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CHAPTER

Introducing *Tkhines*

The *Seyder Tkhines*,¹ which first appeared in print in Amsterdam in 1648, is a landmark in the history of women. It represents an age of religious, sexual, linguistic, and literary revolution within the Jewish community across Europe, an age when mysticism pervaded mainstream² Judaism. Yet this exceptional episode, along with its literature, has disappeared from the Jewish collective memory. Jews of this period believed themselves to be on the verge of a Messianic redemption that called for spiritual regeneration, heartfelt prayer, and repentance by the entire community, women as well as men. Each catastrophe experienced by the community, and these were many and cataclysmic, was seen as an affirmation of this belief. The urgency to get the community's "house in order" necessitated an unprecedented reform in the religious and cultural participation of women who traditionally had not played an essential role in communal prayer or learning in Orthodox Judaism. A new vernacular prayer literature for, and sometimes by, women was prolifically printed and widely circulated by a dynamic, pan-European Yiddish printing industry. These prayers, and in particular those entitled *tkhines*, are the subject of this book. Jewish women today who are seeking a precedent for women's prayer need look no further.

WOMEN, LITERACY, AND THE LANGUAGE OF PRAYER

Tkhnines are a phenomenon of Ashkenazic Jewry that arose from the ninth century³ in the German-speaking lands in the basins of the Rhine and the Danube. These Jews formed a community that was autonomous from the major Jewish settlements in the Middle East. They had a common culture that differed from the Christian community around them—even their language was different.

Three Jewish languages coexisted within the Ashkenazic community: Yiddish, Hebrew and Aramaic. Each had its own accepted function and status. The only spoken language was Yiddish, the Ashkenazic vernacular. Aramaic, which had been the vernacular in the Middle East from the time of the Babylonian exile in the seventh century B.C., was not spoken in Europe. It was learned only by an elite coterie of scholars for the study of the Talmud, and by yet more elite scholars of the central work of Jewish mysticism—the *Kabbalah*. The Hebrew language, known popularly in Yiddish as *Loshn koydesh* (Sacred tongue), was not spoken in Europe, but was the language of the Torah, Bible, and other sacred texts. Hebrew was also the established language of the Jewish prayer book known as the *Sider* (Modern Hebrew: “Siddur”). Yiddish, known also as *Mame loshn* (Mother tongue), developed from a fusion of Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic brought from the Middle East, which was then combined with what was the most sizeable constituent of Yiddish, medieval urban German dialects, and then, according to some scholars with the Jewish versions of Old French and Old Italian, known as *Laaz*. Jewish mass migrations across Europe, particularly in the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries, due to persecutions generated by the Crusades and the Black Death, were responsible for the gradual spread of Yiddish across territories as far afield as what are now Holland, Germany, parts of Denmark, Alsace and Switzerland in Western Europe, Italy in the Southwest, Hungary and the Czech Republic in Central Europe, and Lithuania, Latvia, Russia, Poland, and Rumania in the East. In all these places, the spoken language in the Jewish family and community was almost invariably Yiddish, and although Jews were often proficient in the local language for reasons of trade and other necessary communication, they could usually read only in the Hebrew alphabet.

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While the Church conveyed its message visually by means of murals, statuary, stained glass, and altarpieces, Jews regarded any depiction of the human form as a “graven image” and did not permit visual art in synagogues. Their religious knowledge came from books, and unlike their Christian neighbors, the Jewish community was highly literate. Girls were taught the Hebrew alphabet, either at elementary school (*kbeyder*) along with boys, or privately at home. For boys from poor families, communities set up non fee-paying elementary schools (*Talmud-Toyre*) in preparation for further education.

Boys were expected to be able to read Hebrew well enough to enable them to use the Hebrew prayer book. Opportunities existed for the most able boys to extend their education beyond the rudimentary level by attending seminaries (*yeshives*) where they were able to study up to rabbinic level. Such advanced education was not extended to women. Although women achieved a basic literacy in the Hebrew alphabet in which both Hebrew and Yiddish are written, they were generally literate only in Yiddish, the vernacular. Men, on the other hand, were encouraged to attain proficiency in Hebrew, the traditional language of prayer and literature. At the time of the heyday of the Yiddish literature presented in this book, Yiddish was spoken and read by millions of Ashkenazim across Europe.

