

# Medieval Ashkenaz (1096-1348)

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The Jewish communities of Northern France and of Germany who constituted Medieval Ashkenaz were situated along the trade routes of the time. These communities were well known for their prominent and accomplished scholars as well as their flourishing businesses. These Jewish communities flourished during the High and Late Middle Ages (1050–1450) as urban centers grew and thrived and centers of Jewish learning expanded. This growth, both material and spiritual, occurred in communities open and aware of the cultural renaissance that was part of the surrounding Christian culture. This prosperity was halted by the Black Death in the fourteenth century.

Together with prosperity and growth, the Jews in Ashkenaz experienced some hard times during the High Middle Ages (1050–1300). The communities along the Rhine River were attacked in the late eleventh century by the Crusaders, and further attacks followed in the succeeding decades and centuries. Despite these violent incidents, Jewish life continued to flourish. During the early fourteenth century, additional changes occurred—the Jews of France were expelled from France in the early fourteenth century and after the Black Death many communities in Germany were expelled (though they later returned), while many Jews moved eastward, joining the growing Jewish communities of modern Poland (*Stow, Alienated*).

Medieval Jewish society, like all of traditional Jewish culture, was ordered by patriarchal hierarchy. Women's position in society was secondary in comparison to that of men and a variety of comments made in religious and philosophical tractates attest to this fact as well as to a certain degree of misogyny. Philosophical, medical and religious views of the time all supported the view that men were superior to women both in nature and in deeds. (*Barkai, Gynaecological Texts; Grossman, Pious* 31-43).

## WOMEN OF ASHKENAZ

**At the same time, one can find many positive comments about women's roles. According to these more positive sources, women were admired as God-fearing**

**and as true partners of their husbands. A good marriage was a blessing that God himself was part of.**

It is almost impossible to reconcile the polarities expressed by the variety of citations, polarities that can be found when examining attitudes toward Christian women in medieval society as well as when studying Jewish women in other times and places. Much of the medieval rhetoric is based on more ancient Jewish sources as well as on contemporary non-Jewish literature. As scholars of these other times and places have argued, both positive and negative attitudes existed toward women and any picture one seeks to create is filled with contradictions. Over and above this difficulty, one must ask to what extent the ideology expressed in the written sources corresponded to the reality.

## SOURCES

To a large extent, our knowledge of medieval Jewish women depends on the sources that report their deeds. Jewish women appear in many of the Hebrew sources that have survived from the Middle Ages, and scholars who have written and described their lives have taken advantage of the many different genres that contain information about different aspects of women's lives and of attitudes toward women.

The most plentiful source material from the Middle Ages in Ashkenaz are *responsa*—questions and answers written by the leading rabbinic authorities of the time. Many of these questions deal with women and domestic problems, especially divorce and inheritance, as well as women's involvement in business, ritual and other legal issues. The sources provide an outline of what some women were doing in actuality as well as guidelines to the way legal authorities thought women should behave.

Another important source is exegesis on the Bible and the [Talmud](#) as well as exegesis on *Kinot* (liturgical poems). Many of the commentators, scholars in medieval France and Germany, remark on women in their times as well as on the way they understood the lives of women in the past (in Biblical or Talmudic times) in comparison with their own lives. In addition, stories and exempla like those found in moral literature such as *Sefer Hasidim*, a late twelfth/early thirteenth-century book written by R. Judah ben Samuel he-[H](#)asid (c. 1150–1217) and his successors, illuminate different aspects of medieval life and beliefs. Other stories

from the period, together with medical literature, community lists and additional records, provide insight into the mentalities of the medieval Jews and the place women had in society.

**The sources from medieval times provide two different types of perspectives on women and their lives.** The more programmatic sources provide information concerning stereotypes of women—wicked women, temptresses, righteous women, good wives, bad wives and others. Some of the sources that provide these stereotypes are literary sources, many of which do not originate in Jewish culture, in which stories ancient and medieval are recounted (Grossman, *Pious*, 31–62). In addition, some of the same sources, as well as other sources, provide a second perspective on medieval life, recounting information, often of sporadic nature, concerning the lives of actual women who lived in medieval times—the wives, daughters, mothers and neighbors of the authors.

