

The Orthodox Jewish Woman and Ritual

Women and the Cemetery: Historical Notes

By Jennifer Breger

The relationship between Jewish women and the cemetery is historically a complex one. The Bible tells us of public women mourners. *Jeremiah* 9:16-19 speaks of *mikonnenot*, skilled women who composed elegies. The *Mishna* in *Moed Katan* 3: 8-9 describes women who led the public display of grief at funerals, and sang dirges and lamentations. The customs of Jews in Muslim and Oriental lands reflect the public participation of women at funerals. Ashkenazic women traditionally visited the cemetery a great deal. Many *tchinas* were written to be said at the cemetery. The famous book of mourning practices, *Maaneh Lashon* (1615), contains many prayers for women to recite on visits to the cemetery.

The second book of the Personal Guide to Illness, Death, and Mourning called *Sefer Hahayyim* (1703), is directed specifically at women. While Ashkenazic women regularly went to the cemetery to pray, they did not attend funerals at the cemetery. One of the reasons given for this abstention is the fear of intermingling of the sexes on the way back from the cemetery. It has also been suggested that women avoided funerals at cemeteries because of the traditional notion that Eve was responsible for bringing death into the world. Traditionally, women were responsible for preparing the *tachrichim*, the shrouds in which the dead are buried. The custom of *tachrichim* was instituted in the first century so that rich and poor would be buried in the same way. According to the Zohar, the *tachrichim* correspond to the *chalukah d'rabbana* the robe of the sages, woven of a person's mitzvot that he or she fulfilled while alive. The shrouds are traditionally sewn by hand, and are made without tying any knots. Some traditions assert that women sew *tachrichim* as a *tikkun* (rectification) for having brought death into the world. There is a German custom that young women sew their own *tachrichim* either upon marriage as part of their trousseau, or during pregnancy. The custom presumably relates to the fact that many women died in childbirth.

It is clear from prayer books and other sources that women traditionally went to the cemetery throughout the year, in times of sickness, hardship, and particularly during the month of Elul to ask their ancestors and famous *tzadikim* to plead for them. A film dating to pre-war Lemberg shows thousands of women converging upon the grave of the seventeenth century Jewish woman known as the Golden Rose. Sephardic and Oriental women traditionally go to the grave of *tzadikim* to pray for mercy. Perhaps the most famous gravesite which women visit is *Kever Rachel*. One of the most interesting rituals of Ashkenazi women was the ceremony of the laying of wicks. It was a long established custom for women in time of trouble, and especially between *Rosh Chodesh Elul* and *Yom Kippur* to walk around the cemetery, measuring either the whole cemetery or individual graves with candle wicks. As they walked, the women recited *tchinas*, or prayers. The women then made the wicks into candles for use on *Yom Kippur*, in memory of the dead, or in honor of the living. The candles were lit at home and in the synagogue. The custom is first mentioned by Eliezer of Worms in 1197 and enjoyed great longevity we have photographs of this ritual which date to the beginning of the twentieth century.

One of the most beautiful eighteenth century *tchinas* centers around this practice of laying wicks. The second gate in the *tchina* of The Three Gates by Sarah Bas Tovim is written for the making of candles from cemetery wicks. The *tchina* is very complex, showing how women may connect with the righteous ones of the past. Through this ritual the dead gain merit for having supplied the wicks for the synagogue, and in turn become obligated to help the living and act as intercessors during the holy month of *Elul*. The author of this *tchina* pleads not only with those in the cemetery, but with all the *avot* and *imahot* to intercede on her behalf: As we have not forgotten the souls who sleep in their grave we go to entreat them and measure them or this may we be measured for good in the heavenly court, so that our sentence may be with great mercy, not with anger. (Translation courtesy of Chava Weissler). In this way the woman laying the wicks and making the candles views herself as an active partner in bringing the redemption of *Am Yisrael*.