

Builders *of the* Jewish Future

Jonathan Fishburn reflects on the death of
women antique book collectors

My wife has noticed that I have no women collectors on my mailing list. 'But, darling,' I suggest, 'women just don't go in for that sort of thing.'

'Rubbish!' she retorts. 'It's just that you don't have anything interesting for them to buy!'

I paused to think. I dug out a pamphlet about women's religious duties, a postcard of a Jewish prostitute in Casablanca, a magazine published in London and a report about a Jewish women's conference in Australia. While contemporary Jewish women's literature has been recognized as a distinct genre, I realized that the antiquarian Jewish book world has failed to create any systematic understanding of the disparate and relatively small number of items reflecting the lives of Jewish women.

This short essay is an initial attempt to classify the range of printed material written by and for Jewish women. I have proposed five categories and given some examples highlighting the type of material available.

Religious Training

There is no shortage of instruction manuals, usually written by men, filled with details of baking challah, salting kosher meat and raising a Jewish family. Titles such as *The Religious Duties of a Jewish Wife*, *A Jewish Woman's Handbook* and *Religious Duties of the Daughters of Israel* are commonplace. The introductory paragraph of the first title is typical of the genre:

Deeply feeling the high importance of the duties incumbent upon Jewish housewives, and having at heart their spiritual welfare, the writer of the following pages has ventured to give, in a concise form, a faithful translation, from authoritative books, of the principal observances binding upon them. He entertains the hope that this short sketch will be the means of recalling those who have hitherto neglected such laws to a sense of the imperative necessity of henceforth observing them.

Recently, there has been a trend for batmitzvah ceremonies for girls. However, they are not a recent invention and various types of ceremonies have taken

place for decades. In 1929, for example, the Office of the Chief Rabbi printed pamphlets for the 'Special Consecration Service for Girls on Completion of The Chief Rabbi's Preparatory Course of Instruction'. In addition to some standard prayers, others were specially written for the occasion:

Be with us, O God of our salvation, in the years to come, as Thou hast been with us in the years that are past. Inspire our hearts with a firm determination to strive after all that is purest and noblest in life. Then shall we realize the dignity and sacred purpose of our womanhood, and hallow Thy Name before the children of men.

We thank Thee, O Lord, with all our heart, for the dear parents Thou hast given us, whose one desire it has been to train us in a knowledge of goodness and virtue, and whose tender watchfulness hath shielded us from evil and sorrow.

Social welfare and communal advocacy

Women's groups such as WIZO, the Council of Jewish Women, and Emunah have played a central role in highlighting the welfare needs of people in the community. One of the best known at the turn of the twentieth century was the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls, Women and Children. Established in 1885, it focused for many years on raising awareness of Jewish girls ensnared in 'White Slavery'. After the First World War, when Jewish involvement in White Slavery diminished, it turned to social casework. Its reports provide a fascinating insight into people's lives and communal concerns. As its 1937 Annual Report explains,

The number of married couples who seek the Association's advice is fairly constant from year to year . . . Many cases are in need of psychiatric treatment. Again and again, when a husband complains of neglected household duties, or his wife's chronic nagging, the woman, when interviewed, will say more or less proudly that she is 'under the nerve hospital' . . .

This year has produced its customary tragic batch of unmarried mothers, whose ages range from fifteen to over

thirty. At the older level is the young woman who obviously feels, though she does not always put it into words, that she has 'very little to lose' for she has not been educated to any sense of social responsibility, and marriage, which, by instinct and environment, she has been led to desire, has seemed only a very remote and diminishing possibility. She has evidently prided herself on 'keeping respectable' until hope declined, and she gave way either to some sudden temptation or, more rarely, to the natural craving to indulge her affection. If such a young woman is asked whether she has ever thought of becoming engaged to be married, she will almost certainly reply 'What was the good? I'm poor, and no boy wants a poor girl.'

In Australia, the 1934 Report of the Third Jewish Women's Conference (whose cover is reproduced on page 24) heard a poignant address by Dr Dora Peysner about the discrimination and increasingly difficult situation faced by German Jews in the early 1930s. A session entitled 'Help to the Jewish Woman Outback' conjures up an image of a Jewish woman wearing a Stetson and wrestling with an errant kangaroo; in reality, however, it offered practical ideas for keeping in contact with families away from the main centres of Jewish life.

The status of Jewish women

In her pamphlet on 'The American Jewess – Builder of the Jewish Future in America', Mrs Jennie H. Miller-Faggen proclaimed the virtues of Jewish women:

Jewish history knows of no Cleopatras and Madame Pompadours who have acquired their place in the history of the world not through spiritual achievements for humanity, but thru their Satanic power and their boundless indecency. WE, on the other hand, in the very DAWN of our history DID have holy matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah), venerable types of Jewish mothers ...

