

LIMMUD VANCOUVER

Marginalization as Opportunity – A SpeakChorus*

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The Voices

Narrator

One - Sabina

Two - Sheva

Three - Elka

Four - Ethel

Five - Hinde

Unison - All

Singer

* With thanks to Iris Parush, **Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society** (2004) Brandeis University Press.

The Speakchorus

Singer: Chants a few verses from Eishes Chayil, Women of Valour, in traditional nusach, fade to ...

Narrator: *The story of Jewish women in 19th century Eastern Europe during the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment. The benefits of women's marginality in a male-dominated world. Life in the women's space. Women as agents of change, of modernization, of secularization.*

Sabina: I am a subversive

Sheva: I am a trespasser

Elka: I am a revolutionary

Chorus: We are ... women who read! In plain sight, unsupervised, unnoticed, free!

A new world of foreign languages, of classical literature, of culture.

We grew up in the margins ... the inferior margins.

Reading marked us, changed us, empowered us.

We were transformed ... and became ... agents ... of social change.

Singer: Hums a bit of a (Dudele) niggun, then reads/recites/creates a bit of a tkhina.

Elka: I am Elka, a child bride. I grew up in a shtetl near Odessa. My father was the rabbi. My brother went to cheder. In my world, the men were spiritual. They studied

Torah and Talmud. They observed the mitzvos. The women were practical; they took care of the men ... and the children. They stayed home and cooked and cleaned ... and laughed ... and sang ... and prayed to God.

Singer: Hums a bit more of the (Dudele) niggun.

Chorus: God is in my kitchen, and in my kitchen, and in mine!

The men pray in the synagogue. They pray three times a day. I pray my challah. I sacrifice ... my challah. [Chant the blessing over challah.]

Elka: When I was 14 years old my parents matched me to Leib. I didn't want to marry him ... or anyone. I cried and cried and cried. But it was no use; I had no choice. After the wedding, we lived with my parents. They supported us so he could study. Before we were married, I was so free. I couldn't go to school with my brothers, but I was smart! My parents wanted me to learn things. Not Torah and Talmud, but to read Yiddish and do arithmetic. They hired Yankel to tutor all their daughters. And so ... I learned.

Chorus: A window of opportunity ... unexpected possibilities. We learned the ideas of the Haskalah from our tutors. Liminal men who brought us books and pamphlets to read.

They brought us ideas, knowledge about change ... in the outside world. While our brothers studied Torah and Talmud, we studied secular topics ... sciences, foreign languages, classical literature, ... even Hebrew!

We read about changes in Jewish life, about how Jews prayed, and were living in “their” cities, about working in professions.

Even the clothing we wore ... changed. We took off our wigs!

Elka: I could smell that change was coming. But I didn’t have the courage to leave my community. I was a daughter of Israel. I remained enslaved. But I became a passive agent of the Haskalah. I encouraged our children, to be educated ... not just Jewishly, religiously, but in secular subjects too.

Chorus: When the men weren’t looking, when they were intent on preserving the gender hierarchy, we upset ... the social order.

Sheva: I am Sheva. I grew up in Brisk, in Belarus. My family was very poor and needed me to work to put food on the table. They made sure I could speak the folk languages; they made sure I could add and subtract ... and write. I would be more marriageable if I could be a breadwinner. I became tough. I became aggressive. Domineering! A fishwife. I didn’t like myself. But I was successful!

Chorus: Ezras Nashim ... the Women’s Section ... the private space.

Tkhines that suited our lives and echoed our themes. The Bible stories in the Tseina Ureina were way more interesting than the law.

For men, prayer and study of the law were required. Not for women.

Sheva: They taught me what I needed to know ... just what I needed to know. My husband Mordechai and I fought ... a lot. He only knew Yiddish. I had a head for

languages. I spoke Polish, Russian, German. I was exposed to “them”. The Christians. Polish and Russian and German gentleman. Outside society. Mordechai was jealous ... controlling. I was soooooo frustrated. The difference between my status in the marketplace ... as a business woman and my “place” ... in my home, in my community, became unbearable.

Chorus: Rabbi Eliezer used to say: “He who teaches his daughter Torah is teaching her promiscuity.”

