Historians, anthropologists, sociologists, literary experts, archeologists, and Talmudic scholars have published articles on Jewish women. Even general books on Jewish history include some information about a few women among hundreds of men.

Consequently, for this book the opposite problem existed. There was so much information that we knew we could never include it all. We had to collect as much material as possible and from it we had to choose what we would include.

SOURCES

We used a variety of sources including archeological, literary, and epistolary. We found women's words and reports about women in early classical writings, in the Genizah, in legal responsa, and in women's own writings. I would like to give a few examples of some of those sources.

For the earliest times, when written matter about women is scarce archeological information was most helpful.

Here is a fragment of an amulet that was believed to protect women in childbirth (late antiquity) (p. 18)

. . . by and/or for Surah, daughter of Sarah: . . . the foetus of Surah, daughter of Sarah, that it should not emerge except in its proper time . . . the four holy angels. . . I have been revealed and have spoke with him that placed the foetus in my belly . . . she should not give birth . . . until her time comes. I invoke you, holy angels and good names.

However, even from very early times, we find mention of women in written historical sources. Here is Flavius Josephus's description of the death of Mariamne, wife of Herod (1st century B.C.E. (p. 34)

From Flavius Josephus

[Mariamne] went to her death with a wholly calm demeanor and without change of color, and so even in her last moments she made her nobility of descent very clear.

Later we used mainly written legal sources, like collections of responsa, to chart the histories of women. Here is part of one responsum.

My brother said to me, "I don't want to make any *riysala* (Arabic for a business contract) for you, but if you want I will accept your merchandise on commission. If you have anything more, give it to me [also] on commission". I did so and I gave him the merchandise and due to my illness I also sold some gold and gave [the money from the sale] to him . . . (Meir ben Barukh, *She' elot u-Teshuvot*, defus Prague, #880. (from *Sefer ha-Dinim*, by R. Yehudah ha-Cohen, mid-11th century, France), (p. 87).

Much information about women in medieval Egypt is found in Genizah documents, Several documents concerning Wuhsha, the broker, have survived. One of these is her will (Wuhsha's will, end 11th century, p. 60).

In her will, Wuhsha left these detailed instructions concerning her son's education:

"The *melammed* (teacher), Rabbi Moses, shall be taken to [my son] and shall teach him the Bible and prayer book to the degree it is appropriate that he should know them. The teacher shall be given a blanket and a sleeping carpet so that he can stay with him. He shall receive from the boy's estate every week five dirhams."

By the high middle ages we find inscriptions on gravestones. The gravestone of Urania of Worms d. 1275, (p.101) reads:

"Urania, the daughter of the chief of the synagogue singers. His prayer for his people rose up to glory. And as to her, she, too, with sweet tunefulness officiated before the women to whom she sang the hymnal portions."

We have found poems by Jewish women as early as the 10th and 11th centuries in Spain. But the literary production by women, both poetry and prose began to flourish in the 16th century.

Here is a part of a poem from the late sixteenth century (p. 157) written in German but found in a Hebrew manuscript.

Love Song

Once I felt enticed
to woo a young man
as I wanted to become a woman.
Then the thought occurred to me
what fun a young woman has
here on earth.

I constantly thought by myself
how I might for once,
and soon, enjoy love
and become a bride
to be wed with a young man
to live together with him in
happiness.

Whenever I go to sleep alone
painful thoughts always come to me
that I have to be alone;
if only I had a young man
with whom I could go to bed
to have a good time with him

Now I want to make it happen
and constantly ponder in my mind
how I should approach it
soon to make a catch
of a young man
who is alert and joyful

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Among the prose sources we find autobiographical writings. Here is a section from *The Memoirs of Glíkl of Hameln* (mid-seventeenth century) (p. 138).

A Bride at Fourteen

Before I was twelve years old I was betrothed and the betrothal lasted two years. My wedding was celebrated at Hameln. My parents, accompanied by a party of twenty people, drove there with me . . .

In the evening we had a great feast. My parents-in-law were good, honest people, and my father-in-law, Reb Joseph, of blessed memory, had few to equal him. At the feast he toasted my mother with a large glass of wine . . .

An early book written by a woman was an ethical work, *Meneket Rivkah*, written by Rivkah bat Meir Tikliner of Poland and Prague at the turn of the 17th century, in Yiddish.