And our young mothers! Where is there to be found a resemblance to the EXCEPTIONAL type of our young mothers, in whose persons beauty and modesty, glory and delicacy, grace and pure naïveté were blended and incarnated ...

The modern Jewish woman must again become the standard-bearer of Judaism as Jewish daughter, Jewish woman, Jewish mother. The modern Jewish woman in America must adjust herself to the great mission which the peculiar economic circumstances of our country and our time have thrust upon her – to be the complete educator of the future Jewish child.

In 1918, Lizzie Hands was more troubled by the status of Jewish women and produced a polemic pamphlet on 'Some Difficulties which beset the Jewess, with special reference to her legal position' (illustrated on page 24), in which she proposes:

to set forth the difficulties which confront the Jewess in the modern world; to indicate the steps which have already been adopted for her relief, and to consider the need for further measures ... to induce Jewish women all the world over, to indicate their wish, that the state of affairs may receive the consideration of a Rabbinic Conference at the close of the war.

Popular culture

While women's organizations produce their own newsletters for their members, there have been few attempts at commercially viable magazines targeted at Jewish women. An early attempt was the Surrey-based *Jewish Woman* (one of whose covers appears on the opposite page). In the letters section of their second edition (May 1967), Mrs Lily Carpus has some very specific suggestions for future editions of the magazine:

do not write too much about Israel or statistics, we want good sensible down-to-earth news and items on everything, including handicapped people, old people and young, how to live alone or as a family and everything about beauty and fashion and recipes which do not call for loads of eggs, but also for a small family, and easy, good, sensible things.

The best writer who is Jewish that I know is [agony aunt] Claire Rayner, she is down to earth and most of your readers are down-to-earth women, who don't go to coffee mornings, except maybe a few and who have children at school.

Ephemera

Postcards are a very popular type of ephemera and there are a couple of well-known ones featuring women. One shows a Jewish prostitute in Casablanca taking the sun, and another, entitled 'The Victim and the Fanatics' (illustrated on page 24), reflects a story about a woman who left her shtet to live with a non-Jewish man. When she returns to the village, she is depicted as backing against a fence as she is attacked by the community.

One of my favourite pieces of ephemera is a small picture of Henrietta Szold. Szold – a founder of Youth Aliyah and a scholar who was allowed entry into the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary on condition that she would not request rabbinic ordination – is immortalized on a chewing-gum wrapper!

'This,' my wife assured me, 'is just the sort of thing a woman would buy.' ☺

Jonathan Fishburn is an antiquarian bookdealer specializing in Judaica (www.fishburnbooks.com). His latest catalogue has 1,000 items relating to Zionism.



JEWISH WOMAN

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**CAN A JEW BE A
SPIRITUALIST?**

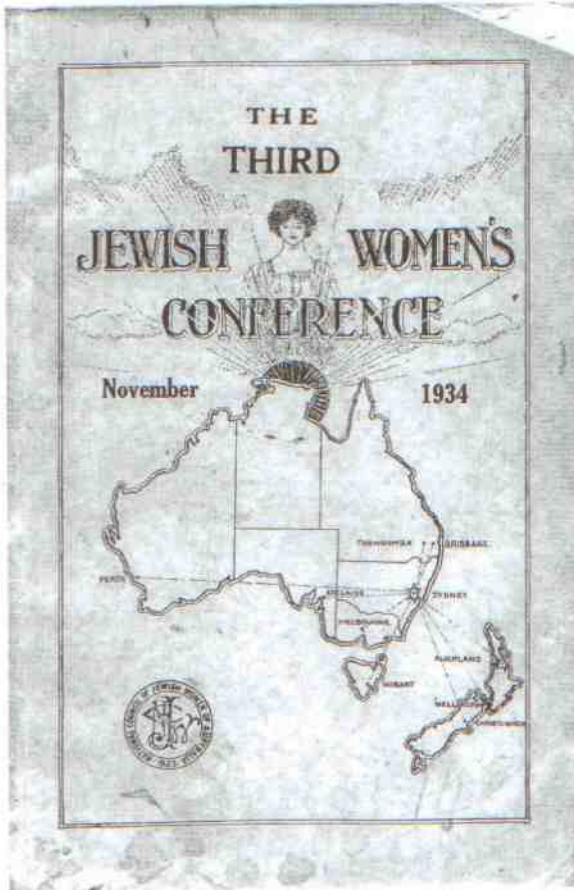
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*Some Difficulties
which beset the Jewess
With Special Reference
to her Legal Position.*

By L. HANDS.