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Iris Parush. *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society.* Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2004. xix + 340 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58465-367-7.

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Jewish Women and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe

In this brilliant book, literary scholar Iris Parush has presented a compelling case for the central role of Jewish women in the modernization of Eastern European Jews in the second half of the nineteenth century. A professor of Hebrew literature at Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Beer Sheba, Israel, Parush recognized that it is impossible to understand the impact of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment movement, without investigating who read the books, pamphlets, and journals written by the *Maskilim*, the men who articulated the *Haskalah* ideology. Since the *Maskilim* wrote in Hebrew, and virtually no women could read Hebrew, most scholars assumed that women neither read *Haskalah* literature nor played any role in its diffusion in Eastern European Jewish society. Parush turns this assumption on its head. Although very few Jewish women read Hebrew, they did read popular works in Yiddish that purveyed the *Haskalah* to the masses, in particular to an audience largely composed of female readers. Moreover, Jewish women, far more than men, read literature in Russian, Polish, German, and French, thereby absorbing western culture. As a result, they spread both European culture and the ideology of modernization to their children and by extension to all of traditional Jewish society.

Parush's thesis is extraordinarily insightful. She argues that Jewish women benefited from the fact that traditional Jewish society deemed them religiously inferior to men and excluded them from prayer and study of the holy books, activities that conferred high status on men in general and on rabbinic scholars in particular. Excluded from the formal Jewish educational system, which taught all boys Hebrew language and holy texts but focused on training an intellectual (rabbinic) elite, Jewish women who learned to read had the freedom to read what they pleased. Their very marginality in Jewish religious life, combined with the fact that the traditional elites thought them intellectually weak, and therefore did not worry about the dangers of their reading, provided Jewish women with an unsupervised space in which they could read, come under the influence of modern ideas, and then consciously or unconsciously spread those ideas to their families. Even in extremely devout Jewish homes, it was not unusual for the daughters to read Yiddish popular fiction and also to read literature in Russian, Polish, German, and French, while their brothers were only allowed to study Talmudic texts. Using a wide array of memoirs and fiction as her sources, Parush reveals how these daughters taught modern ideas to their brothers, sons, and daughters, often behind the backs of their husbands and fathers.

In a rich and thick description of Jewish reading practices, Parush reveals the significant difference between the "reading biographies" of men and women in Jewish Eastern Europe. Jewish boys all went to *heder*, the traditional school that taught Hebrew and Bible, but most of them only learned to read Hebrew mechanically; they were able to recite the prayers, but with little ability to comprehend the language and understand a real Hebrew text. Although they studied the first five books of the Bible (the Torah) intensively, they did so in a disjointed way, studying the portion read in the synagogue each week, but usually not completing one section before they moved on to the next. As a result most Jewish boys had no real sense of biblical literature. The more intellectually adept continued their schooling in a *yeshiva* where they studied the Talmud and rabbinic literature, and as a result knew Hebrew and Aramaic, but without a sound grounding in grammar. The *Maskilim* themselves had indeed been *yeshiva* students who had come to question the insular world of Jewish tradition, and they sought recruits for the movement among young men just like themselves.

In their memoirs and other writings, the *Maskilim* described their intellectual journey from the traditional world into secular culture as a difficult initiation rite, filled with doubt, guilt, and conflict, culminating in il-

lumination and transformation. They began by reading "kosher" Hebrew books: works of philosophy and science from the medieval Spanish and Arab Jewish communities, graduating to historical and scientific works of the *Haskalah*. *Belles Lettres* were not so important to them, except to foster a love of the Hebrew language. All of their reading and subsequent writing was in Hebrew, the noble Jewish language, and more importantly, the male Jewish language, knowledge of which was traditionally restricted to men. Of course the Jews of Eastern Europe spoke Yiddish, not Hebrew, but books written in Yiddish played no role in male Jewish intellectual life, at least no role that the *Maskilim*, who were hostile to Yiddish as "jargon," would admit. Moreover, traditional Jewish society regarded Yiddish as female, part of the domestic domain of women. Reading and writing in Yiddish, the *Maskilim* feared, would somehow hurt their masculinity.

Women, on the other hand, had been excluded from the male world of Hebrew. When they learned to read–and probably only half of Jewish women in Eastern Europe could read at all–they learned to read Yiddish, the language they spoke, and they learned it at home, in an informal environment, free from the problems that beset *heder* education. Pious Jewish women always had Yiddish-language books they could read, most notably the *Tseina Ur'eina*, the Yiddish paraphrase of the Bible, which included not only Bible stories but also later Jewish legends elaborating those stories, as well as devotional books written for women. In addition, they could read books of fairy tales written specifically for a female reading audience, including Yiddish versions of Sinbad the Sailor, and *Bobe Mayses*, literally Grandmother's Tales, a medieval Yiddish collection of stories. Jewish women read these books for pleasure, and they read them aloud to their children, giving them a taste for stories and stimulating their imaginations.

