

Pirkei Imahot:

The Jewish Women's Reclamation Project



by Sylvia
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From earliest times, Jewish history is studied with intriguing information about the roles of women in their communities, but often these fascinating nuggets are submerged texts that are not easily available.

One exception is the Book of Genesis. Even the casual reader can discover that in biblical times mothers often named their children. We read in Genesis II, 19 that Adam named the animals and his wife Chava (Genesis III, 20), but Chava named her sons Cain (Gen. IV, 2) and Seth (Gen. IV, 25). Lot's daughter's named their sons Ammon and Moab (Gen. XIX, 37, 38). But the heavy hitters are Jacob's wives, Leah and Rachel, who between them named ten of the twelve tribes (Gen. XXX, 1-24, XXIX 32-35). Leah named Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yehudah, Gad, and Asher; Rachel named Issachar, Zevulun, Dan, Naftali, Joseph and Ben-Oni (Gen. XXXV, 18) whom Jacob renamed Benjamin. Joseph named his sons Menasheh and Efraim (Gen. XLI, 51 - 52).

In fact, by naming Yehudah (which means, "I shall praise the Lord") Leah quite literally named the Jewish people for all time, since the origin of the English word Jew, is the Hebrew Yehudi after the tribe of Yehudah.

In archeological evidence from late antiquity, a number of inscriptions refer to "mother of the synagogue", and women are referred to as *archisynagogai*, a Greek term meaning "head of the synagogue" or a high ranking official. Another term referring to women synagogue officials is *presbyterous*. Such titles appear in evidence from Rome, Smyrna (Turkey), Spain, and Syria, as well as Crete, Greece, Thrace, and Italy. Well into the sixteenth century there are also titles like *paterassa* and *parnessa* (the feminine equivalent of *parnas*). From written sources of the period we learn that these high-ranking women synagogue officers took care of the needs

of poor widows and orphans, sick and dying women, and helped poor brides with their dowries.

In the history of the Hasidic movement certain women were able to attain the status of the *Tzaddik*, the Hasidic leader. These women were called *Tzaddikot* and they had their own following of Hasidim. While the Maid of Ludmir achieved a certain measure of popular fame with the recent Off Broadway musical, there are quite a few others mentioned in Hasidic literature. Notable examples include: Odel, the daughter of the Baal Shem Tov (1700-1766); Fayge, her daughter, the mother of Rav Nahman of Bratzlav (1772-1810); Malke, wife of Rav Shalom of Belz (1779-1845); Marish, daughter of Rav Elimelekh of Litzhensk (1717-1787); Freida, daughter of Rav Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1747-1812), and Hannah Hava, daughter of Rav Mottele Twersky of Chernobyl (1770-1837).

While most of us from Ashkenazic families are not used to seeing the name of the mother and the father on the tombstone, this practice has a venerable tradition. Both the Syrian Jewish and Judeo-Spanish communities inscribe

the name of the deceased's mother on the monument. Sometimes the father's name is also listed, but not always. This custom is also found among Jews of German or Dutch origin.

Although Orthodox Judaism has always opposed anything that even faintly smacks of magic, an exception seems to have been made for amulets (or *kameot*) for the prevention of disease or misfortune. The use and wearing of amulets by Oriental and Hasidic Jews continues to this day. All amulets are always written in the name of the mother, according to a statement by Rashi in the Gemara Shabbos 66.

Finally, it is gratifying to learn that women's creativity in the arts was officially recognized in Italian synagogues of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The following *misheberach* is from the Mahzor, Mantua, 1712-1718, "He who has blessed Sarah, Rachel and Leah, He shall bless every daughter of Israel who makes a mantle or wrapper for the honor of the Torah and who prepares candles for the honor of the Torah." ■

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Photo by Joan Roth

Attentive listeners at the Second International Conference on Feminism & Orthodoxy were offered 41 workshops on topics ranging from Women's Obligation in Daily Prayer to New Religious Leadership Roles for Women.