



Jewish Tales of Holy Women

Yitzhak Buxbaum



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Jewish Tales
of
Holy Women

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S'micha as a Maggid

When my spiritual master, the holy and pure Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, gave me *s'micha* (ordination) as a *maggid*, a teller of sacred Jewish tales, he put his holy hands on my head and said:

B'ezrat HaShem

Maggid devarav l'Yaakov.

Aileh hadevarim asher tidabeir el bnai Yisrael.

Bizeh anu somchim v'tomchim u'm'chazkim yidei

Reb Yitzhak ben Meir Buxbaum

sh'yichyeh lihiyot machzir al hap'tachim, pitchaihem miku-
vanim

petach habayit sha'arei halev liban shel Yisrael

l'hachzir otam avaida mida'at da'at Elyon

b'divrei aggada sh'moshchim liban shel Yisrael

b'divrei hitorerut.

Kumi ori ki va oraich.

Yagid yagid

Y'orair y'orair

Yachzir yachzir

am Yisrael b'tshuvah shleima mitoch ahavah.

Koh t'varchu v'yizkeh lirot b'haramat keren Yisrael mitoch
simcha.

With the help of God,
Be a *maggid*, a teller of tales, and speak sacred words to the
seed of Jacob.
These are the words you shall speak to the Children of Israel.
With this, we support, strengthen, and uphold the hands of
Reb Yitzhak son of Meir Buxbaum
To live a life of the spirit, making the rounds, knocking on all
doors, the doors facing each other, the door of the Tem-
ple, the gates of the heart, the Heart of Israel
To return those who are lost, lost to mind,
the Mind of the Most High,
With stories that draw the heart of Israel and cause them to
awaken.
Arise, shine, for your light has come!
Tell, tell
Awaken, awaken
Return, return the People of Israel in complete repentance,
from love.
So shall you bless, and merit to see the raising of the honor
of Israel, in joy.

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NOTE TO THE READER

ABOUT GOD LANGUAGE

Although the language in this book sometimes refers to God as “King,” “Father,” “He,” and “Him,” God is not corporeal and has no gender. Men and women are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:27), and God has both masculine and feminine traits.

ABOUT HONORIFIC TITLES AND MISSING NAMES

Many of the women about whom stories in this book are told were *rebbetzins*, rabbis’ wives, which is undoubtedly a main reason why stories about them were known and preserved. But a holy woman’s worth does not depend on a title derived from her husband’s status. There are a few women in this book who were not wives of rabbis, and much as I would have wanted to bestow on them titles of honor, there is a problem in doing so. The traditional female equivalent to the male honorific *Reb* (Mr.) is *Marat*—a title not used outside traditional circles and one that would strike most ears as unfamiliar and strange. So I have decided to leave these holy women without honorific titles, knowing that we honor them all the same.

Because many of the stories collected lack the names of the holy women, who are identified only as this rabbi’s wife or that rabbi’s mother or daughter, I had to do special research to try to find the names and respect the dignity of the women involved. I often succeeded but sometimes did not. In order to honor the remaining handful of unnamed women, I gave them fictitious names. These are identified in the Notes so that no one will be misled to think that these are the actual names.

Jewish Tales
of
Holy Women

Proverbs 1:8 says:

“Listen, my son, to the musar [instruction] of your father and do not forsake the torah [teaching] of your mother.” This book is dedicated to those Jewish holy women who have been forgotten through our neglect.

May we always remember the sacred teachings of our Torah mothers.



Preface

Stories, particularly Hasidic tales, have provided me with spiritual nourishment for all of my Jewish religious life. But I have long been troubled by the lack of tales about holy women. I have read scores and scores of Hebrew books of Hasidic and other traditional Jewish tales, and the number of stories about holy women is minuscule, almost negligible. And to add to the embarrassment, when a book contains an anecdote or a story about a holy woman, her name is often left out; she is identified only as this or that rabbi's mother, wife, or daughter. Because of my distress at this unfortunate lack of stories of holy women, for about ten years I have made it a point to collect stories or anecdotes of holy women as I came across them—one here, one there, a few here, a few there. Happily, in recent years, things have been changing. A few collections of stories about women have finally appeared, and I've selected tales from these sources too. And at long last, with God's help, I've collected enough material for this book.

