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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ramos-González, A. (2005). Daughters of Tradition: women in Yiddish Culture in the 16th-18th Centuries. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12(2), 213-226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506805051243>

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Daughters of Tradition

Women in Yiddish Culture in the 16th–18th Centuries¹

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on the cultural world of Jewish women in Eastern Europe between the 16th century and the beginning of the 19th century. It reveals the extent to which Yiddish language and literature were a means of gaining knowledge for such women. This is because Yiddish – a Jewish language that developed around 1000 years ago among the Jews living in Ashkenaz – was the language of the people, of ordinary life, of business and social relations, and also of the home and the kitchen. It was the language of female spaces, stigmatized by its ‘humble’ associations with women and uncultivated persons. In turn, Yiddish literature was closely associated with women and a female readership.

KEY WORDS gender ♦ Jewish women ♦ literature ♦ religion ♦ Yiddish

In the middle of the 19th century, having been touched by the ideals of the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) and the Emancipation (recognition of legal equality of the Jews), which opened the doors of the modern, gentile world, the Yiddish² way of life represented by the *shtetlakh*³ of Ashkenazi Europe began to give way to a new Jewish community in Eastern Europe, one in which a *new man* and also a *new woman* were to be born. It was the beginning of the sad end of hundreds of years of Jewish life in villages of Russia, Lithuania, Poland, etc., of many generations of fathers and sons who had kept the tradition alive, in the synagogue, where the men prayed, and in the Jewish schools, where the boys memorized pages of the *Gemara* (one of the two parts of the *Talmud*). And also of many generations of mothers and daughters who, silent and anonymous in the home, had carried the weight of their people on their backs, nourishing Judaism and, with their unwritten prayers, their stories, their songs and their lullabies sung in the language of female spaces, of kitchens, of the sharing among women gathered around the samovar or at the market, contributing to the *mame-loshn* (mama’s language), Yiddish.

Daughters, mothers and grandmothers were heirs and transmitters of their tradition, bearers of their sacred duty, of the commandment of life itself. These Jewish women, who carried a heavy load and yet remained anonymous, hidden in their kitchens, in the private sphere, nurtured an emotional religiosity and safeguarded the purity of the Jewish home, or, in the public sphere, seated in the women's section of the synagogue, listened to the *zogerin*⁴ read the prayers.

When their world disappeared, the voices of the *bobes* (grandmothers) and of the *mames* (mothers), voices that were rarely heard, also faded away. That is why the history of Ashkenazi women can only be partially reconstructed, and only with the help of a rich heritage that lies in the margins of the books 'about' or 'for' women that they had amassed from generation to generation.

At the end of the 18th century, the education of boys in the Ashkenazi world was limited strictly to Jewish matters. From the ages of five to 13, they attended the *kheyder* (private Jewish school) or the *Talmetoyre* (study centre, a public Jewish school, traditionally an elementary school that the poorest children of the community attended at no charge), where they began learning the Hebrew alphabet and were initiated in the study of the Law, the *Toyre* (*Torah*); by reading fragments of Leviticus, they were prepared to recite the prayers and read the sacred books. Later, the intellectually talented children who could afford to devote their lives to study, attended the *yeshive* (rabbinic academy for young men) or the *besmedresh* (study centre for adults), where they acquired the latter stage of their religious education and studied rabbinic literature in the Holy Tongue.