By the mid-nineteenth century, women could also read novels written specifically for them by some *Maskilim*, who, despite their aversion to Yiddish as "female," realized that they would greatly enlarge their audience–and, more importantly, spread their ideology–if they wrote in Yiddish. Women made the transition from traditional women's literature to modern fiction seamlessly, especially since many of the early novels written for them used the language of women's devotional literature, and they read the new literature with pleasure, free from any sense of guilt. These novels may not have been great literature, but they did contain the *Haskalah* critique of traditional Jewish society, in particular the attack on traditional Jewish education and on arranged marriage, and the *Haskalah* advocacy of marriage for love and the virtues of the European bourgeois patriarchal family. Women who read these romance novels came to espouse modern ideas about men and women and about the need for secular education, and they spread those ideas to their families, just as the *Maskilim* who wrote in Yiddish had hoped.

Some Jewish women also began to read European languages: Russian, Polish, German, and French. Traditional Jewish society fiercely opposed the acquisition of these languages by men, but regarded it a virtue for women, as a practical necessity in a world in which women often served as the breadwinners for their families and needed to converse with non-Jews in the marketplace. Acquisition of foreign languages, therefore, was a skill–or among the rich, an ornament–that would increase a woman's worth on the marriage market. Thus, even in very pious families, especially rich ones, the boys studied Talmud while their sisters read Russian novels, absorbing European culture in the process. Many of the girls who learned Russian or Polish attended secular schools for girls, most often under Jewish auspices, but offering no Jewish religious content. Here they read and memorized great European literature and made it their own. They had developed a taste for great literature, they came under the influence of modern ideas, and they spread both to their families.

By the late-nineteenth century, some women even tried to learn Hebrew, the traditional preserve of Jewish men. Parush insightfully describes the ambivalence of the *Maskilim* toward this issue. On the one hand, they very much wanted to increase their readership. By that time, moreover, the nascent Zionist movement had embraced the Hebrew language as the national language of the Jewish people, and was urging all Jews to learn a modernized Hebrew, including women who could then educate Jewish children for the nation. On the other hand, the *Maskilim* continued to regard Hebrew as a male preserve and jealously guarded it from female intrusion, especially intrusion into the honored cadres of those who could write in that language. Moreover, women were still excluded from traditional Jewish education, so even if they learned the Hebrew language they still did not know the Bible and rabbinic literature, whose idiom was central to Hebrew literature at that time. Hebrew literature itself thus excluded women, becoming in Parush's words, a "spiritual synagogue," in which women could passively sit in the women's section. Despite their significance, then, women did not create Hebrew literature for a very long time.

Iris Parush has made a most compelling case for her thesis that in the struggle for modernization, Jewish women benefited from their own marginality, a marginality that provided them with a space to read and absorb modern ideas, and then to spread those ideas to Jewish society at large. Skillfully using references to women from the memoirs of men (and from the few written by women), she has painted a nuanced and thorough portrait of the major role played by women in the modernization of Jewish society in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century. *Reading Jewish Women* is thus a very satisfying book.

Historians, however, might find a few aspects of the book somewhat problematic. In the first place, Parush treats Eastern Europe as an amorphous whole, without any sense of the very significant differences between the Russian Empire, the Habsburg Monarchy, or Romania. Indeed, while Parush does provide evidence from Galicia, she ignores traditional Jews in Hungary or Romania entirely. Such focus, of course, comes from the fact that Parush is reading the literature of the *Maskilim*, all of whom lived either in the Russian Empire or in Galicia. Still, it is striking how "Eastern Europe" exists as a seamless whole in this book. As a result, the reader gets no sense of what role the state played in the process of modernization, which surely it did, especially in the Habsburg Monarchy which mandated compulsory education in the late-nineteenth century. Thus, in Galicia even the most pious Jews had to obtain at least a rudimentary elementary education in Polish (or Ukrainian, but most chose Polish), and while undoubtedly many very pious Jews subverted the system, others could not. Indeed, attention to the role of the Habsburg state, or the Galician provincial administration, might even strengthen Parush's argument. Religious Jews were probably much more willing to send their daughters to public schools than their sons, thus giving their daughters a leg up in the quest for secular education.

Secondly, historians might appreciate a more careful attention to class differences. After all, it really was only the daughters of the rich who learned to read Russian or Polish. Other Jewish women might speak those languages as a practical matter, but they probably did not learn to read them adequately, at least in the Russian Empire. Parush argues that women's role as breadwinners played a significant role in the acquisition of language skills, which is certainly true, but the daughters of the rich probably did not serve as breadwinners, and they were an important social group that deserves more specific attention. Finally, although it is satisfying that Parush focuses on women in this book, one does wonder what happened to the vast majority of "men who were like women," that is, to men who were not rabbinic scholars, who could not really read Hebrew, and who also probably also read the Yiddish books that their wives left around.

Reading Jewish Women also has some minor, technical problems. Parush should have explained more fully what she meant by "traditional" Jewish society in Eastern Europe. She, or the translator, should also have explained some concepts, in particular the "national revival period," which the readers of the Hebrew original certainly understood, but which are less familiar to an English-reading audience. Nevertheless, these minor problems, and even her lack of attention to geographical borders and the role of the state, do not detract from the singular accomplishments of this book. Parush has written a path-breaking study which literally changes the way we look at the process of Jewish modernization in Eastern Europe.

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