Many of the sources are deeply embedded in more ancient traditions—legal precedents and earlier discussions from the [Mishnah](#), Talmud and other earlier sources—around which the medieval compositions were written. One of the challenges that faces scholars is the need to separate between the layers of the text and distinguish between information that continues tradition and novel data that refer specifically to medieval times. At the same time, an awareness that in some cases little had changed from when the Mishnah and Talmud were written is necessary in order to understand Jewish society and its structure.

In addition to Hebrew sources from medieval times, many of which are still in manuscript, Latin sources contain some information about Jewish communities as well as stories and laws that mention Jewish women. For example, moral exempla tell many stories about Jews, and a fair number of them are about Jewish women. Canonic legal literature is another source that is useful, especially since many Jews employed Christian women and these women were in direct contact with Jewish women.

However, while women appear in many texts, it is not easy to hear their voices or to sift through the many layers in the text. A central difficulty stems from the fact that all the sources were written by men and for the most part for men, since most women could not read Hebrew, certainly not on a level that would enable them to read complex rabbinic material. Thus, we are reading literature written by men and for men, trying to understand what implications it has for women,

who are rarely the main subject of these writings. The problem is even greater when trying to integrate the women into a broader picture of medieval Jewish society, since all the documentation we have describes male outlooks on society and its organization.

While the names of the men who wrote these sources are on the whole well known and many of the scholars, such as **Rashi** (R. Solomon b. Isaac of Troyes, 1040–1105) and the Tosafists (Talmudic glossators, mainly French, twelfth to fourteenth centuries) are famous, few women are known by name.

**Many of the women whose names we know fit into Rashi's definition of an important woman (*isha hashuva*—the wife, daughter, mother, or sister of a scholar. This definition is clear evidence that women were usually perceived in relationship to the men in their families and lives.**

**A good example of such a woman is Dulcea, the wife of R. Eleazar b. Judah of Worms (c. 1165–c. 1230), whose husband eulogized her after her death. Yet she is the only woman for whom such a full portrait can be written.**

Other women known by name are identified only by their death, cited in lists of Jews killed during various attacks on the Jewish community during the High Middle Ages, which include the names of many women, as do some medieval gravestones. These lists tell us a little about the women's family members who were killed together with them—husband, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren—or about the women's piety and devout character.

**Only two professions are mentioned in these lists and on the gravestones—midwifery and the role of women's prayer leaders.** Besides the women who belonged to scholars' families, some women whose names are known to us are famous for their business enterprises (Berliner; Güdemann). However, most women are not known by name and even those who are known by name are mentioned only briefly, so that it is impossible to construct a sketch of their lives and biographies. As a result, current research can only discuss women as a group, attempting at times to distinguish between social class and/or geographic region.

## WIVES AND MOTHERS

All Jewish women in medieval Ashkenaz were expected to become wives and mothers. The option of not marrying was almost non-existent in Jewish society, as opposed to the ideal of celibacy that existed in surrounding Christian society.

Women were often promised by their fathers or other relatives in early childhood and then were betrothed and married before reaching the age of twelve, which was considered the age of majority. If the woman was not married by age twelve, she had the right to refuse to marry the man chosen by her father or parents (Grossman, *Pious*, 71–81). However, the sources indicate that few women chose to refuse these matches. Canceling an agreement made by two families was considered unforgivable, since people were afraid that the harm caused to their family's good name would make future matchmaking very difficult.

Couples that married at a young age often lived with the parents of the bride or groom for the first year or two after the marriage. In this way the groom could continue his studies and the couple could be supported at the beginning of their married life.

Marriage was in essence a business transaction between two families. While some didactic sources such as *Sefer Hasidim* instruct their readers (all men) not to marry their children off against their will and discuss the importance of a fulfilling conjugal relationship, most sources, including some stories in *Sefer Hasidim*, suggest that parents forged alliances based on social, political and economic considerations. Parents provided their daughters with dowries, and the quality of the match depended on the size of the dowry. The sources suggest that obtaining a sizeable dowry and acquiring a respectable match for daughters was a central concern for parents.

Despite the continued Talmudic tradition that served as the basis of all the medieval Jewish marriage practices and customs, some of the principles around which medieval marriages were arranged changed during the Middle Ages.