Meanwhile, most girls received no formal education. Some attended the *kheyder* for a couple of years, but the instruction they received was different from that given to boys, and it was normally guided by the teacher's wife: they learned the mechanics of reading and the Hebrew alphabet, which allowed them to read Yiddish. The daughters of well-to-do or erudite families were usually given a somewhat broader education than that given to girls of the lower classes, since some of them knew Hebrew and were familiar with the Jewish sources, especially the Bible and the *Talmud*. But these girls of course were the exception to the rule. In general, the girls who were 'exempt from' or more precisely 'excluded from' studying the *Torah* – which was considered by many to be bad or sinful for women – completed their education with religious readings in their vernacular tongue, Yiddish. Early on, in the 16th century, Yiddish religious literature aimed fundamentally at women began to appear. In many of the prefaces of the Yiddish works, the author dedicated his work to the female readership with a '*basheydlekh, far vayber un meydlekh*' (modestly, for women and girls) (Niger, 1994: 72). Such works were printed using a special typography called *vaybertaytsh*⁵ (of women) and were produced by authors who defined themselves as 'writers' or 'servers

of all pious women' – *diner* or *shreyber ale frumem vayber*. The female readership carried considerable weight in old Yiddish literature. Ashkenazi women were not only great consumers of this production, but also, in a certain way, their preferences had an effect on what was produced and translated into their vernacular tongue.

Girls and women read Yiddish books aloud or had the books read to them. Some texts became indispensable for the hours of rest and were read and reread day after day, either alone or in group reading sessions. Often a single text was read and reread throughout the day and week, as a group activity. This is the case of *Khumesh-Taytsh* (Niger, 1994: 76), an exact translation of the Hebrew Bible into Yiddish that was used for the teaching and reading of the Holy Text to the masses of ignorant or simple Jews (*proste yidn*) who were not versed in the Holy Tongue. Most women had their own *Khumesh* and the introductions to many of these vernacular Bibles emphasized the importance they had for women, since they were a means of acquiring knowledge and allowed girls to learn to read and to begin their moral and religious reflection. Other religious works popular among the female audience were commentated Bibles, especially the *Tsenerene* (Ferrer i Costa, 1999: 43–50).

The *Tsenerene*, which literally means 'go forth and see', in allusion to the Song of Songs 3:11, was written in the 16th century by a travelling preacher named Yankev ben Itzhok Ashkenazy, of Janow. It gracefully narrates the main biblical episodes, interwoven with legends taken from the *Talmud* and other Hebrew sources, and with extracts of important Jewish Cabbalistic works, especially the *Zohar* – the most important work of classical Jewish mysticism – as well as selections of the classical commentaries of biblical texts. Although the book was conceived by its author as a work for both a female and a male audience, the *Tsenerene* soon became a 'women's book', with which women learned and enjoyed themselves; a vehicle for making contact with the Sacred Texts to which they did not have access because they were in Hebrew (Waxman, 1960: 635). Young women read this book in search of inspiration and catharsis (Weissler, 1998: 6), and it was a favourite for holiday and leisure reading. According to Baumgarten, women were 'the favourite readers of Yiddish works: in the Jewish quarters, especially during the pious readings of the Sabbath rest, while the man studied a page of the *Gemara*, the woman studied or read popular Yiddish texts, especially the *Tsenerene*' (Baumgarten, 1987: 16). It therefore comes as no surprise that the *Tsenerene* was popularly called 'the women's *Torah*'. In addition, although the women appearing in the *Tsenerene* were sometimes characterized as sinners and transgressors, the work represents a real 'promotion' of the image of women as the centre of daily life and as an important part of the process of messianic redemption, as a source of knowledge and as the living heart of the Jewish home.

Another very popular work among female readers was the *Brantspiegel* (1596), by Moses Henoch Altshuler Yerushalmi (Weissler, 1998: 38), a book on morality, an ethical guide devoted largely to detailing the duties of wives and mothers, which, just as the *Tsenerene* did, also enhanced the image of the Jewish woman, particularly as the real foundation of the home and family, and as the natural educator of her children (Baumgarten, 1993: 277; Weissler, 1998: 53–5).