The established language of the Ashkenazic prayer book in the sixteenth century, as with Jewish prayer books in other times and places, was Hebrew. Jewish prayer was male dominated. The attendance of a quorum of ten adult males, a *minyen*, was obligatory for the three daily synagogue services, as it is today. Women are not permitted to participate in the *minyen*. Women are exempt from time-bound and location-bound prayer and are therefore not obliged to attend the synagogue services. They are, however, obliged to pray once a day.⁴

The *Seyder Tkbines* was a new, standard prayer book of daily and occasional prayers for women, which was printed repeatedly between 1648 and about 1720, in various centers across Europe. Unlike the *Sider*, it was composed in Yiddish, the language that women would better be able to read and understand. The *Seyder Tkbines* never attained the status of the *Sider*, and never challenged it, but for more than seventy years it was endowed with the remarkable prestige of being printed, in its entirety, inside many editions of the *Sider*. It offered a liturgy of prayer for women to say once a day as an alternative to, but based upon, the Hebrew liturgy. These prayers, together with

others that were specific to women's needs, had no precedents in the history of Jewish prayer.⁵

The printing and circulation of prescribed vernacular prayers for women, and often authored by women, were not only permitted, but also encouraged. This was revolutionary and unparalleled in all respects. Motivation for this encouragement may have stemmed just as much from a profit motive on the part of Yiddish printers, as from a spiritual one, as women were the predominant readership of Yiddish books. It was repeatedly emphasized in introductions to the Yiddish books of the time that Hebrew prayer was the "higher" form of Jewish prayer.⁶ However, in the following lines from the introduction of the seventeenth-century Yiddish ethical work *Seyfer Lev Tov* (Good heart), its author, Yitskhok ben Elyokum of Posen,⁷ states that it is of little value to say a prayer without understanding it:

A little prayer that one understands and prays [recites] with that little bit of spiritual intensity, is a thousand times better than a prayer that is not understood or that has no spiritual intensity.⁸

In the introduction to the earliest printed Yiddish translation of the Pentateuch,⁹ it is stated that the book is for "women and young women who can after all generally read Yiddish." This suggests not only that women were, for the most part, literate, but that they were usually literate in Yiddish. The author of the preface to the earliest known edition of the *Seyder Tkbines*,¹⁰ refers to "the holy language (Hebrew) which women do not generally understand," indicating that Hebrew was not the language in which women were generally proficient. The introduction to an atypical *tkbine* published in Prague in 1718 contains the information that the work is adapted from Hebrew for women to say in synagogue and states rather charmingly:

As soon as a person enters the synagogue she must immediately bow and say *Ma Toyvu*,¹¹ then bow low, sit down and start to say this *tkbine*, which must be said with deep concentration¹² for I have plucked a rose from the Holy Tongue and made it Yiddish so that all pious women may honor beloved God.

There is evidence to suggest that although some women were able to recite prayers in Hebrew, they still may have chosen to recite them in Yiddish:

And many pious women will particularly wish to say this [prayer] in Hebrew. Therefore, we have also printed it in Hebrew so each may choose to say it as they please.¹³

Yiddish is seen here as the language chosen by women for prayer, not as a necessity for the uneducated. The phrase “also printed it in Hebrew” unexpectedly places Hebrew in a secondary role. The passage implies that Yiddish would be the automatic language for women’s prayer, and that those who wished to do so, could read the prayers in Hebrew. Women are given the choice of language in which to pray; but the vital thing is that they pray.

In 1648, Yiddish was the language selected for the *Seyder Tkbines*, the new standard prayer book that was not a translation, had no precedents, and was tailor made for women with the sanction of the religious authorities. It continued to be printed and reprinted for the next seventy years, until its relevance ceased to exist.

CLASSIFICATION OF TKHINES

An attempt to classify *tkbines* was made by Chava Weissler in her book *Voices of the Matriarchs* (1998). She divided them into those that were printed from 1648 until around the 1720s, which she calls “Western European,” and those that began in the middle decades of the eighteenth century and continued into the nineteenth, which she called “Eastern European.”

To categorize *tkbines* geographically is problematic. Although the earlier *tkbines* were published in Amsterdam and in various towns in Germany, they were also published in Prague, which although further west than some of the later eastern European centers of printing, is indisputably located in Central Europe. Weissler herself includes Prague in both the western and eastern categories, and writes elsewhere:

Prague is in between Western and Eastern Europe and *Seyder Tkbines* by Mattithias Sobotki [1718] has some of the Eastern European as well as of the Western European *tkbines*.¹⁴

Virtually all of the extant religious songs or *lider* that were written by women were published in Prague. One of the authors, Toybe Pan, claimed to be writing her song in a literary style that she called “*tkbine*

losbn" (*tkbine* language). Thus, the majority of early works related to *tkbines* written by women were not published in Western Europe at all. The *Seyder Tkbines* published in Prague was in an identical form to those published in Amsterdam and German towns, and it appears that the genre was firmly enough established in Prague to have had its own recognizable literary language.

