

INTRODUCTION

- ❖ Women's seals from biblical times indicate that women may have held appointed posts in ancient Israel.
- ❖ Archeological finds dating from the first to the sixth centuries (C.E.) reveal tombstones referring to specific women as heads of synagogues (*archisynagogissa*).
- ❖ Rashi's daughters and granddaughters were sought out by Jewish scholars in the twelfth century for their opinions on specific laws, and Dolce of Worms was a leader of the women in her community.
- ❖ Gracia Mendes Nasi, a woman of power and influence, was referred to as "the very magnificent lady" in the sixteenth century.

Such historical data represent real facts. And yet . . .

- ❖ Philo, a respected Jewish philosopher of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.E. to 50 C.E.), wrote that women are always irrational, weak, and filled with "bestial passions."
- ❖ Beruriah, the scholarly woman mentioned in the Talmud, was portrayed one thousand years later as an adulterer in order to prove that even the best of women are sexually irresponsible and untrustworthy.
- ❖ When Rebecca Tiktiner's scholarly book of advice for women was published early in the seventeenth century, the printer felt it necessary to write: "Who had heard of or seen such a novelty within our time that a woman had, on her own, become a learned person!"

How can we explain this gap between stereotype and reality?

THE SOURCES

For centuries, history was written largely by men. Whether from ignorance or bias, most women's activities and accomplishments were overlooked; women's names, when mentioned at all, were buried in footnotes or old documents.

Recently, there has been a veritable explosion of interest in examining Jewish women's lives. In the last thirty or forty years, scholars and historians have searched out and analyzed literary, documentary, and archeological evidence that challenges the old stereotypes. However, such monographs, biographies, and journal articles are scattered and may be difficult to find.

In this comprehensive guide we have attempted to make both the old and the new data more accessible to interested readers. We have retrieved many of the older sources on Jewish women, organized much of the recent information, and examined and evaluated a variety of opinions. Notes consolidate and cite the sources clearly, and indexes list each woman by name to aid researchers in pursuing any individual woman or topic.

THE FORMAT

The format of the book is both chronological and geographical. We have divided Eastern Jewry from Western Jewry and marked out ancient, medieval, early modern, and Enlightenment periods, beginning in the late sixth century B.C.E. and ending at approximately 1900 C.E.

Each chapter covers a specific period or cultural context within this overall time frame and contains an overview explaining how historical events affected Jews in general and Jewish women in particular. This is followed by a section of biographical entries, in alphabetical order, of some of the women who lived during that time period. A third section, "The World of Jewish Women," is organized by topic, covering women's activities, interests, and issues. The names and subjects highlighted in bold letters (on first mention in each of these three sections) indicate that they have their own entries elsewhere in the book.

Spelling of names, especially when these are transliterated from another alphabet, sometimes varies. In all cases, we have chosen the variant that is used in the most current texts or in *The Encyclopedia Judaica*. When more than one spelling is accepted, a cross index is provided, or the second choice is in parentheses. If no last name is available, names are alphabetized by the first letter of the first name, not by a patronymic. (For example, "Sarah bas Tovim" would be listed under S.) When specific dates are known for any individual, they are included after the name. Sometimes only one date is available. Date of birth is preceded by "b." and date of death by "d." An "a." indicates that the person was active during that time, usually based on the existence of a document. Approximate dates are preceded by "ca." (circa).

CHOOSING THE WOMEN

We chose the women for a variety of reasons. The most obvious choices were the outstanding, well-known women such as rich moneylenders, prosperous and independent commercial traders, or the wives, mothers, and daughters of famous men. Others were chosen because they were unique. Women who assumed public roles, those who became teachers of men or religious mystics, for example, did not fit the traditional model. They serve to illustrate the broadest parameters of the society within which Jewish women might have found a place.

But we have also included a number of other women, chosen because they serve as examples of specific activities, occupations, or lifestyles. A will, a tombstone, a letter or other document may be the only marker that identifies them. While these markers were never intended to make them famous, these women

should not be discounted as actors in history. They were often the backbone of the Jewish community and made important contributions to the family economy.

Of course, it is not possible to include every Jewish woman. For earlier periods, information is scarce or nonexistent. For later centuries, there is too much data to incorporate. Instead, we feature only a sampling of representative women.

CHOOSING THE TOPICS

Whatever their activities or accomplishments, all women in traditional Jewish communities functioned within a world of Jewish law and custom, and their lives can only be understood and appreciated within that framework. For this reason, each chapter's World of Jewish Women offers six basic themes that impacted on Jewish women's lives: **Economic Activities, Education, Family Life, Legal Status, Public Power, and Religious Participation.** Within these broad parameters, changing social values and differing rabbinical opinions are discussed, with sources cited for each.

GUIDELINES

In the course of compiling this book, we have consistently tried to avoid imposing our own contemporary views on other eras and to keep in mind certain general principles:

1. Women, even if they themselves were remarkable, rarely questioned a role that placed them in the home as guardians of their households, serving and subservient to husbands.
2. A challenge to tradition came about only recently, with the beginning of the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century, and it evolved slowly.
3. While laws and practices remained on the books, women, without any overt rebellion, often seem to have gone beyond them, sometimes even forcing a reevaluation of the laws.

GOALS

Our goal here is to offer a guide to the evolving culture of Jewish women throughout history and to help bring their names and their lives into the mainstream. Ultimately, we hope this comprehensive volume will enable today's readers to know our Jewish foremothers, understand their past, and use it as a foundation for the future.