In addition to these works, among the others that had multiple editions published up until the 19th century especially for 'the pious lady reader', special mention must be made of *Azhores noshim*, by Dovid Hacoheh (1535), a book of religious laws for women (Baumgarten, 1993: 255); *Seyder mitsves ha-noshim*, by R. Benjamin Aaron ben Abraham Solnik (1577), a compendium of rules of conduct for women, written in verse (Weissler, 1998: 68–9); and, in the same year, *Sheyn froyen bikhl*, on the appropriate behaviour of women, their religious obligations and the proper relationship with their husbands (Niger, 1994: 76). Another work from this era was *Seyfer midos* (1542), rich in parables and legends, which was dedicated to all pious women and in particular to Morada of Ginzburg, whom the author describes as a doctor of medicine (Baumgarten, 1993: 264ff.).

But women did not only read *muser sform* and *minhogim sform* (books on morality and customs): the *pakntregers* (travelling booksellers) who visited the Jewish communities of Ashkenazi Europe also attracted buyers, young girls and housewives, with the praises of the works they peddled, offering a wide variety of small-sized, inexpensive books. Most of them had very few pages and specified neither author nor date. Some of them, such as *Seyfer matsl memoves* – a booklet of just eight pages – contained prayers of supplication, while others were collections of hymns. Others contained historical texts, *agodes* (Talmudic legends) or biblical fragments.

There were also *pakntregers* who sold little books on morality or edifying tales. From the 17th century, women showed great interest in an opusculum called *Dinim veseyder*, which was about the purification of food and how foods should be washed and salted. It was a very useful text for Jewish women in their efforts to comply with dietary purification laws (Baumgarten, 1993: 64, 306).

In addition to translations of the Bible into Yiddish, works addressing ethics and morality, books on customs and practices and the little booklets on a variety of subject matter, most women also owned and read *makhzoyrim* (books of prayers for Holy Days) and books on the legends of Hassidic holy men.⁶ The *Shivkhei ha-Besht*, a collection of legends on the Baal Shem Tov (founder of the movement), was for many years the only collection of Hassidic legends in print. It was only in the last third of the 19th century that books on the *tsaddikim* (spiritual leaders in the Hassidic community) began to proliferate, both in Hebrew and Yiddish, which

many women read avidly. The *Shivkhei ha-Besht*, aimed at all pious women, enjoyed great popularity during the 19th century (Weissler, 1998: xxvi).

Psalms, the holy book most translated into Yiddish between the 16th and 18th centuries, was also among the favourites of Ashkenazi women. Along with *Psalms* were collections of religious hymns used by women during celebrations and Holy Days, such as *Tsemakh letsvi* (Baumgarten, 1993: 90), and bilingual books such as the numerous *siddurim* (books of prayers).

Many works on morality and books of a religious character spread through Eastern Europe from the 16th century. These books constituted an important element in the development of private forms of education for Jewish girls; pious works that instructed and gradually became an instrument that stimulated and encouraged reflection by women, who read not only for entertainment, but also to educate themselves.

Through translations and adaptations of Hebrew works into Yiddish, Jewish women began to cultivate themselves: they received and assimilated religious texts or parts of religious texts that for centuries had been a body of knowledge accessible exclusively to the Jewish man, and with such texts they discovered new worlds. Yiddish literature thus became for Ashkenazi women an indirect route by which to acquire broader knowledge in religious fields and to nourish themselves with sources that helped combat their ignorance. The Yiddish books read by women served as cultural contact between two very different traditions, their own and that of the cultural and religious world of men, of the Hebrew books restricted to men and prohibited and unknown to women.

Also published were Yiddish translations of works of a mystical nature, such as the *Zohar*. From the 17th and 18th centuries, ethical works inspired by the literature and the subjects addressed by the Cabbala began to appear in Yiddish. Works such as *Nakhlas Tsvi* – also known as the ‘Yiddish Zohar’ – or the *Kav ha-yashar* (1709) – the bilingual edition of which became a great favourite among the female readership – were published in various editions, were very popular reading, even among the female public, and served as a bridge to help reveal, sometimes surreptitiously, the mystic texts to the unlearned, among whom women of course were a large part (Weissler, 1998: 56–9). This shows us how Jewish women readers of Ashkenazi Europe were experiencing a broadening in the limits of what they were allowed to know, and were now accessing texts that had previously been reserved for erudites and scholars. Women thus came into contact with Jewish mysticism, opening up new fields of wisdom and reflection, which allowed them to find answers and also discover new questions.

