

Marginalization as Opportunity – A SpeakChorus¹

© Rabbi Susan Shamash

Yom Kippur Mincha 5779

THE VOICES

NARRATOR

- ELKA** a child bride from a shtetl near Odessa; her father was a rabbi
- SHEVA** grew up in Brisk, Belarus and was sent to work young because her family was poor and to make her more marriageable
- SABINA** lived in Warsaw and was sent to a secular girls' school because her parents could not afford a tutor
- ETHEL** wanted more education and ran away from home to become a "coursist"
- HINDE** lived in Warsaw; her father was a Maskil
- ALL** all speakers
- SINGERS** all singers
- EVERYONE** all speakers and singers

¹ With gratitude to Iris Parush, **Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society** (2004) Brandeis University Press.

NARRATOR: BLESSINGS BEFORE THE READING²

בְּרוּכָה אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר מְרַחֵפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם וּמְצַמֶּלֶת
אֶת בְּאֵר מֵרִים הַנְּבִיאָה

בְּרוּכָה אַתָּה יְיָ עַיִן הַחַיִּים אֲשֶׁר מוֹשֶׁה דִּבְרֵי תוֹרָה מִמַּיִם-חַיִּים בְּרַחֲמִים
רַבִּים

Bruha at Yah, eloheynu ruah ha'olam, asher merahefet al peney
hamayim umamaleytt et be'eyr Miryam hanevia.

Bruha at Yah, eyn hahayim, asher mosha divrey torah mimayim
hayim berahamim rabim.

Blessed are you, Yah our God, Spirit of the Universe, who hovers
over the face of the waters and replenishes the well of Miriam the
prophet.

Blessed are you, Yah, Source of Life, who with abundant compassion
draws words of Torah from the living waters.

² **Women's Haftarah Blessings**, Dorshei Derekh Women's Haftarah Group

SINGER: (*Chants in Haftarah trop*)

The Enlightenment - a revolution of ideas, of philosophies of political theories and a process of democratization. Change in the very nature of the state. People moved from the country to the cities, from agriculture to industry. Wealth and power spread out and down, the universities opened to the “masses”, and the separation of Church and state began.

Meanwhile, in Berlin, a group of young men recognized an imminent explosion in the Jewish world. The maskilim - intellectual elite outside of the rabbinic framework. Called many things into question, especially rabbinic control of the institutions of the Jewish community and in secular life. Their goal - to bring rationalism into Judaism, to study secular subjects and bring their ideas and learning back into Judaism, to change Judaism to keep it relevant. A seismic change.

And the women? They lived on the margins in Eastern European shtetls, relegated to the home, ignored. This marginality became a powerful subversive tool for women’s liberation and societal transformation. They had the freedom to think, discuss, read and move into modernity almost clandestinely while the men were unaware and oblivious.

Women were exposed to the outside world, became literate, numerate, and multilingual. They were not permitted to study Torah or Talmud but brought in the money to feed their families.

They became extroverted, tough, hardcore business women. They learned to read vernacular languages and Hebrew. They had a

secular education; they were exposed to enlightenment ideas, poetry, Russian, Polish and Renaissance literature. Private tutors were hired and secular schools for girls were established.

They changed their behaviours: refused marriage to rabbinic scholars, forged secret alliances for secular education, became heretical, ran away from home for a higher education, and joined revolutionary movements.

Their story in spoken word and song ...

SINGERS: (*sing Eishes Chayil, Woman of Valour³, Kapitchnizer niggun*)

אִשֶּׁת חַיִּיל מִי יִמְצָא, וְרַחֵק מִפְּנִינִים מְכָרָה
בְּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בַּעֲלָהּ, וְשָׁלֵל לֹא יִחָסֵר

Eshes chayil mee yimtzo, verochok mi'pninim michro.

Botach bo lev baalo, vesholol lo yechsor.

NARRATOR: A woman of valour, who can find? Far beyond pearls is her value.

Her husband's heart trusts in her and he shall lack no fortune

SABINA: I am a subversive

SHEVA: I am a trespasser

ELKA: I am a revolutionary

ETHEL: a scholar ...

HINDE ... a Zionist!

ALL: **We are women who read!**

ETHEL: In plain sight ...

SHEVA: ... unsupervised ...

HINDE: ... unnoticed ...

ALL: ... **free!**

³ **Book of Proverbs** 31:10-31; credited to King Solomon. Translation and transliteration from chabad.com

SHEVA: A new world ...

HINDE: ... of foreign languages ...

ELKA: of classical literature ...

ALL: ... of culture.

ELKA: We grew up ...

ETHEL: ... in the margins ...

SABINA: ... the inferior margins.