The first and most central change was implemented during the period preceding the first Crusade and is attributed to R. Gershom ben Judah Me'or ha-Golah (950/960–1048). **Two statutes on this matter are attributed to R. Gershom. The first is a ban on bigamy, while the second is a ban forbidding a man to divorce his wife against her will.** It is unclear how common polygamous marriages were

in Ashkenazi society before this ban, but after it became accepted, it gradually became more and more enforced. At first, it was not implemented in cases in which the couple did not have any children. In such cases, if the couple had been married ten years (the time required according to Talmudic law to wait and determine whether the couple was infertile) and the woman had never been pregnant, her husband was allowed to marry another woman. After the twelfth century, R. Gershom's statute was more strictly enforced and even in cases where the woman was barren, the husband could remarry only after he divorced his wife (Grossman, *Status*).

While it is hard to determine the extent to which the ban against bigamy influenced **Ashkenazi society**, **it is certain that R. Gershom's second ban was highly influential. Divorce was not a rare occurrence in medieval Jewish society. In fact, both Israel Yuval and Avraham Grossman have suggested that divorce was widespread. Based on figures from fifteenth century Nuremberg, Yuval has suggested that close to one-third of Jewish marriages ended in divorce.**

Grossman has suggested a similar divorce rate and has argued that the high divorce rate was the result of marriage at a young age and a strong social stigma against breaking engagement agreements made by parents for their children. Perhaps because of this high rate of divorce, over time and especially in the thirteenth century, legal authorities tried to make it more difficult for women to demand divorces from their husbands. R. Gershom's edict had already made it much more difficult to divorce wives and further legislation made it difficult for women to demand divorce writs (Grossman, *Pious*, 398–458; Yuval, *An Appeal*).

During the Middle Ages, one can note changes that were essential to understanding medieval marriages and economics. During the pre-crusade period, the family of the bride usually provided a dowry, whereas the family of the groom promised money in the future, most notably in the form of an inheritance their son would eventually receive.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw the emergence of new strategies of marriage negotiation in Ashkenazic society. Until the mid-thirteenth century, only the woman's family put up money before the marriage took place, in the form of a dowry, whereas the groom's family committed itself to funding by way of the sum promised in the *ketubbah*. A new ruling that originated in the twelfth century enhanced the position of the bride's family. Whereas previously, once the

marriage was contracted the money was transferred to the husband's family and no longer returned to the bride's family even if the bride died the day after the wedding, a new ruling became accepted. According to this new custom, if the bride passed away within the first two years of marriage and no children had been born to the couple, the money was returned to the bride's family.

**In the mid-thirteenth century, double marriage payments seem to have become the standard, and not only the bride's family but also the groom's family contributed to the young couple's economic position.** Some scholars have suggested this double marriage payment was necessary because Jewish economy relied so heavily on money lending and couples needed a larger initial income when they started out. At this point the new ruling became that if the bride or the groom died either before the birth of offspring or before two years had passed, the monies were returned to the respective families (Yuval, *Monetary*).

Once the couple was married, the focus moved to procreation. Children were the expected product of all marriages, and they were to be a main focus of every woman's life. The care of young children was chiefly the responsibility of women. Barren women are described as miserable; medieval compilations of amulets and charms devote pages to ways to aid childless women.

**Although couples often married young, it seems that they either refrained from sexual relations until the woman was old enough to deliver a child safely or they used some form of contraception. Gynecological treatises refer to age fourteen as an age when women's passages were still too narrow to deliver children safely and suggest that a midwife who fears God should instruct these young women in the womanly art of contraception.**

**The average number of surviving children a woman in medieval Ashkenaz has been estimated between two and four.** This conclusion is based on lists of Jews killed during the Crusades and on the biographies of some of the well-known scholars of the period. Unfortunately, no other demographic evidence exists. In any case, even if we accept this opinion, it is probable that most women delivered many more than two to four children since infant mortality was so high during the period (Stow, *Jewish Family*; Grossman, *Early Sages*).

While few sources discuss the relationships between parents and their children, it is clear that women were expected to care for young children and that the

responsibility for children, especially for boys, was transferred to their fathers only when children began school. Women were responsible for their daughters' education and although there is evidence of male involvement in the educational process, it seems women were the ones involved in the daily details.

