

FROM THE HAZZAN'S DESK

A Woman's Place in Prayer: The Hidden and Suppressed Example of *Tkhines*

As many of you know, Jewish girls were not always educated in Hebrew Schools, Talmud Torahs. Day Schools or Yeshivas. In fact, for the most part, Jewish females being educated in the reading and meaning of the Hebrew language is a 20th and 21st century phenomenon. Centuries ago, both in Eastern and Western Europe, our Jewish female ancestors, did not learn Hebrew as a language of text study. For that matter, neither did many poorer male Jews of the shtetls who were not educated in Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, etc. This was a privileged education reserved for the Hachams (lit. wise males), the smart Yeshiva bochers (boys). The 'common folk', both female and male, spoke the vernacular of their community, i.e. Yiddish. Hebrew was known as *loyshn choydesh*, the holy language. Some of the female community may have been familiar with the prayers from attending synagogue, sitting upstairs or in the back, isolated from direct participation, but their experience of prayer was one of 'by rote' with no understanding of the meaning of the words.

This resonates for many of us today. While some, but not all, of us can read Hebrew, most of us do not know the meaning of the words we are reading or chanting. Fortunately, our prayerbooks provide us with translations in English and many of us rely on those translations to fully engage in the process of prayer. Sadly, however, most of our translations fall short of the true meaning of texts, as their authors often put too much emphasis on 'poeticizing' their English translations, making them awkward and difficult to apprehend, especially in the real-time process of services. For this reason, an understanding of prayerbook Hebrew as a language is something we should all strive for. It can only serve to deepen our experience of prayer, for how can we truly believe words that we cannot understand? Believing words we can understand is challenge enough.

The 16th through 18th centuries witnessed an unusual blossoming of prayers written in Yiddish, the equivalent of English in our times, for the Jewish Ashkenazic communities of Eastern and Western Europe. Women and men both were writing personal prayers in their vernacular, i.e. Yiddish, to express their personal connection to God in a way that was personally meaningful. The advent of printing in the 15th century, as well as the rise of Kabbalistic and Chassidic traditions reflecting a surge of interest in the mystical and spiritual power of Judaism and a yearning for a deeper personal connection with God, created a context of demand for prayers to be shared through mass distribution. This market demand resulted in the publication of a number of collections of prayers in Yiddish known as *Tkhines*. The genre takes its name from the Hebrew root, *L'Hithanen*, to supplicate. *Tkhines*, then, are supplications.

The creation, publication, and use of Tkhines gradually ceased due to various historical transitions seeded in the enlightenment, continuing into the industrial age, including migrations of Jews from villages to cities, the eventual 19th century migrations to the New World, and, of course, assimilation and the subsequent gradual discarding of Yiddish as a Jewish Ashkenzic vernacular. Moreover, we have only learned about these Tkhines since the last few decades because their existence was, at the least, marginalized and at the most, suppressed, for well over a century until female scholars began to unearth this treasure trove. A comprehensive book on the subject of Tkhines that I recommend for a more in depth understanding is by Chava Weissler, Professor of Religion Studies at Lehigh University, where she holds the Philip and Muriel Berman Chair of Jewish Civilization. The book is entitled, *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women*.

Below is an example of a Tkhine, authored by Leah Dreyzl, a woman of distinguished Jewish ancestry. Her grandfather was Hakham Tsevi Ashkenazi (1660-1718), one of the early battlers against underground Sabbatianism, and her husband and sons were intimately connected with early Hassidic circles. Her daughter-in-law transmitted the Tkhine in Leah Dreyzl's name. This Tkhine was to be recited during the penitential season, from the beginning of Elul through Yom Kippur:

Woe is me that I have taken continuous thought for my body, and attributed no importance to my soul. Woe is me that I have sated my body with eating and drinking, and clothed it in bright colors, while taking no thought for my soul, which I have utterly corrupted. Oh, woe is me that I have blemished and deformed my 248 limbs and 365 organs. (Reference to 613 commandments – Cantor Dubrow) Woe is me that even the three mitzvot of hallah, niddah, and candle-lighting have I not properly kept. Woe is me, with what sort of countenance can I approach the holy court in the next world? Woe is me for my sins, that I have not had trust in God, blessed be He, and have relied on a human being: as it is written, “Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you” (Psalms 55:23 – Cantor Dubrow), that means in Yiddish: A person should cast his desire upon God, and He will nourish him. He abandons no one; He has mercy on Israel...

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