In it she gives the following advice to mothers (p. 149):

. . . Now I will speak about the education of daughters. Our sages said “if a daughter comes first, it is a good sign for sons.” [This is] because she will be able to help the mother in the education of children who come afterward. Thus, every woman should try to educate her daughter to good deeds . . . and don’t think “why does my daughter need to work, since I have enough money.” But no man knows what the day will bring, as our eyes see. . . . [This advice originates in the Talmud: B. *Bava Batra* 141a.]

OVERVIEW

Each chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part of each chapter called the **OVERVIEW** we explain how historical events of that time and place effected Jews in general and Jewish women in particular. This segment of five or six pages does not take the place of a general history of the Jews of that time and place. It is far too cursory and is only meant to give some background to those readers who have no or very little knowledge of Jewish history.

WORLD OF JEWISH WOMEN

The third part of each chapter, **THE WORLD OF JEWISH WOMEN** is divided into six primary topics. These are Economic Activities, Education, Family Life, Legal Status, Public Power, and Religious Participation. The primary topics are subdivided into several secondary topics. Some of these are consistent throughout the chapters and some change due to differing historical circumstances.

BIOGRAPHIES

The middle part of each chapter, **BIOGRAPHIES**, contains short pieces describing women of that time and place. These biography sections are really the heart of the book and can tell us much about the women's lives and the conditions that they lived in. I will spend the remainder of this talk relating the stories of a few of these women.

MIBTAHIAH

Let me tell you first about Mibtahiah (pp. 7-8).

Mibtahiah was a prosperous woman who lived on Elephantine, a small island in the Nile river with a thriving Jewish community. Born in 476 B.C.E. to a well-to-do family that owned property and slaves, the meager facts of her life are contained in eleven papyri, discovered by diggers near Aswan, Egypt. These documents, written in Aramaic, clearly show the amount of property Mibtahiah owned and how it was legally protected . . .

Mibtahiah had two husbands. Her first husband was Jezaniah, the Jew. Several years after he died she married Eshor the Egyptian. For this marriage there is an existing contract called a "document of wifehood," stipulating that either party could initiate divorce, a right that was not common to Jewish women in later periods.

The union of Mibtahiah and Eshor produced two sons, Jedaniah and Mahseiah. When Mibtahiah died in 416 B.C.E. at the age of sixty-four, she left a considerable estate to her sons, including both real and personal property.

As can be seen from Mibtahiah's document of marriage, in Elephantine the wedding contracts gave men and women equal rights to divorce. This is contrary to present-day Jewish law. This tradition for equal rights to divorce was echoed in the Palestinian Talmud and examples of it are found in old *ketubbot*. The formula was the same for both spouses and remained similar from Mibtahiah's time (5th century B.C.E.) to the 12th century C.E. in Egypt and Palestine. The clause invariably reads: "If she hates [her husband] then the silver of hatred should be on her head." In other words, she must return anything given to her or given to her father at the time of the marriage. She also takes back everything she brought

into the marriage “from straw to string” and then she can go away wherever she desires. The husband has exactly the same rights.

What happened to that tradition? With the weakening of those Jewish communities, it disappeared. The Babylonian Talmud became prominent and far overshadowed the Palestinian Talmud, which was hardly studied. But it is important to know that it wasn't always that way and that marriage laws can change and develop over time and under differing conditions.

BAT HA-LEVI

Most Jewish scholars are men and this has been true over the centuries, but there have been a few women whose names (or the names of male relatives) have come down to us. One of these was Bat ha-Levi of 12th century Baghdad (p. 54).

This unnamed woman, referred to in the documents only as *Bat ha-Levi* (daughter of the Levite), was the child of the Gaon of Baghdad, Shmuel ben Ali. Writings about her relate that she lived in Baghdad in the twelfth century and was well educated in Bible and Talmud. Travelers reported that she lectured the students in her father's academy from behind a screen or from an adjoining room, so that the young men would not be distracted from the law by her lovely appearance.

The personal name of this woman who was not only a great scholar but also a great teacher is not known. She is identified through her relationship to her father.

HAVA OF MANOSQUE

Most people think that Jewish women first appeared in the professions in the late nineteenth century. But Jewish women were medical practitioners throughout the medieval period and perhaps even earlier. They were trained by husbands or parents and mainly treated other Jewish women, but occasionally they treated men and sometimes even Christian men as this record of a case treated by Hava of Manosque of 14th century Provence describes (79).