This female involvement in the upbringing of daughters is also reflected clearly in legislation concerning custody. According to Jewish law, daughters always remained in the custody of their mothers, whereas sons were transferred to their fathers once they reached the age of education.

If a woman survived childbirth, she had a good chance of living into her sixties. The early age of marriage, at times marriage to an older spouse, and women's longevity in comparison to men's life span, caused widowed women to be commonplace in medieval society.

Widows were in a unique position since they were not under the authority of any man and, unlike divorcees whose ex-husbands were still alive, were completely independent. In addition, women were usually appointed the executors and the benefactors of their husband's will and as such they had, in some cases, substantial capital to live off and to conduct their businesses.

The fact that widows in medieval Europe benefited from a relative social and economic independence has led some scholars to argue that the status of a widow was a favorable one. Yet widowhood was not a simple position for women.

The sources indicate that widows, especially widows with young children, who were probably rather young themselves, were usually interested in getting married again, at times quite rapidly. In addition, the families of younger widows were often uncomfortable with the idea that their daughters—at times eligible and attractive women—would remain unmarried. A certain degree of suspicion and fear of sexual promiscuity accompanied this status. Widows were also at times suspected of being sorceresses and associating with demons.

## **JEWISH WOMEN AND THEIR CHRISTIAN NEIGHBORS**

Jewish society in medieval Ashkenaz lived in close contact with Christian neighbors. In this period, in which there were not yet any ghettos, the Jewish areas of residence in the city were rarely separated from those of other inhabitants. Moreover, while Jews tried to live close to each other and to their



centers of worship, they lived in courtyards together with their Christian neighbors, often sharing wells, cisterns and ovens.

The close contact characteristic of the cities was magnified in the many different small villages where a handful of Jewish families lived among Christians. Despite the high tension between Jews and Christians, they were in contact for business and as neighbors. These daily contacts, a part of all Jewish everyday dealings, were most probably an essential part of women's lives.

**Contact between Jewish and Christian women is mentioned especially in the context of domestic activities and in medical consultations. During the Middle Ages, many women prepared medicinal herbs as part of their daily chores, growing herbs in garden plots by their homes.** Based on sources concerning the lives of medieval Christian women who lived in the cities, it is clear that one of the responsibilities of women was the administering of cures for daily ailments and afflictions, and there is no reason to think Jewish women did not do the same. Sources report neighbors advising each other on methods and medicines as a daily occurrence.

**Besides daily neighborly contacts that included shared conversations and activities related to cooking and other domestic chores, medicine was an area in which Jews and Christians in general, and women in particular, helped one another and gave advice.** Jewish doctors and medical practitioners often sought the advice of Christian doctors, while Jewish families often required the help of non-Jewish practitioners. Christian sources from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries forbade medical assistance provided by Christian practitioners and especially the services Christian midwives provided to Jewish mothers. Although Jewish women probably preferred to use the services of Jewish midwives, this was not always possible, since many small communities did not have experienced midwives (Baumgarten, *Midwives*).

Another point of contact between Jews and Christians was inside the home. In some cases, Jews employed Christian women as domestic servants, as childminders and wet-nurses. Despite the persistent efforts of the church, this practice was never eliminated, and Christian women continued to work in Jewish households throughout the Middle Ages. These servants, especially the wet-nurses, were usually hired by Jewish men, who secured the terms of employment with the husband or family of the servant or wet-nurse. Once the agreement was

made, the men usually had little to do with the woman's employment and most of the daily contact was conducted between the women. Little information about the nature of these interactions has reached us, but one can assume that even though this association was an employer-employee relationship, Jewish women and Christian women became more familiar with each other's practices and aware of each other's customs. Although Christian women working in Jewish homes certainly learned more about Judaism than their employers did about Christianity, the close contact brought food habits and worship patterns into awareness. On the whole, the close daily contact between Jewish and Christian women contributed greatly to a more intimate knowledge of each other (Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews*).

This link between Jewish and Christian women is especially important for assessing Jewish-Christian relations in the High Middle Ages. Both close relationships and tensions between Jews and Christians stemmed, at least in part, from these daily contacts.