Although in this area of domestic and private education of girls, reading and reflecting on religious works certainly played an important

role, young girls and women, excluded from the study of the *Torah* and the academic education reserved for men, gained instruction and education in a freer way within the walls of their own homes and also enjoyed works whose sole purpose was to entertain. Most were adaptations of Germanic *chansons de geste*, translations of chivalrous romances of the medieval western world or Arthurian legends modified for dissemination among a Jewish readership: the valiant knights were converted to heroes wearing the *taleysim* (prayer shawls) and *tfiln* (small leather cases containing scriptures) – as used by men during prayer – who practised Jewish ceremonies and rites. Among the most famous books of this genre during the 16th to 18th centuries, two in particular must be mentioned. The first, *Dos Bove bukh*, is a chivalrous poem by Elie Bajur Levita that recounts the trials and tribulations of the hero Bove. It reappeared as *Bove mayse* (*The Story of Bove*) at the end of the 18th century, in the form of a book published in instalments, and gained even more popularity among the Jewish masses of Eastern Europe, especially women, although it was later attacked by educated Jews as 'trashy literature' (Niger, 1994: 82). At the beginning of the 20th century, 'Bove' became the derivative 'bobe' and *bobe mayse* came to constitute a 'genre' within Yiddish literature that designated old women's tales, stories for women (Klepfisz, 1994: 35–6). The second, the *Künig Artus hof*, is also a romance, recounting the series of Arthurian legends.

Also enjoying a great deal of success among an audience characterized as *vayber un proste mentshn* ('women and simple people') were works such as *Mayse bukh* (1602), a book of motifs and popular tales with a convoluted moral, which was declared the 'Yiddish *Talmud*' – and consequently the 'women's *Talmud*' – and two *chansons de geste* with abundant biblical and post-biblical material, *Melokhim bukh* and *Shmuel bukh*. The latter was attributed to a woman, Lita of Regensburg, since at the end of a manuscript of it dated 1544, the following note appears: 'This book I wrote with my hand, Liva [Lita] of Regensburg is my name. My dear generin's [patroness's] name is Breindlen, may she use and read it in joy. This I desire' (cited in Zinberg, 1975: 108).

The majority of books known as *galkhes bikher* (transcriptions of Christian works) were attacked in the prefaces of religious works as silly and frivolous, and were stigmatized as profane reading, as books of fables that distracted girls and women and wasted their time (Baumgarten, 1993: 367; Niger, 1994: 78). But beyond any doubt, the translations of the Germanic epic poems also represented for their female readers a new awareness of the non-Jewish world. For this reason (although it was not only women who read and integrated elements of the gentile culture through Yiddish literature, uncultivated men also read these books), works such as *Dietrich von Bern*, *Herzog Ernst*, *Hildesbrandslied*, *Der ghoeenen gluk* and *Ritter von Steiermark* – the most commonly read by Jewish women in Eastern Europe

– were scorned by authors of pious works. They were considered sources of contamination for the population that sustained the Jewish home and transmitted the faith to future generations, namely Jewish mothers and their daughters.

Finally, the reading material preferred by Ashkenazi women up to the 19th century also included works of a variety of genres: animal fables, adaptations of *Yossipon* by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, or of *Decameron*, and certain medical books devoted to subjects related to women, such as *Derekh noshim veyoldos* (Niger, 1994: 78). There was also a Yiddish translation of *Midrash Petirat Mosheh*, which was extremely popular among the women of Poland and Russia and was published in 1693 by the German writer Aaron ben Samuel, at the request of his wife. Another popular work, the *Eyn Yaakov*, was a compendium of non-legal subject matter from the *Talmud* (Seeman and Kobrin, 1999: 73).