Another center of Yiddish printing that cannot be regarded as Western European is Dyhernfurth, near Breslau in Silesia, which, although ruled by the Hapsburgs in the seventeenth century, became part of Poland in 1945. Its Jewish press, established in the 1680s, supplied Yiddish books to both Poland and Germany, including a *Seyder Tkbines* that appeared in 1705 in a joint Polish-German rite *Sider*. Therefore, when it is applied to where texts were printed as well as where they were circulated, the term "Western European" is inaccurate.

A further problem with a division into west and east is that there were no clear-cut geographical boundaries for the Ashkenazic community, and there was a mass migration of Jews across Europe at this time. From 1648, large numbers of Jews fled from the atrocities of the Cossack massacres, led by Bogdan Chmielnicki, and it is estimated that at least 100,000 Jews were murdered in Poland and the Ukraine over a two-year period. Entire Jewish communities were wiped out, and many of the Jews who managed to escape, migrated westward and settled in towns such as Amsterdam and Prague. Among those displaced, were some of the printers and technicians from Jewish printing houses. They took up their trade in their new locations and practiced their skills alongside the resident printers, thus producing a hybrid, mutually influential, trans-European printing industry that provided the best of east and west. The influx of new immigrants necessitated the printing of liturgical and other religious books to replace those left behind. Those who survived the massacres, but remained in the East, also needed to replenish the books that had been destroyed in the turmoil. From its earliest days, the *Seyder Tkbines* appeared within *Sidorim* used for both German and Polish rites.

The earliest known edition of the *Seyder Tkbines*, which was printed in the year the massacres began, testifies to an intermingling of Eastern and Western traditions. For example, a *Seyder Tkbines* was printed in Amsterdam in Western Europe by Yoysef ben Naftali of

Koskowola who, as his name indicates, hailed from Poland in the East. A prayer book entitled *Minbagim: Rites for all seasons in Poland, Ruthenia, Lithuania, Bohemia, Moravia and Germany* by Aisik Tyrnan, which was printed in Amsterdam in 1635, was clearly intended for Jews from all over Europe, both east and west. This is typical, and emphasizes the difficulty of clearly dividing the Western and Eastern European Jewish populations. Another example of this phenomenon can be seen from the life and publications of the seventeenth-century scholar and rabbi Nathan Note Hanover. Born in Volhyni, he lived in Zaslave before he was forced to flee during the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648. He lived in Prague and Amsterdam, and then studied Kabbalah in Venice. He was later rabbi of Jassy in Moldavia and is believed to have died in Venice. His homiletic work on the Feast of Tabernacles, *Ta'ame Sukkah*, was published in Amsterdam in 1652, and his book containing a vivid account of the Chmielnicki massacres, entitled *Yeven Metzulah* (Abyss of despair), was published in Venice in 1653. Another of his books, a Hebrew-German-Italian-Latin dictionary was published in Prague in 1660, and a second edition of the same book, with added French, was published in Amsterdam in 1701. His book of mystical prayers and religious customs, *Sba'arey Tsion* (Gates of Zion), was published in 1662 in Prague. From the life of one man, and the many places his books were published (all for the same intended readership), it is clear that the geographical criteria of Eastern European and Western European does not really apply. During this period, Jews across Europe had more in common with one another than with their Christian neighbors, and the same Yiddish books were being printed during the same time period, in completely different countries.

I have divided my analysis of *tkbines* and related prayers into Phase 1 and Phase 2, which offer historical rather than geographical divisions. Weissler's field of interest is Phase 2; mine is Phase 1. As is clearly reflected in the prayers themselves, Phase 1, when the *Seyder Tkbines* first appeared in print, is a very different period from Phase 2, in terms of the readership, the authorship, and, in particular, the historical relevance of *tkbines*. This book deals solely with Phase 1 (that is, from 1648 until about 1720), and does not look, in any detail, beyond the middle of the early decades of the eighteenth century.

THE TEXTS

The prayers and religious songs that have been translated in this book from their original Yiddish are all from Phase 1 and date back more than three centuries. Today, their existence, their significance in the lives of women, and the names of those women who wrote some of them, have disappeared like “smoke in the wind.”¹⁵ They lie forgotten and neglected in the libraries of academic institutions to which only scholars have access. These texts are not easily accessible to the modern reader of Yiddish, as the language is a specific literary form of Yiddish that was archaic in its own time, easily distinguishable from the spoken language. While the living language had been transformed with the addition of a large Slavic component following Jewish migrations east across Europe,¹⁶ the literary language remained in an earlier form that was predominantly Germanic¹⁷ and owed much of its vocabulary to early Yiddish Bible translations.¹⁸ Equally remote is the appearance of the unfamiliar cursive Hebrew characters, a style known as *mashket*, used in early Yiddish printing to differentiate Yiddish from Hebrew texts. *Mashket* is unlike the familiar bold, square, Assyrian Hebrew characters of the Torah scroll that are found in Hebrew prayer books and also differs from the typefaces used by modern Hebrew printers. It resembles Rashi script in some respects,¹⁹ but also differs from it. Yet when the technical difficulties are overcome, the language is energetic and earnest.