## **WOMEN AND WORK**

**Women had substantial work within the family framework. Their domestic responsibilities included running the household and taking care of its daily needs—laundry, cooking, and cleaning, as well as producing or obtaining the cloth needed for clothes and sewing them, making candles to light the household, and ensuring that there was water for drinking and bathing as well as a fire for warmth and for cooking. These chores were many, and it was virtually impossible for one woman to perform them alone. The sources suggest that almost all homes, even poor ones, had servants who helped with these chores.**

**However, over and above the running of the household, many Jewish women were involved in different business ventures, many of them working from within their homes. One profession of Jewish women that has been well documented, especially in Latin sources from thirteenth century France, is that of money-lenders.** Records from Northern France document disputes concerning loans between Jewish women and their Christian neighbors, shedding light on the business relationship between them.

Although there are a small number of sources that tell of women who were central and very powerful money-lenders, such as Marat Minna of Worms, who dealt with the authorities in her city or Pulcellina from Blois, who was often in the court of Count Thibaut of Blois V (reigned 1152–1191), most women lent small sums to their female neighbors. This is another area in which Jewish and Christian women were in frequent contact (Jordan, *Women and Credit*; Einbinder, *Pulcellina of Blois*).

**In addition, Jewish women bought and sold merchandise, and some women are known to have traveled frequently for their business, be it money-lending or trading. Jewish women also wove cloth and embroidered. These were considered part of a girl's education, and it is possible some women made a trade out of their needlework. Other women worked as midwives and wise women—helping women during birth and helping men, women and children during illness. While no women were called “doctors,” many were recognized as wise women—*nashim hakhamot*—and were famous for their healing abilities.**

**Many of the women who were active merchants and money-lenders were part of a family business—sometimes in partnership with their husbands, or with their siblings. It was not rare for a woman to have a business separate from her husband nor was it rare for her to have her own profits that were not shared by her husband. The activities of these businesswomen demonstrate the extent to which women were part of the public sphere, whether they conducted their business within or outside of the perimeters of their homes. In addition, despite ancient legal rulings that forbade Jewish women to conduct business alone with non-Jewish men, the medieval rabbinic authorities permitted such activities, arguing that women often traveled alone with men and took care of customers on their own (Grossman, *Pious*, 198–209).**

**As a result of their visibility and involvement in business ventures, women appear frequently as parties in legal disputes. Some of these proceedings have to do with differences that arose in the course of business, while others have to do with marital disagreements and arguments over wills and inheritance. It seems that because of the considerable involvement of women in business, at times independently of their husbands, the prevalent Ashkenazi opinion was that women were able to swear in court concerning their involvement in business deals. As the Raban (R. Eliezer b. Nathan of Mainz, c. 1090–c. 1170) states in his book *Even ha-Ezer*:**

... and certainly in these days when women are legal guardians and vendors and dealers and lenders and borrowers and they pay and collect and withdraw and deposit money, and if we say they cannot swear or affirm their business negotiations, then you will forsake these women and people will begin to avoid doing business with them.

## WOMEN AND EDUCATION

Little is known about the education of Jewish women. Despite many attempts to outline their education, there is no comparison between the abundance of information that exists concerning the education of Jewish boys—from the beginnings of their studies through the higher echelons of learning—to the paucity of sources that discuss girl's education (Baskin, *Some Parallels*; Güdemann, 1: 228–238; Zolty; Grossman, *Pious*, 277–303). Until age five or six, the age when Jewish boys began their schooling, boys and girls were together at home, under the supervision of their mothers. During these early years they were taught their first prayers and began to learn in practice about Jewish observance and tradition.