In Yiddish literature women found an abundance and variety of subjects with which to enrich their lives. The Ashkenazi woman, excluded from traditional study and texts in the Holy Tongue, has a link with Yiddish literature that brought her closer to Judaism and its traditional sources, but not just as reader. There were also women associated with Yiddish books in other ways: printed works were sometimes dedicated to them, they were authors or translators of the works into the vernacular tongue, or the *generins* or patronesses of this body of literature.

In Krakow in 1586, Moshe Stendel's Yiddish version of the *Psalms* was published by Royzl Fishl (Zinberg, 1975: 242). To the translation, Royzl added an extensive preface of her own, written in verse. It seems that she also published some books she composed herself using the *Shmuel bukh* as a model (Taitz et al., 2003: 136, 152). But most women who worked in the print workshops were the wives or daughters of the printers. This is the case of Czerna, who helped in the printing workshop of her father, Menahem Nahum Meisels, in Krakow; of the sisters Rivke and Rokhl, daughters of Itsjak ben Yehuda Löb Yudels, in Wilmersdorf (Henry and Taitz, 1978: 118); and of Rivke, the daughter of Israel ben Mosheh, who prepared the Yiddish part of a bilingual *Makhzor* (book of prayers for the Jewish Holy Days) that her father published in 1735 (Baumgarten, 1993: 78). Gele, the 12-year-old daughter of an Amsterdam printer, prepared the printing of a book of prayers, to which she added a brief poem as an introduction (Baumgarten, 1993: 83–4), and nine-year-old Ella, the daughter of a printer from Dessau, copied in the lower part of a page from a prayer book a few verses in which she declared that she had participated in the printing of the book (Taitz et al., 2003: 135, 162). Other women's names that appear in connection with the world of Yiddish books and their printing are Gutel Kohen of Prague, Fiola Hirsch of Bavaria (Henry and Taitz, 1978: 118) and the wife of the Polish rabbi Tsvi Hirsch ben Issacar

Berish Rosanes, named Judith, who apparently did printing jobs in Lemberg (Alfassi, 1997).

Studying the works that women read daily or frequently in 16th- to 18th-century Ashkenazi Europe is important not only because it indicates to us what was allowed to them, but also because it informs us about the *power* they had to choose. Similarly significant is the study of the *generins* or patronesses of letters who exercised the right to choose the works they wished to sponsor. Very few references exist regarding these early female promoters of books. One of the names known is a certain Rebecca, who appears in a manuscript of prayers translated into Italian (Zinberg, 1975: 132). Others include Breindlen (mentioned earlier) and Pesl bas reb Yisroel (Niger, 1994: 74). But in any case, the presence of these women and those engaged in printing, together with the large number of works consumed by the female readership, reveal, at the very least, the interest women had in getting to know the world of culture and, more importantly, in participating in it, something also demonstrated by the women who wrote in Yiddish.