Most of the tales I have included are newly translated from the Hebrew. Some were heard orally and are appearing in print for the first time. Others have been retold.

I am aware that as a man, my perspective as expressed in my comments on these tales may have certain limitations. I ask my Jewish sisters to forgive me if I have made a misstep. My only desire is to enhance the glory of God, our people, and our holy Jewish women.



Introduction

What is a “holy woman”—or a “holy man” for that matter? According to Jewish mystic teaching, all people should strive to be holy. Everyone is granted a pure soul and has the potential for holiness. Someone once asked Rebbe Yisrael of Rizhin what was meant by saying that a person had the holy spirit. He answered, “When a person has spirit and keeps it from becoming impure, it is the holy spirit.” In Hebrew, a Jewish holy woman is called a *tzaddeket* (plural, *tzaddikot*), and a holy man is called a *tzaddik* (plural, *tzaddikim*). The male term is also used inclusively for both genders. Some people are *tzaddikim*—holy and good—in almost every aspect of their life. Others are *tzaddikim* in only certain aspects. There are people who are *tzaddikim* just with their immediate family. Others are *tzaddikim* in their relation to everyone they meet. Whereas some stories in this book are about women who were perfect *tzaddikot* with God and with people, other stories are about women who rose to holiness in particular instances.

God said to the prophet Isaiah about the Jews, “Your people are all *tzaddikim*.” Everyone is a *tzaddik*, but some are smaller *tzaddikim*; others are bigger *tzaddikim* who can extend their love farther afield.

There is a ladder of holiness, from the little to the great. Most of us do some good in this world, do something that is pure and

holy. When we hear tales of women who reached awesome levels of piety and holiness, we might think, “Oh, I can’t attain that! What does that have to do with me?” Or we can be inspired by their holy deeds to think, “I may not reach the level she attained, but with the example of her holiness before my eyes, may I reach a little higher!” The ancient Rabbis taught, “Every Jew should say, ‘Oh, when will my deeds reach the level of the deeds of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob!’” The Hasidic rebbes (leaders) understood this to mean that each of us should say, “When will my deeds have the merest connection with the deeds of my ancestors!” and we can add, “with the deeds of our holy female ancestors—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, and all the other holy women who followed them!” Every Sabbath night, pious parents bless their daughters: “May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah!”

One of the benefits of reading these tales of Jewish holy women is that we become aware of a pattern of spirituality different from that prevalent among Jewish men. Judaism rests on three pillars: Torah study, prayer, and kind deeds. With almost all male *tzaddikim*, the central pillar is either Torah study or prayer, although of course they participate in all three areas to some degree. But for *tzaddikot*, the central pillar is usually kindness and occasionally prayer. Traditional holy women study Torah, but their study is less central to their spiritual lives, and their devotion to Torah is often expressed through supporting and encouraging the men to study. This produces a different pattern of holiness, which is useful even for men to know about because not all men are scholars. And it is valuable for everyone to have a model of a devout lifestyle in which the essence of life is compassion—doing good, helping others, doing favors—constantly and at every minute. According to Jewish mystic teaching, continuous spiritual practice leads to continuous God-awareness. Although such mystic attainment is rarely spoken about explicitly in the stories about women in this book, more than a few of the women mentioned undoubtedly reached high levels of the holy spirit and of divine wisdom.

In most collections of Jewish or Hasidic religious tales, many of the heroes are famous individuals. If a story tells about a famous

rabbi or rebbe, there are many other stories about him that serve as a background and context. In this collection, however, the heroines are, with a few exceptions, relatively unknown. Frequently, we have only a story or two about a particular holy woman. This unfortunately lessens our ability to appreciate a certain woman in the context of her whole life.