At about age six, boys were taken to the local synagogue or to the house of the *melammed* (teacher) to begin their formal schooling. After an elaborate ceremony that included licking honey from the letters of the alphabet and eating special foods, they began to study the Bible (Marcus, *Rituals*; Kanarfogel, *Jewish Education*). Unlike the boys, girls did not undergo an elaborate ritual to symbolize a new stage in their lives. Despite this, like many of the boys, they were taught by hired tutors. The sources that discuss these tutors suggest that they were male tutors and contain warnings against employing single men who would be left alone with their female pupils. Girls were supposed to be taught that which they needed to know in practical terms. As the author of *Sefer Hasidim* explains:

**One is obligated to teach his daughters the commandments such as the legal rulings ... if she doesn't know the commandments, how will she keep the Sabbath and, in this way, all the commandments? ... But a young man should not teach the girls even if the father is standing there watching lest they be alone together ... They have no business with the Torah, with the depth of the law, and commandments which they are not commanded to keep they are not commanded to learn, but they must be taught the commandments that they are commanded to keep in whatever language**

they know. But the man is commanded to study in Hebrew and he has to learn everything.

This passage points to a number of principles that were recommended in girls' education: they were not to be taught in Hebrew, nor were they to be taught the depth of the law. Rather, they were supposed to be familiar with the practical issues—how to observe the Sabbath, prepare **kosher** food and keep the laws of ritual purity.

Based on this passage, as well as other sources that discuss women who prayed in the vernacular, or were worried about their lack of ability to understand the Hebrew texts of prayers, scholars have concluded that many women did not know how to read Hebrew. While a few sources seem to suggest that girls were taught to read Hebrew just like the boys, there is no confirmation for this practice and probably only a minority of well-educated women could read. However, it should be noted that those men who did not continue to pursue scholarship after their first years of education probably knew little more than their wives and female neighbors about the “depth of the laws and the commandments,” although they did perhaps know how to read Hebrew better.

Scholars since the end of the nineteenth century have pointed to the inferior education Jewish women received in comparison to Jewish men. Some have argued somewhat apologetically that although Jewish women's education was lacking, it was superior to that of Christian women, whereas others have argued that it was inferior.

The same scholars have pointed to a tradition of women who were known for teaching legal rulings to their female neighbors as well as to some men. Some of these women, who are mentioned by name in the sources, instructed men and women on the laws of **kashrut**, as well as laws connected to lighting the Sabbath candles, making *zizit* (fringes attached to the *tallit*), and laws of ritual purity. Many of the scholars who mention these women forgot to note, perhaps in their zeal to find female authorities, that with the exception of traditions regarding lighting the Sabbath candles, the female legal experts were not independent authorities. Rather, they acquired their prominence and authority due to their family connections as the wives, daughters or sisters of a great rabbinic authority, and they were in fact transmitting these men's traditions and rulings.

However, the note made of their roles as transmitters of tradition and as leaders of their communities who instructed other women, indicates a central female role.

**A number of women are known to have instructed the women in their city and taught them both prayers and legal rulings. The activities of such women, such as Dulcea of Worms, point to a network of Jewish education for women, that is not mentioned in the sources because it had nothing to do with the men, but was certainly a central source of women's education.**

## **WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS DEVOTION**

The medieval sources present women not only as active businesswomen but also as enthusiastically committed to the religious lives of their communities. While some scholars have portrayed medieval women as removed from this sphere because many of them did not know Hebrew, and because of their limited role in traditional worship, the sources present women as involved in different kinds of religious, spiritual and communal activities.

The synagogues in medieval Ashkenaz were the centers of worship and the archaeological evidence shows that many of the synagogues in Germany consisted of two parts—a central shrine of worship and a second room, at times even a separate building, known as the *Frauenschule*. This chamber was often attached to the main sanctuary by small windows on a joint wall or in some cases was situated beneath or above the main sanctuary. It is unclear what the structure of the synagogues in Northern France was (Krautheimer, *Mittelalterliche*).

Women came to services every Sabbath and some women came to the synagogue daily as well. For example, R. Eleazar b. Judah of Worms reports that his wife Dulcea attended services daily, morning and evening (Haberman, 165). The women's service was led by a woman who prayed for the women. A few such women are mentioned by name in the medieval sources. One cannot conclude how women obtained this position, but there may have been such a woman in every large community. One of these women, Urania of Worms, was the daughter of the cantor, while another, Dulcea of Worms, was the wife of a respected leader and rabbi.