ALL: **Reading marked us ...**

SHEVA: ... changed us ...

HINDE: ... empowered us.

ETHEL: We were ...

ALL: ... transformed ...

ELKA: ... and became ...

ALL: ... agents of social change.

SINGERS: *(sing the beginning of the Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev's
Dudele niggun)*

EVERYONE: *(sing) Riboyne Shel Oylom*

ELKA: Creator of all creations, author of all wonders. I come to You in my
time of weakness to thank and praise You.

EVERYONE: *(sing) Riboyne Shel Oylom*

SABINA: You created me from a piece of earth and lump of clay and now You have done the same in my womb; You have split open my body wondrously like You did the sea.

EVERYONE: *(sing) Riboyne Shel Oylom*

ETHEL: Indeed, I was in Your hands the entire time. Accept my blood, my labour pains, and my weakened state as an offering and a sacrifice.

EVERYONE: *(sing) Riboyne Shel Oylom*

SHEVA: Return me to good health so that I can raise the child well so that he can develop good qualities and perform good deeds to bring him contentment.

EVERYONE: *(sing) Riboyne Shel Oylom*

HINDE: Master of the Universe, during my childbirth, I was like Isaac ascending to the sacrifice and You granted me, too, life, through the help of holy angels, as You spared him the knife and redeemed his life.

SINGERS: *(sing the second part of the Dodele niggun⁴ under the speakers)*

ELKA: I am Elka, a child bride. I grew up in a shtetl near Odessa.
My father was the rabbi. My brother went to cheyder.

In my world, the men were spiritual. They studied Toyrah and Talmud. They observed the mitzvos.

⁴ Beginning where the melody changes at “mizrach - Du”; sing the melody just using the word “Du”.

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.

SINGERS: *(sing the second part of the Dodele niggun under the speakers)*

ETHEL: God is in my kitchen,

SABINA: and in **my** kitchen,

ELKA: and in **mine!**

SHEVA: The men pray ...

HINDE: ... in the synagogue. They pray ...

ETHEL: ... three times a day.

SABINA: I pray my challah.

ALL: I sacrifice ... my challah.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם המוציא לחם מן הארץ

**Boruch Atoh Adoynai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'Oylom, ha'moytzi
lechem min ho'oretz**

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 Toyrah and Talmud, but to read Yiddish and do arithmetic. They hired Yankel to tutor all their daughters. And so ... I learned.

ALL: **A window of opportunity ...**

HINDE: ... unexpected possibilities.

ALL: **We learned the ideas of the Haskalah ...**

ELKA: ... from our tutors.

ETHEL: Liminal men ...

SABINA: ... who brought us books and pamphlets to read.

ALL: **They brought us ideas ...**

ETHEL: ... knowledge ...

ELKA: ... about change ...

ALL: ... **in the outside world.**

HINDE: While our brothers studied Toyrah and Talmud ...

SHEVA: ... we studied secular topics ...

ETHEL: ... sciences, foreign languages ...

SHEVA: ... classical literature ...

ALL: ... **even Hebrew!**

ELKA: Even the clothing we wore ...

SHEVA: ... changed

ALL: ... **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.

SHEVA: When the men weren't looking ...

ELKA: ... when they were intent ...

ETHEL: ... on preserving the gender hierarchy!

ALL: **WE upset ... the social order.**

SINGERS: *(sing the second part of the Dodele niggun under the speakers)*

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!

ALL: **Ezras Nashim ...**

HINDE: ... the Women's Section ...

ALL: ... **the private space!**

HINDE: Tkhines that suited our lives ...

SHEVA: ...and echoed our themes.

ELKA: The Bible stories in the Tseina Ureina ...

ETHEL: ... were way more interesting ...

ALL: ... **than the law.**

SABINA: For men, prayer and study ...

ALL: ... **of the law** ...

SABINA: ... were required.

SINGERS: *(sing the second part of the Dudele niggun under the speakers)*

SHEVA: Not for women. 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.

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

ELKA: Really?

ETHEL: Are they joking?

ALL: **They must be joking!**

HINDE: They looked on us with disdain.

SABINA: They thought that teaching us ...

SHEVA: ... allowing us to learn ...

HINDE: ... would cause our moral decline ...

ETHEL: ... *their* moral decline ...

ALL: **The Jewish people’s moral decline!**

ELKA: Decline?

ALL: **No ... modernity!**

SABINA: They thought we were stupid.

ALL: **They were wrong!**

SHEVA: But *that* saved us ...

HINDE: ... from those horrible schools...

ELKA: ... where our brothers suffered.

SINGERS: *(sing the second part of the Dudele niggun under the speakers)*

ALL: Esras nashim!