There is another problem in collecting stories about holy women. In the past, women were traditionally relegated to supportive roles. A wife was praised, for example, for aiding her husband's spiritual elevation in Torah study and prayer. Her own spirituality was generally given less attention. That is one reason why there are so few traditional stories about holy women. This attitude fails to satisfy most Jews today. But I hope people will see that just because a pious woman of former times expressed her devotion in a supportive way does not mean that we cannot appreciate and be inspired by her piety. The difference between a woman who served God by sacrificing herself to spiritually and materially support her husband and a husband who served God by sacrificing himself for the sake of Torah study may be less than people might suppose. Both wife and husband were devoted, and each was holy. One expressed his spirituality by Torah study and prayer, the other expressed her spirituality by devoted service to her husband. The archetypal aspiring tzaddik sits and studies Torah and *davvens* (prays) confined in the *beit midrash*, the house of Torah study; his wife is confined to their home, caring for the children and him. But they each act out of pure spiritual motives to serve God. By their devotion, they are released from the restricted confines of their egoism to fly freely in the exalted heavens of holiness and bliss.

Most of us today expect women to have a broad and equal scope for their spiritual lives. But we can still be inspired by the devotion of the holy women of former times or of today who choose to follow a supportive lifestyle. One can appreciate and be inspired by another person's devotion and holiness, even if one pursues a different path. Some very pious Jewish women cut off all their hair and wear a kerchief. I sometimes tell modern Jewish women, "If you heard

of a Buddhist nun who cut off all her hair, you might say, 'Wow!' Why not give the same credit to your Jewish sisters, to say, 'They're trying to attain something spiritually. They're going all the way!' It is a mistake to impute the highest motives to women of another religion but to impugn the motives of one's traditionally pious Jewish sisters. You don't have to tread the same path or want to cut your hair to appreciate and be inspired by their sincerity and spirituality."

There are few traditional tales about holy women. If we reduce their number still further by excluding those that show women in a supportive role, we are left with nothing in our hand. Some tales showing women in supportive roles are unworthy and demeaning, but many are inspiring, if one has an open heart and the eyes to see. Why should we look down on our pious grandmothers and great-grandmothers? Why should we disparage their holiness and piety? I have included some tales in this collection that may challenge the reader's values. I hope those tales will be appreciated in the spirit they are offered and will be pondered. I favor the full development, appropriate for our time, of women's religiosity and spirituality, as they choose. But I want to revere the ways of our forebears, of our holy women of former times.

Much of the unfortunate animosity and disrespect among religious people of different persuasions would be dissipated if people understood that they can pursue one path and yet appreciate another. The ancient Rabbis gave us concepts to apply to sincere people of contrary views, such as "These and those are the words of the living God" and "Leave him alone, for everything he does is for the sake of heaven"—meaning that someone may seem to be acting contrary to what you consider the correct path, but you should not trouble him because of that because in truth, everything he is doing is for the sake of God.

I hope this book inspires people to holiness and piety. Let it be seen as part of a movement toward a fuller appreciation of tales of Jewish women's holiness. Let me make two practical suggestions toward that goal. First, Jewish tales of holy women are still unfolding today; let us begin to notice and record the pious deeds of women

we know—our family, friends, and teachers. Second, how wonderful it would be if many of us who observe the Sabbath and Jewish holidays made it a custom, at our festive table, to always tell or even to read aloud a tale of a holy woman—perhaps from this book. Others can find different contexts for the telling of these tales. But the ultimate purpose of sacred tales is to elevate our religious life. In fact, many of the tales in this book describe spiritual practices that can be imitated.

A traditional Jewish text states, “There are angels—divine messengers and servants—above and angels below. There are also ‘female’ as well as ‘male’ angels.”²

May we be more aware of the female angels here on earth below and learn to tell their tales and imitate their ways.



The Tales