Really? Are they joking? They must be joking!

They looked on us with disdain. They thought that teaching us, allowing us to learn, would cause our moral decline, ... their moral decline, ... the Jewish people’s moral decline.

Decline? No ... modernity!

They thought we were stupid. They were wrong!

But that saved us from those horrible schools where our brothers suffered ... and didn’t really learn much anyway.

Women’s place.

Women’s space.

Chaotic space.

Our space! Where we laughed and danced and sang and prayed and learned and read and ... were!

A source of empowerment ... of advantage. Unexpected possibilities!

Singer: Hums a snippet from ???

Sabina: I am Sabina. My family lived in Warsaw. My parents couldn't afford tutors, so they sent me to a secular girls' school. Such schools were forbidden to my brother. They are the agents of assimilation, my father said. But ... not for me. I didn't get a Jewish education ... no religious subjects for me.

Chorus: While the Maskilim and the Haredim fought over Jewish souls, male Jewish souls, ... we read novels for pleasure. They didn't care about our education. They left us room ... to learn what we wanted.

The Maskilim started writing novels in Yiddish for us to read. Silly stories they thought. Marginal stories.

Sabina: I found refuge from my hard life in those stories. By candle light I read. Late at night ... love stories. I read of a different world ... where I could marry a man for love. Incredible! Even ... perhaps ... a Maskil! I loved their ideas. Of science and reason ... of participating in the whole wide world. Why not? While our brothers were learning Torah and Talmud, "they" invented the steam engine. We had to include ourselves. The world around us had changed. We also needed to change. I brought the Maskilic ideas into my world. Once, I even caught my brother reading one of my books. Ha!

Chorus: Some of us read Polish, Russian, German, even French and Italian.

The Maskilim created a library for Jewish girls so we would read “superior” books, raise our moral standards.

Sabina: I demanded that I be allowed to marry for love. I refused an arranged marriage. My parents were furious. I threatened the very foundation of their traditional society. Of male authority ... of male power.

Our parents lost control of our reading ... lost control of us. We developed ... liberal views!

Ethel: I am Ethel. I am a courisist. I wanted more education ... higher education. I wanted to become a midwife. My parents wouldn't hear of it. So I ran away ... to the city. There was an underground of women who helped us. I lived in wretched conditions ... but it was worth it. It was worth all of it. I was **not** a moral degenerate. I was **not** a traitor to my people! But ... at the university I met ... revolutionaries. How could I help but be influenced by them? Some courisists even converted. ... Maybe there was some basis for their fears

Chorus: And finally, incredibly ... we learned Hebrew!

Apostasy! Heresy! They said the world would end!

We expected that from the Haredim, the traditionalists in the shtetls, but ... the Maskilim? They laughed at the religious. But just like them, the Maskilim were afraid ... of us, afraid we would ... upset their social order.

They didn't have much respect for religious men, ... thought they were lazy, slothful.

But both had the same prejudice against us. The women!

They wanted us back in the kitchen, out of the salons, out of the universities.

But it was too late ... too late ... **too late!**

Hinde: I am Hinde. I call myself Henrietta. My father was a Maskil. We lived in Warsaw. He didn't mind so much when I read Yiddish, or even when I read Polish, but when I started to read Hebrew, oy vavoy! Hebrew was Lashon Koydesh/the Holy Language. The language of our religion. The language of men. I was a betrayer. I am a Holy Language Girl. Am I still a Daughter of Israel?

Ridiculed and persecuted by the religious. Abandoned by the Maskilim. All we wanted was to be ... equal.

They were afraid we would assimilate ... would not involve ourselves in the Jewish national enterprise.

Hinde: They thought my desire to learn Hebrew was because I was shallow, that I just wanted another adornment. Like a new necklace. But I wanted to learn Hebrew **because** I wanted to be part of the Jewish national enterprise. I became a Zionist.

Chorus: I am a subversive.

I am a revolutionary.

I live in the margins.

I am a modern, ... a secular.

And I am **still** a Jewish woman.

I **will** say kaddish for my father myself!

We are ... **feminists** ... before feminism!

Singer: Sings the first verse of Bread and Roses

Narrator: *This is our story. This is your story. It is alive in us. In all of us!*