HINDE: Women's place.

SHEVA: Women's space.

ELKA: Chaotic space.

ALL: Our space!

SABINA: Where we laughed ...

HINDE: ... and danced ...

SHEVA: ... and sang...

ETHEL: ... and prayed ...

ELKA: ... and learned

ALL: and read — and were a source of power — of advantage!

SABINA: Unexpected possibilities!

SINGERS: (*sing Mayn Shtetle Beltz⁵ in Yiddish only*)

Oy, oy, oy Beltz, mayn shtetele Beltz,
Mayn heyemele, vu ikh hob
Mayne kindershe yorn farbrakht.

Oy, oy, oy Beltz, mayn shtetele Beltz,
Mayn heyemele, vu ikh hob
Mayne kindershe yorn farbrakht.

⁵ As sung by Theodore Bikel. Music Alexander Olshanetsky and Jacob Jacobs; Lyrics Burstein, Lith-Frey, Roman.

Oy, eden Shabes fleg ikh loyfn
Mit ale inglekh glaykh
Zitzn unter dem grinem beymele,
Leynen bay dem taikh.

Oy, oy, oy Beltz, mayn shtetele Beltz,
Mayn heyemele, vu ikh hob
Mayne kindershe yorn farbrakht.

Oh Beltz, my little town!
The little house where I spent my childhood!

Oh Beltz, my little town!
The little house where I spent my childhood!

Every Shabes I would run to the river bank to play with
Other children under a little green tree.

Oh Beltz, my little town!
The little house where I spent my childhood!

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.

SHEVA: While the Maskilim and Haredim ...

HINDE: ... fought over Jewish souls ...

ALL: ... male Jewish souls ...

ELKA: we read novels ...

ETHEL: ... for pleasure.

ELKA: They didn't care ...

ALL: ... about our education!

HINDE: They left us room to learn ...

ALL: ... what we wanted!

ETHEL: The Maskilim started writing novels...

SABINA: ... in Yiddish ...

SHEVA: ... for us to read.

ELKA: Silly stories they thought.

ETHEL: 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 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 Toyrah and Talmud, the gentiles 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!

HINDE: Some of us read Polish ...

SABINA: ... Russian ...

ELKA: ... German ...

SHEVA: ... even French

ETHEL: ... and Italian.

ALL: **The Maskilim created a library for Jewish girls ...**

ELKA:: ... so we would read “superior” books ...

ALL: **... 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.

HINDE: Our parents lost control of our reading ...

ETHEL: ... lost control ...

ALL: **... of us!**

SHEVA: We formed ...

ALL: **... liberal views!**

SINGERS: *(sing the second part of the Dudele niggun under the speakers)*

ETHEL: I am Ethel. I am a coursisit. 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 coursisits even converted. Maybe there was some basis for their fears.

SABINA: And finally ...

HINDE: ... incredibly ...

ALL: ... **we learned Hebrew!**

ELKA: Apostasy!

SHEVA: Heresy!

ALL: **They said the world would end!**

SHEVA: We expected that from the Haredim ...

ETHEL: ... the traditionalists in the shtetls.

ELKA: But ... the Maskilim?

ALL: **They laughed at the religious.**

SABINA: But just like them, the Maskilim were afraid ...

ELKA: ... afraid of us!

HINDE: Afraid we would ...

ALL: ... **upset their social order.**

SABINA: They didn't have much respect for religious men.

SHEVA: Thought they were lazy ...

ELKA: ... slothful. But both had the same ...

ETHEL: ... prejudice against **us!**

ALL: **The women!**

HINDE: They wanted us back...

SHEVA: ... in the kitchen ...

ELKA: ... out of the salons ...

ETHEL: ... out of the universities.

SABINA: But it was too late ...

HINDE: ... too late ...

ALL: **too late!**

SINGERS: *(sing the second part of the Dudele niggun under the speakers)*

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?

ALL: **Ridiculed and persecuted by the religious.**

ETHEL: Abandoned by the Maskilim.

SABINA: All we wanted was to be...

ALL: ... equal.

SABINA: They were afraid we would

SHEVA: ... assimilate ...

ELKA: ... would not involve ourselves in the ...

ALL: ... **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.

ALL: **I am a subversive.**

SABINA: I am a revolutionary.

ELKA: I live in the margins.

HINDE: I am a modern. A secular.

SHEVA: And I am **still...**

ALL: ... a **Jewish woman**. I **will** say kaddish for my father myself!

