

## Mystical Jewish Women

What has been the role of women in the history of Jewish mysticism? Are there examples of women kabbalists who were in any way comparable to the famous women mystics of Christianity or Islam?

### **JEWISH WOMEN MYSTICS**

'Kabbalah', generally used as a generic term for Jewish mysticism between the early Middle Ages and the modern Chassidic movement, refers to a specific textual tradition. Participating in this tradition meant seeing the entire Jewish tradition through a peculiar lens. All biblical and post-biblical texts and ritual practices were viewed as embodying and reflecting the inner structure of the Godhead, conceived in terms of sefirot (divine channels).

Since women were not active producers or consumers of the textual tradition of kabbalah, they could not be considered kabbalists in the strict sense of the term. This does not, however, preclude the possibility that Jewish women had mystical experiences.

Inquisitorial records from late medieval Spain record numerous cases of female Jewish prophets. Foremost among them was a young girl, **Inés of Herrera**. Inés told her many followers of her ascents to heaven, guided by angels. In the words of one inquisitorial witness, "she saw purgatory and the souls who suffered there, and also, how in another department others sat with honor upon golden thrones." Inés and other prophetic women of her time led gatherings that included throngs of followers who engaged in ecstatic dancing, song, mystical marriages, and calls for fasting and repentance.

### **SAFED**

Safed or Tzfat, a sleepy little town in the 16th century, never mentioned in the Tanach, experienced an explosion of Jewish spirituality. It went from zero to 100 miles per hour over the course of about 80 years" before dying out. But it

affected Judaism for the next 400 years. It would be like having 100 Nobel Prize winners living in one small town.

Most women in Tzfat were as literate as their husbands, except it may have been in Portuguese or Spanish rather than Hebrew, but there are few documented records of women's voices in the fellowship, just a few glimpses.

## **FRANCESCA SARAH**

During the renaissance of Jewish mysticism that took place in the Galilean town of Safed in the mid-16th century there is evidence of a number of mystically active Jewish women. The hagiographic literature describing the luminaries of the period, including Rabbis Isaac Luria and Hayyim Vital, includes stories about a woman named **Francesa Sarah**. This woman is also mentioned in Vital's mystical diary, *The Book of Visions*.

Much is known about Francesca Sarah who was thought to have had prophetic abilities and was a dream interpreter. After dreaming that all of Tzfat would be destroyed by earthquakes and plagues, the rabbis coordinated a three-day community-wide fast, which was followed by another dream that Hashem had accepted their *teshuvah*.

In this regard, Francesca's authority was equal to that of men. This versatile woman was well versed in the Mishna, Zohar and Torah, and gave classes behind a *mechitza* to men. There were many possibilities for women at that time. The fellowship was quite concerned with the status of women. Even the smallest details of conversations between a couple was thought to have deep kabbalistic meaning. The Kabbalah, as a whole, is a deeply gendered system of thought.

According to Vital's diary, Francesa Sarah was present in the study hall when he lectured on Jewish mysticism in the late 16th century. He described her as "a pious woman, who sees visions while awake, and hears a voice speaking to her. Most of her pronouncements are true."

Joseph Sambari, in his history of the Jews under Muslim rule (written in the mid-17th century) describes Francesa Sarah as "a woman, wise and great in her deeds

... She had a maggid (angelic medium) speak to her to inform her of what was to be in the world. The sages of Safed tested her several times to know if there was substance to her words, and if everything that she said came to pass.”

In one instance, she sent for the sages, warning them that unless they declared a fast day, prayed and gave charity, they would perish in a plague. The rabbis heeded her, and immediately decreed a fast. When everyone was gathered on the fast day and one of the rabbis rose to speak, she received a revelation that he would die in eight days as atonement for the sins of the congregation. Exactly eight days later, he passed away.

One Safed scholar, although skeptical of her powers, consulted her as to whether he would succeed in a certain endeavor. Upon recognizing the veracity of her vision, "he bowed low in homage to God, who imparted of His wisdom to such a woman of valor."

Rabbi Vital notes, however, that while most of her visions came true, her revelation that the Mashiach would come did not materialize.

### **FIORETTA OF MODENA**

In the past, most of the elderly Jews who immigrated to the Land of Israel chose to settle in Jerusalem, but one woman who opted for Safed was the Italian Fioretta of Modena, ancestress to an exemplary scholar. Her grandson, the scholar, kabbalist, and author Rabbi Aaron Berechiah of Modena (d.1639), paid tribute to her in the introductions to two of his books. "May my good name be remembered before God," he wrote, "together with the merit of my mother's mother, the righteous woman Fioretta...widow of Rabbi Solomon of Modena."...it was, therefore, incumbent upon him to give her the respect due a parent and rabbi...

Fioretta absorbed herself in the study of Tanach (Bible), Oral Law and halachic works, in particular Maimonides, as well as the Zohar. She adhered to a weekly course of study on each of these subjects which she herself had charted.

Fioretta raised her grandson, and was responsible for his education, traveling from city to city in search of the best teachers. Rabbi Aaron stated that it

was, therefore, incumbent upon him to give her the respect due a parent and rabbi.

Another leading figure of this period was the **young daughter of Rav Raphael Anav**. While we do not know her name, there is extensive documentation of her activities in **Damascus** in the year 1609. This young woman served as an oracle to the entire Jewish community, and was consulted, and obeyed, by its leading rabbinic figures. The spiritual advisor of the young Anav girl was a woman by the name of **Rachel Aberlin**. Rachel enjoyed visions of Elijah the prophet regularly and was described by Vital as having been “accustomed to seeing visions, demons, souls, and angels, and most everything she says is correct, from her childhood and through her adulthood.”

Criticizing Vital’s bookish interpretation of one of her mystical dreams, Rachel told him, “You tell me the words of the biblical verse as they are written, but I see the matter in actual practice, and completely manifest.” Vital, the male kabbalist, may have been the master of the mystical word, the sacred text, but Rachel was the adept of experience.”

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The involvement of Jewish women in the messianic movement may have led to a backlash devoted to the eradication of the very memory of women’s mystical activity. When it is defined more broadly, there is considerable evidence for the existence of eminent women Jewish mystics.