The literature reveals an insecure society that lived in the shadow of persecution, but never lost its optimistic spirit and belief in imminent redemption. This is expressed in the voices of female narrators or by female authors for a mainly female readership. The Yiddish prayers and religious songs bear little resemblance to the more sophisticated works being produced contemporaneously in Christian Europe.²⁰ Rather, they look back to medieval forms for a model. They are part of a popular, communal literature and there is little emphasis on the author as an individual voice.²¹ But due to their historical uniqueness, the literature speaks out to a modern readership from the remoteness of a past that often proves to be startlingly unexpected.

Of the works translated, it is the *Seyder Tkbines* that is most significant.²² It has generally been believed that *tkbines* were written by women.²³ However, even though the *Seyder Tkbines* is the standard prayer book for women in the voice of a female narrator, it is

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anonymous. Part 2 of this book provides translations of related single prayers by women, some called *tkbine*, some *tfile*,²⁴ and some *lid*,²⁵ which were printed at the end of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. During this period, women were producing new prayers, songs, and sermons, for both men and women.²⁶ Together with the translations of the printed texts, I have included the first ever printing of a manuscript dating from the seventeenth century: a unique collection of *tkbines* for a particular pregnant woman.²⁷

From what follows, I hope that the names of some of the leading women of early Yiddish literature: Beyle Hurvits; Khane Kats; Toybe Pan; Rokhl, daughter of Mordkhe Soyfer; Sheyndele, wife of Gershen ben Shmuel; Royzl Fishls; and Rivke Tiktiner, along with the *tkbines*, *tfiles*, and *lider* recited and sung by Ashkenazic women across Europe for three generations, may at last emerge and take their rightful place in world literary history.

Notes

1. *Seyder Tkbines* means “Sequence of Supplications.” *Tkbine* (pl. *tkbines*) comes from the Hebrew *tebinnaḥ* (pl. *tebinnoth*) meaning “supplication” or “prayer.”
2. At this early juncture the use of the terms “mainstream” and “orthodox” should be clarified when applied at the time of the *Seyder Tkbines*. They refer here to the whole Ashkenazic community. Today, when Judaism is fragmented into many different denominations, “mainstream” and “orthodox” have particular meanings, and refer to a recognizable section of the faith. Until the eighteenth century, however, there was no clear division between orthodox and non-orthodox, religious and secular. Jews led an all-embracing Jewish life. In the period when the *Seyder Tkbines* was printed, Jews across the world, whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated, were more in tune with one another than ever in their shared expectation of the Messiah.
3. Weinreich 1973:1, 338.
4. Berakhot 3:3 (from the Mishnah, the code of Jewish law that dates mainly from the middle of the first century to the second decade of the third century B.C.E.).
5. Ibid.
6. Yoysef bar Yokor’s introduction to the earliest Yiddish prayer book translation, Ichenhausen, 1544.
7. Prague, 1620.
8. Yitskhok ben Elyokum of Posen, 1681: 7–8.
9. Mikhl Odem, Constance, 1544. Another translation was printed in the same year: Paulus Æmilius, Augsburg.
10. Amsterdam 1648.
11. The Hebrew prayer that appears in both the *Sider* and many editions of the *Seyder Tkbines* that is said on entering the synagogue.
12. The word *kavone* is used.
13. Introduction to prayer book entitled *Menoyre* printed in Frankfurt an der Oder, seventeenth century.
14. *Voices of the Matriarchs*, 1998:20.
15. A line from the daily prayers in the *Seyder Tkbines*.
16. Known as Eastern Yiddish.
17. Known as Western Yiddish.
18. Leibowitz 1931.
19. The script in which commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud by Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040–1105) are printed.
20. The *Tkbines* are contemporaneous with Donne, Milton, Congreve, Aphra Behn, Ludamília Elisabeth Grimmelshausen, Bedrich Bridel, Adam Michna Otradovic, etc.
21. See Chapter 4 on defining *tkbines*, about the personal and communal aspects of *tkbines*.
22. See Part 2: “The *Seyder Tkbines*” and Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

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23. E.g., Niger 1913: 131-138.
24. Prayer.
25. *Lid*, pl. *lider*, meaning song (s).
26. See Chapter 2 on Yiddish printing.
27. See Part 2, "Book of *Tkbines* for a Pregnant Woman," for the translation and Chapter 6 for a discussion of the manuscript.