Hava or Hana was a surgeon and part of a prominent medical family. Among the documents of Manosque (Provence), one record reports that a certain Hava (or Hana) intervened to rescue a wounded Christian gentleman by the name of Poncius Porcelli. He had been hit in the most intimate organs of his body and the court wanted to know if Fava (sic) had actually palpated the wound. Luckily, she could answer in the negative because her son Bonafos had assisted her during the treatment. She gave instructions and assigned the necessary medicines, while her son did the actual handling.

Hava was educated as a surgeon. But there were Jewish women who were educated in traditional Jewish subjects. One of these was Fioretta da Modena of 16th c. Italy (111-112).

FIORETTA DA MODENA

Fioretta was a disciplined and dedicated scholar. She was the wife of Shlomo da Modena, and her husband's nephew was Yehudah Arye (Leon) Modena (1571-1648), a famous and controversial rabbi, scribe, lecturer, and historian . . .

Fioretta was an expert in Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, and Zohar. Her grandson, Aaron Berekhiah da Modena (d. 1639) who later became a noted kabbalist, related how, when he was a young boy, his grandmother (“the mother of my mother, the important and wise elder *Marat Fioretta*”) would try and get the best possible teachers for him . . .

Fioretta da Modena was unusual but not unique. There were a sprinkling of women scholars throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period. Beside Fioretta, we know of Bat HaLevi of twelfth-century Baghdad (mentioned earlier), Asenath Barazani Mizrahi (pp. 175-177) of sixteenth-century Kurdistan who ran a yeshivah in Mosul, and Eva Bacharach of early seventeenth-century Prague (p. 134) who taught her grandson Yair Bacharach, “the festival and petitionary prayers and Rashi’s commentary on the five books of Moses, and the whole Bible, and *Targum* and *Apocrypha*.”

But before we end, let’s move from the Old World to the New. Jews began coming to the New World soon after the discovery of the Americas became public knowledge. They first came to countries controlled by Spain and Portugal, many trying to escape the Inquisition, but the Inquisition followed them there. The first record we have of Jews in the New World are those in Mexico (then called New Spain) who were killed by the Inquisition. One such notable family, the de Carvajals (pp. 244-246) lost their women and some of their men to the flames of the Inquisition in 1596 and 1601.

ESTHER BRANDEAU

Canada was the last to receive Jews and they were reluctant at that, especially when they found that the single Jew who tried to enter was a woman. This is the story of Esther Brandeau (p. 244)

The first Jew to appear in Canada, then called New France, was a woman. Her name was Esther Brandeau, and she had traveled by ship from La Rochelle in France disguised as a boy. Under the name of Jacques La Frague, Esther found work on a ship bound for North America. Upon her arrival in Quebec in 1738, “this passenger had attracted considerable attention until the remarkable discovery was made that the comely, spirited you whose manners were so refined was in fact no >Jacques’ but >Esther’ . . .

Efforts to find suitable lodgings for Esther as well as continued attempts to convert her, became an *affaire officielle*, with a continuous stream of letters being sent back and forth across the Atlantic for several years. A final report to the Minister in France informed him that “her conduct has not been wholly bad, but she is so frivolous . . . with regard to the instruction the priest desired to give her [that] I have no other alternative that to send her back.” Esther Brandeau was returned to France at the expense of the French government, and we hear no more about her.

In conclusion, between 600 B.C.E. and 1900 C.E. there were Jewish women who were writers, prayer leaders, mystics, community leaders, and women who practiced all the professions. Many although certainly not all care within the pages of our book. Still more are waiting to be rediscovered, but, at least to some extent, Jewish women have, now, been “written **in**” to history.

Although it is very important to discover more about Jewish women throughout history, it is not only a question of multiplying our knowledge of the lives of specific Jewish

women or groups of Jewish women. Neither would it be sufficient for future historians of women to find additional types of sources or new methods of analyzing those sources. The next advance in Jewish women's history should be the integration of women's biographies and aspects of women's lives into the general narrative of Jewish history. That step would be most welcome and might initiate the golden age of Jewish women's history.

For more information on this book contact Cheryl Tallan, ctallan2001@yahoo.com or the authors' website, www.guidetojewishwomen.com or The Jewish Publication Society, www.jewishpub.org

1 *The JPS Guide to Jewish Women, (600 B.C.E-1900 C.E.)* A JPS Desk Reference. Emily Taitz, Sondra Henry, Cheryl Tallan. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003. ISBN: 0-8276-0752-0