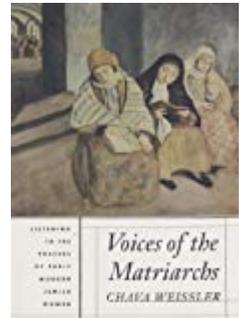


**Chava Weissler.** *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1998. xxvi + 269 pp. \$28.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8070-3616-7.



**Reviewed by** Dianne Ashton

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This thoughtful and important volume amply rewards the patience of those of us who have long awaited its appearance. Weissler offers us both a careful examination of the *tkhines* (supplicatory prayers) written by and for women in Ashkenaz as well as a meticulous feminist analysis of their meaning for women and their place in Jewish culture.

Tracing their origin to the flowering of Hebrew supplicatory prayers after the rise of the Safed revival, Weissler cautions that Ashkenazi *tkhines* lacked much of the imagery and all of the mystical techniques of the Safed-inspired prayers. Few western *tkhines* for/by women had theurgic power, although many believed that God could be moved through prayerful weeping.

It was during the eighteenth century that *tkhines* truly flourished in eastern Europe. *Tkhines* were written for both men and women, in Hebrew and in Yiddish; Yiddish *tkhines* were directed toward "women and men who are like women", i.e., ignorant of Hebrew. According to Weissler, men who wrote Yiddish *tkhines* hoped either to promote female piety in general, to in-

struct women in the religious ideas that they believed corrected women's presumed superstitious beliefs, or to serve those women whom they knew to be seeking a fuller spiritual life.

By comparing the content and rhetoric of *tkhines* written by men with those created by women, Weissler shows us the impact on women of male hegemony and male-defined Ashkenazi culture. For example, men often wrote *tkhines* in which women asked forgiveness for Eve's sin that drew both men and women from Paradise. By contrast, women's *tkhines* often explained to God that had they been there they would not have sinned, thus justifying a petition for an easy childbirth. Both sorts of *tkhines* helped to shape women's identity and piety.

Throughout the book, Weissler explores the special role of the Hebrew matriarchs, who seemed to be slates on which Ashkenazi values for women were written. A few years ago, Weissler's contribution to Ellen Umansky and my *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality*, which noted many such usages, helped to bring this historic use of biblical matriarchs to the at-

tention of contemporary scholars. In many tkhines, matriarchs modeled female virtues, religious piety, and provided the frame, validation, and inspiration for creative midrashim. Often, God forgives the sins of later Jewish women because of the merit of the matriarchs. The figure of Rachel is most dramatic. Tkhines author Leah Horowitz portrays her speaking directly to God on behalf of weeping Israelites being led into exile, asking God to forgive their sins and end their suffering. The tears of the Israelites stir Rachel to respond with a bitter cry of her own, and her tearful plea to the Holy One causes him to respond with redemption (p.123).

Leah Horowitz, (actually named Sarah Rebecca Rachel Leah bat Jacob Yokl Horowitz), the greatest female scholar to write Tkhines, suggested that contemporary women could bring the messianic redemption if they pray with weeping in the synagogue. Weissler fully explores the poignancy of Horowitz's life. An eighteenth-century woman, she was the sister of three rabbis, the daughter and granddaughter of rabbis, and the wife of a rabbi. A talmud scholar in her own right, Leah wrote her *Tkhines of the Matriarchs* in Hebrew. By writing in Hebrew, Horowitz defended her right to be a learned woman, but silenced herself by effectively eliminating any audience her ideas and work might have found. Her introductions in both Yiddish and Aramaic argued the importance of women's attendance at synagogue, but when her tkhines were translated into Yiddish, the introductions were omitted.

Weissler contrasts Horowitz's work exalting women's potential power with that of Sarah Bas Tovim, whose *Tkhines of the Three Gates* petitioned for forgiveness of sins. The sin of talking in synagogue especially disturbed Sarah. She felt punished all her life for this sin, which she had committed in youth. In exploring this work, Weissler uncovered a lapsed women's ritual. Bas Tovim's book included tkhines to be recited while measuring graves with candle wicks and making

the actual candles. These tkhines asked the souls of the male and female Jewish martyrs and those of the patriarchs and matriarchs buried in the cave at Machpelah to "pray for us so that we may have a good year" (p. 139) or, even more, so that we should be forgiven and that exile should end. This desperate plea for an end to exile appeared in many tkhines.

American conditions transformed tkhines. In the early twentieth century, tkhines from the immigrant era pleaded for strength and wisdom to be a model middle-class wife and mother and for self-reliance, according to Weissler (p.155). A tkhine for candle-lighting from that era assumes that God understand that economic demands sometimes require profanation of the sabbath. More recently, tkhines written by women rabbis include prayers to be recited on occasions as traditional as attending a mikveh and as new as contemplating feminist consciousness. Some refer to God as the Divine Feminine or Sacred Mother of the Moon, for a Rosh Hodesh ritual. Weissler notes that valorizing women's biological and maternal lives continue from traditional to modern times in these women's prayers.

Throughout the book, Weissler brings the reader along as she thinks through her argument and assesses her data. In the last chapters she confronts her own dilemma as a feminist scholar working on Judaism from within the tradition. Here she draws out the implications of points she has made earlier, yet her own ambivalence may have stopped her from drawing conclusions we can draw from data she gives us. The tkhines she shows us illustrate the tension in Ashkenaz between women and the realm of the synagogue.

In her earlier chapters, Weissler shows us tkhines asserting that prayer in the synagogue was generally believed to be more powerful than private or domestic prayer, prayerful weeping more powerful than less heartfelt prayer, and that women were believed to be particularly adept at prayerful weeping. She tells us about Horowitz,

who argued that women's prayer in the synagogue was so powerful it could bring the messianic age, and that Horowitz was effectively silenced. She tells us about Sarah Bas Tovim's certainty that she was punished all her life for the sin of talking during the Amidah as a young girl. And she reminds us that women generally knew no Hebrew, making attentiveness in synagogue difficult. Finally, the tkhines illustrate that women's piety was shaped to fit domestic, not public life. By giving us each of these points, Weissler leads us to conclude that Ashkenazi culture actively turned women away from the synagogue.

In this brilliant work, Weissler has laid the foundation of another volume exploring the way Ashkenaz maintained a gendered society founded on piety. The volume provides a foundation that broadens the meaning of recent work by Paula Hyman, Pamela Nadell, Riv-Ellen Prell, and Laura Levitt that explore the religious dilemmas faced by modernizing Jewish women in Europe and America. Yet here, too, Weissler does not shrink from addressing that culture's power to silence women. It shaped the tkhines written by men, by women, and determined which writings would not be published. In order to be Jews, women had to accept the basic values of the system including the central place of Torah study and thus the authority of Torah scholars (p.186). Weissler raises the question that haunts most feminist scholars, the question of loyalty. What does loyalty to Judaism, to scholarship, and to women demand? "Some days I reach the point at which the conflicting loyalties block any response but silence" (p 186). We are grateful that silence did not win this time. Weissler has given us an important addition to Jewish Studies, women's studies, and to feminist thought.

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