Women were also responsible for part of the upkeep of the synagogue. They made and donated candles to the synagogue, they embroidered the **Torah** covers and binders and they are mentioned as donating charity to the synagogue. During the period preceding the Black Death, women also participated in some of the rituals. For example, they served as *ba'alot brit* (like a modern *sandak*), during the circumcision ceremony, holding the infants on their laps while the ritual was performed. R. Meir of Rothenburg (c. 1215–1293) and others in the late thirteenth century, objected strongly to this role, which was given by the father or parents of the newborn to a friend or relative, and subsequently the *ba'alot brit*'s role was reduced to being the wife of the *ba'al brit*, who held the baby on his lap.

Like some of their Christian neighbors, many Jewish women in the Middle Ages were pious and actively searched for ways to further their devotion to God. Women gave charity, fasted and prayed to further their own personal devotion. In addition, some women chose to accept obligations that were not traditionally in women's realm. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, some sources tell of women who wore *zizit* and *tefillin* and insisted on hearing the *shofar* and sitting in the *sukkah*. R. Jacob b. Meir Tam (c. 1100–1171), as well as others, such as R. Eliezer b. Nathan, ruled that such women could not only perform these commandments, but could also recite the same traditional benediction as men when performing these acts (Ta-Shma, 262–279).

Some of the actions Ashkenazi women took upon themselves became standard and accepted during the centuries that followed. Other deeds, especially those that were seen as an encroachment on traditionally male roles and actions or which were connected to the body—such as *tefillin* and *zizit*—became less accepted over time and evoked tremendous objection. At the end of the thirteenth century, a number of religious authorities led by R. Meir of Rothenburg rejected these practices (first *tefillin* and then *zizit*) and these opinions gradually became accepted over time. The end of the thirteenth century can be seen as a period in which women were more limited in the ritual sphere.

Other expressions of religious devotion are found in accounts of women during the Crusades and other attacks on the Jewish community. Medieval Ashkenazi women are famous for their acts of martyrdom during the first Crusade and during the various events that followed over the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The chronicles written after the First Crusade recount

numerous stories of women who incited their husbands to fight against their attackers, who led their families to suicide, and in some cases killed their own children rather than allow them to be contaminated by the baptismal waters to which Jews were being led. The chronicles mention these women by name and praise their steadfast belief in God, singling out the women as unusually devoted to their religion, and as able to influence their families and communities.

Scholars are divided as to the extent to which this portrayal of Ashkenazi women applies to the period after the first crusade. While some have argued that throughout the High Middle Ages Jewish women were extraordinarily prominent in the stories of persecution, in part due to their tremendous involvement in economic activities, others have maintained that over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, their prominence in narratives of persecution declined, as can be seen in later accounts such as *Sefer Zekhirah* by R. Ephraim of Bonn (b. 1132) and other liturgical poems written in wake of persecutions. In these accounts, women are no longer mentioned by name and their activities are more confined to their homes. However, all agree that the image of Jewish women that emerges from accounts of persecution is one of Jewish women willing to die for God (Einbinder, *Jewish Women and Grossman, Pious*, 369-72).

Perhaps as a result of this emphasis on the devotion of Jewish women, little attention has been paid to women who chose not to die as martyrs, or in some cases not to remain within the fold, but to convert to Christianity. This lack of attention to women's conversion is in contrast to the discussion of men who converted to Christianity. Many sources discuss cases in which men decided to convert to Christianity while their wives decided to remain within the Jewish community. Such cases posed many legal problems concerning inheritance and divorce and as a result were discussed at length. While it is certain that many Jews who converted to Christianity chose to do so as families, the cases of women who converted alone are less prevalent in the records since fewer legal issues existed in their cases. Their husbands could divorce them and their inheritance could be divided in such cases with considerably fewer difficulties. Other sources discuss women who converted to Christianity and then wished to return to Judaism and the problems that arose concerning such a woman's return to her husband and to the conjugal bed. However, there is no way to estimate how many women chose to convert or how their numbers compare to those of men.



The rich and varied lives Jewish women led in medieval Europe are just beginning to be discovered. Further inquiry into their lives as well as into attitudes toward them will provide more information that will enrich our knowledge not only of women, but of Jewish society as a whole. Investigating women's lives reveals the information hidden in the sources and contributes to a fuller picture of the diversity medieval Jewish life was made of. Further study has the potential not only of illuminating the lives of Jewish women but of outlining the lives of medieval Jews—men and women—and of the society they lived in.