In Ashkenazi Europe, there were women who were literate in Yiddish and had also learned Hebrew, women who studied religious works and who had a thorough knowledge of the biblical texts. There existed the figure of the *zogerin*, a woman who, as we have seen, read prayers in the synagogue in their Yiddish translation so that women could understand them, and who also explained passages and rituals (Niger, 1994: 74). One of these *zogerins* was Rivke Tiktiner, who lived at the beginning of the 16th century possibly in Prague or somewhere in Poland. A woman with extraordinary knowledge, she was a well-known preacher noted for her erudition (Zinberg, 1975: 241–2, 285), and, as indicated in the study by Remy in 1916 (cited in Henry and Taitz, 1978: 270) she stood out for her special interest in writing 'for women'. In the introduction to her book *Meyneket Rivke*, which was published in 1609, after her death in 1550, and which saw at least a second edition, in 1618, the printer addresses women, praising the virtues of the writer and calling for the attention of the female audience (Taitz et al., 2003: 146–8, 160). He declares that Tiktiner wrote her book 'in honour of all women' and that *Meyneket Rivke* demonstrates that 'a woman can also compose a work of ethics and offer good interpretations, as well as many a man' (Henry and Taitz, 1978: 94). *Meyneket Rivke*, a collection of moral dictates and passages from the *Talmud* and the *Mishnah*, and which also contains poetry, is the most well-known work by this author, although it is also important to remember that she translated the 11th-century work by Bahya Ibn Paquda, *Khoyves halevoves* (*Duties of the Heart*), which was one of the most widely read books by Ashkenazi women up until the 20th century. She also wrote a hymn, *Simkhes Toyre lid*, which became very well known and was frequently sung in the women's section of the synagogue.

Other well-known *zogerins* were Dolca, Marat Guta (Zinberg, 1975: 23) and Javah Baharah (also known as Javah of Prague), the granddaughter, daughter and mother of great wise men of Israel and who herself was very knowledgeable in biblical and rabbinic literature and who also wrote very significant commentaries on some of the important Jewish texts (Taitz et al., 2003: 134). There is no doubt, however, that the most famous reader of prayers for women in the synagogue was Sarah bas Tovim (17th century), author of *tkhines*.⁷

The *tkhines*, Yiddish prayers of supplication, were initially published in the 16th century as small leaflets, using simple printing methods and on low-quality paper. They used a special variation of Yiddish called *tkhine-loshn* (see note 4) and were aimed especially at women. From the 17th century, there began to appear prayers of this type written by women themselves and in a 'very feminine style' (Niger, 1994: 77), so that Ashkenazi women could recite them and thus enrich their spiritual lives. The *tkhines* came to be a part of the 'domestic religion' (Myerhoff, 1980: 234–5) that women nourished in the private sphere of the home. While men prayed in Hebrew in the synagogue, women recited these *tkhines*, which dealt with such subjects as household duties, sexuality, the relationship with the husband, pregnancies, births, the raising of children (Weissler, 1998: 151–3) and so on. These private prayers by women were said directly to God, a God that they made closer, more domestic and more feminine, a God who, through these *tkhines*, let women speak and who listened to the sound of their lives, to the things they held dear (Weissler, 1998: 177–8), to what spirituality meant to them, that special female spirituality that prompted them to turn to their Creator and thank Him, entreat Him and show Him their lives and the limitations on their existence. The value of the *tkhines* resides not only in the fact that they show the specific realities of Ashkenazi women, but also in that, as pointed out by Judith Plaskow, they are a testimony of the extent to which 'patriarchal boundaries affect women's religious expression even when those forms of expression are woman-made' (Plaskow, 1991: 49).

This is why the *tkhines* are very valuable documents in any effort to reconstruct the lives of the women of Eastern Europe. These prayers of supplication uncover a private world, unknown and strange, or at least different from the Ashkenazi Europe more commonly known to us and in which women seemed not to be protagonists.⁸ Women gave prayers of supplication for their children, their husbands, for household harmony, for a newborn child, for a young woman about to be married, or for someone deceased; some *tkhines* contained different mystical conceptions, Cabbalistic material or even translations of fragments of the *Zohar*. They reveal that the women who composed them were very well versed in Jewish literature and at the same time offer testimony of how, through this production in Yiddish language, women gradually came to have access to certain areas

of knowledge. But perhaps, as the studies of Chava Weissler show, their most important feature is that sometimes these prayers transform the traditional sources in order to reaffirm the power and dignity of women.