ALL: **Yisgadal v'yiskadash shemey rabo. Oymayn. Be'olma di-v'ro chirusei, ve'yamlich malchusei b'chayeychon u'v'yomeychon uvchayei d'chol beis Yisroyel, ba'agolo u'vizman koriv v'imru ...**

SINGERS: *(start singing Bread & Roses⁶ softly under the speakers (from "Oymayn")*

(pp) As we go marching, marching in the beauty of the day

(p) A million darkened kitchens, *(mp)* a thousand mill lofts gray

(mf) Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses

(f) For the people hear us singing bread and roses, bread and roses.

ALL: **We are feminists before feminism. This is our story.**

NARRATOR: This is your story.

SINGERS: It's alive in us.

EVERYONE: **In all of us!**

EVERYONE: As we go marching, marching in the beauty of the day
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray

⁶ Based on a poem by James Oppenheim, 1911; as sung by Joan Baez and Mimi Farina.

Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses
For the people hear us singing bread and roses, bread and
roses.

As we go marching, marching, we bring the greater days
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories, bread and roses, bread and
roses.

NARRATOR: Blessings after the Reading⁷

בְּרוּכָה אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ לֵב הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר שָׁמָּה לֵב אֱלֵינוּ וְשׁוֹמֵעַת קוֹל
לִבֵּינוּ; רַחֲמֵי עָלֵינוּ וְיִשְׁמַע קוֹל דְּמָמָה דְּקָה

בְּרוּכָה אַתָּה יְיָ שִׂמְחַת הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר מְאַוְרֶרֶת רוּחֵינוּ לְשִׁיר שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ

Bruha at Yah, eloheynu lev ha'olam, asher sama lev eyleynu
beshoma'at kol libeynu: rahami aleynu v'yishama kol demama daka.
Bruha at Yah, eloheynu simhat ha'olam, asher me'oreret ruheynu
lashir shir hadash.

Blessed are you, Yah our God, Heart of the Universe, who attends to
us and hears the voice of our hearts; have compassion on us and
make audible the still, small voice.

Blessed are you, Yah our God, Joy of the Universe, who awakens our
spirits that we may sing a new song.

⁷ **Women's Haftarah Blessings**, Dorshei Derekh Women's Haftarah Group

NARRATOR: *(leads a standing silent Amidah beginning with a Chatzi Kaddish)*

(the Repetition of the Amidah is Marge Piercy's "Amidah: On Our Feet We Speak to You" read by the Narrator and a community activist feminist elder)

We rise to speak
a web of bodies aligned like notes of music.

Bless what brought us through
the sea and the fire; we are caught
in history like whales in polar ice.

Yet you have taught us to push against the walls,

to reach out and pull each other along,

to strive to find the way through

if there is no way around, to go on.

To utter ourselves with every breath

against the constriction of fear,

to know ourselves as the body born from Abraham
and Sarah, born out of rock and desert.

We reach back through two hundred arches of hips

long dust, carrying their memories inside us

to live again in our life, Isaac and Rebecca,

Rachel, Jacob, and Leah. We say words shaped

by ancient use like steps worn into rock..

Bless the quiet of sleep

easing over the ravaged body, who quiets
the troubled waters of the mind to a pool
in which shines the placid broad face of the moon.

Bless the teaching of how to open
in love so all the doors and windows of the body
swing wide on their rusty hinges
and we give ourselves with both hands.

Bless what stirs in us compassion
for the hunger of the chickadee in the storm
starving for seeds we can carry out,
the wounded cat wailing in the alley,

what shows us our face in a stranger,
who teaches us what we clutch shrivels
but what we give goes off in the world
carrying bread to people not yet born.

Bless the gift of memory
that breaks unbidden, released
from a flower or a cup of tea
so the dead move like rain through the room.

Bless what forces us to invent
goodness every morning and what never frees
us from the cost of knowledge, which is
to act on what we know again and again.

All living are one and holy, let us remember
As we eat, as we work, as we walk and drive.

All living are one and holy, we must
make ourselves worthy.

We must act out justice and mercy and healing
as the sun rises and as the sun sets,
as the moon rises and the stars wheel above us,
we must repair goodness...

We will try to be holy,

We will try to repair the world given us to hand on.

Precious is this treasure of words and knowledge and deeds that moves inside
us,

Holy is the hand that works for peace and for justice,

Holy is the mouth that speaks for goodness

holy is the foot that walks toward mercy.

Let us lift each other on our shoulders and carry each
other along.

Let holiness move in us.

Let us pay attention to its small voice,

Let us see the light in others and honor that light.

Remember the dead who paid our way here dearly, dearly
and remember the unborn for whom we build our houses.

Praise the light that shines before us, through us, after us, Amein.

NARRATOR: *(leads a Mourner's Kaddish)*

(closes with Nava Tehila's Oseh Shalom)