The prayers of the Jewish women of Eastern Europe reveal a rereading of the female characters of the *Torah*, recovering especially the biblical matriarchs who serve as examples to strengthen the value of the traditional roles of mother and daughter, and to acknowledge the worth of women as mediators between God and men. By recovering these female characters in their prayers, women give back to themselves the role of protagonist that the sacred texts took away and, like their heirs, they thus gain authority to recognize their own merits and values. On some occasions, the *tkhines* challenge the masculine interpretations of the important texts of the tradition: for example, in these petitions made by women the sin committed by Eve is never described as murder but rather as disobedience to God (Weissler, 1987: 71–2, 117–20, 177–8).

Sarah bas Tovim was an author of these feminine prayers. Born in Podolia, Ukraine, it appears she came from a well-off family, although her old age was spent in poverty, moving from place to place and helping others, which has resulted in her being considered a female complement to the prophet Elijah.⁹ Sarah, the daughter of Mordechai, is perhaps the most well-known Yiddish writer. Her fame was such that many authors signed their works with her name and there were many *tkhines* that appeared under her name,¹⁰ presumably in an attempt to attain the same level of success as *Shloyshe Sheorim* (*Tkhine of the Three Gates*), one of her collections of *tkhines*. The success of these *tkhines* is further testified by the fact that it was reprinted many times, even after Sarah's death. Her prayers were known far beyond the borders of the Ukraine, as proven by the 1838 printing of this collection in Jerusalem (Henry and Taitz, 1978: 183).

In addition to Sarah bas Tovim, there were other women authors of *tkhines* who were well known and admired for their learnedness. Just one example is Leah Horovitz, born in the early 18th century, apparently in Bolekhov, western Ukraine, whose *tkhines* reveal that their author possessed a great deal of knowledge and erudition. She was a student of the *Torah* and the *Talmud*, a rabbinic and Cabbalistic erudite and one of the few women known to have read the *Zohar* in Hebrew. It appears that she engaged in Talmudic conversations with other learned women, and even with erudite men (Taitz et al., 2003: 140–2, 233). Fully aware of the marginalization experienced by Jewish women and of her unusual status as a female erudite, she passionately defended women's 'right' to study and broaden their knowledge (Weissler, 1998: 106–8).

Other, less well-known but similarly talented female authors of *tkhines* include Serel Segal Rapoport, Leah Dreyzl, Mamael and Shifra (Weissler, 1998: 61–3) among others (Niger, 1994: 90).

If the writers of *tkhines* are important because they represent the voice

of Ashkenazi women at the dawn of the modern world, speaking of spirituality, their world and their lives, then from the historical, literary and female perspective equal importance must be granted to Glückel of Hameln – Glikl bas Judah Leib (1646–1724) – (Davis, 1997: 5–62), a wealthy Jewish businesswoman. Born in Hamburg, she attended the *kheyder* as a boy would have and received a religious education that her father completed by furthering her knowledge of different religious and non-religious subjects. Married very young to a German trader, whom she assisted in his commercial activities, and the mother of 14 children, upon her husband's death she had to take responsibility for the family and the business, and she began to write her *Zikhroynes (Memoirs)* (Abrahams, 1962). The importance of these memoirs lies in their religious sensitivity and spirituality, as well as her consciousness of herself as a parent. Glückel's memoirs are a reflection of her life and of 17th-century Jewish society. Moreover, because of the way she constructs her past it can be said that these memoirs are an authentic female *midrash* (a genre of rabbinic literature based on the interpretation of texts) (Reitz, 1999: 63–72) and that she interprets life through the eyes of the Other.

There were other women who wrote in Yiddish and who also translated books. They showed a rare knowledge of the Hebrew language and of Jewish sources and made available to the female readership a variety of works in the vernacular tongue. Most have remained anonymous because only rarely were they cited in the works, although it was common to read in the prologues that they had translated the work 'for the pious women who only understand Yiddish' (Weissler, 1998: 12).

The presence of women writers of old Yiddish literature testifies not only to an interest on the part of Ashkenazi women in culture and letters, but also in some cases to an advanced conception of collectivity and difference. The hymns composed by women for reciting and singing in the synagogue by women; the *tkhines*, those prayers about the world of Ashkenazi women that reflect a different and very feminine spirituality and that represent a space allowing freedom for women, where they can transform the traditional sources using the perspective of their gender to reclaim power and their rightful place in Jewish history; the wish of Rivke Tiktiner and other authors and translators to write for women. All of this can be understood as the expression of a conscious or unconscious feeling of marginalization and a need to nourish a world and a religiosity belonging to women.

NOTES

1. This work has been partially supported by the 'Programa de Incorporación de Doctores del Plan Propio de Investigación' of the University of Granada, Spain.

2. Jewish, relating to Jews, but also connotating the language spoken by a large part of the Jewish population of Central and Eastern Europe for 1000 years. It is a mixture of Germanic dialects from the High German period, a dialect spoken by the Jews of France and Italy with abundant Romance elements and of Hebrew and Aramaic. It is written in Hebrew characters and is read from right to left.
3. The plural of *shtetl*, a small village of Eastern Europe inhabited by Jews. It constituted a sociocultural pattern based on the Judaic character. Life in a *shtetl* revolved around the synagogue, the home and the market. The first *shtetlakh* appear in Poland-Lithuania in the 16th century and they begin their decline at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. For the transcription of Yiddish words, I follow the norms established by the Yiddisher Visnshaftlejer Institute (YIVO).
4. The *zogerin* (*firzogerin* or *zogerkeh*) was a woman educated beyond the normal bounds, who knew Hebrew very well and who was in charge of translating Hebrew prayers recited by men into Yiddish so that less educated women could follow the synagogue service from the women's section (Zinberg, 1975: 23ff., 29, 100).
5. Or the Yiddish of women. Other types of typographic characters used for printing Yiddish books were *Tkhine ksav* (writing for prayers of supplication) or the *Tsenerene ksav* (writing for the *Tsenerene*), of which there were up to 21 different variations. These types of typographic characters clearly demonstrate, as stated by Baumgarten, that many books in the vernacular tongue of the Jews of Eastern Europe were especially oriented towards and aimed at female readers, since, as is discussed later, both the *Tsenerene* (a Yiddish commentated Bible) and the prayers of supplication in this vernacular tongue (the *tkhines*), to which the names of these typographic characters make reference, were a very important part of the life of Ashkenazi women (Baumgarten, 1993: 84).
6. *Hassidism* was a pious movement that arose in the 18th century in Eastern Europe, the followers of which were the *hassidim*, or fair men.
7. Chava Weissler defines *tkhines* as 'supplicatory prayers in Yiddish recited by Jewish women of Central and Eastern Europe' (Weissler, 1998: ix). According to Israel Zinberg, the *tkhines* were probably created by the *zogerkes* for recitation in the women's section of the synagogue (Zinberg, 1975: 251).
8. Thus, for example, in one of the collections of *tkhines* by Sarah bas Tovim there is a prayer about the making of candles in memory of a deceased loved one, a task that women seem to have performed as Yom Kippur (Day of Expiation) was approaching. The composition of the *tkhine* reveals the importance of this task in the world of women, to such a point that the author describes the making of these candles as a *mitsve*, a commandment to women (Weissler, 1998: 40, 126–46).
9. The fame of Sarah bas Tovim was enormous and a legend developed around her. The writer Isaac Leib Perets wrote a story titled *Der Ziveg: oder, Sore bas Tovim*, in which Sarah appears as a fairy godmother. See 'Ha-zivug o Sarah bas Tovim' (Perets, 1968: 65–72).
10. Ayzik Meyer-Dick (1814–93), whose work was frequently read by female readers (Roskies, 1977: 854) was one of the authors who in the 19th century published *tkhines* under the name of Sarah bas Tovim (Zinberg, 1975: 286–9).

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