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## Book Review: Jewish Women's History from Antiquity to the Present

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***Book Review: Jewish Women's History from Antiquity to the Present***<sup>1</sup>

Reviewed by Linor Kadoch<sup>2</sup>

*Jewish Women's History from Antiquity to the Present*, edited by Federica Francesconi and Rebecca Lynn Winer, is a compilation of the work of 21 authors. The text provides an overview of the lives and experiences of Jewish women through different periods of time, spanning from 1500 until the recent period. Individual chapters examine the diversity and complexity of Jewish experiences across regions, highlighting Jewish women's significant contributions and struggles in shaping their communities and societies. One of the main themes explored is the role of Jewish women in religious practices and customs. Several authors highlight ways in which Jewish women have participated in and shaped religious practices and customs throughout history. They explore the role of women in rituals and religious observance, such as lighting Shabbat candles, and their active participation in other aspects of religious observances, such as keeping kosher and observing the laws of family purity. The discussion also includes the leadership role that some Jewish women have played in religious communities.

The contributing authors also examine how the status of women in Jewish religious practice and customs has evolved over time, starting with the chapter on “Gender and Women’s History in Rabbinic Literature” by Tal Ilan, and including “Medieval Jewish Women in Muslim and Christian Milieus” by Judith R. Baskin and “Jewish Women in early Modern Italy” by Federica Francesconi. These chapters discuss how changes in Jewish law and practice have led to increased participation by women in religious activities, including involvement in Jewish practices. This evolution is an important reflection of the diversity and complexity of the Jewish experiences across different regions and times.

According to Francesconi and Winer (p. 10), Jewish women who were forcibly converted to Christianity in 1391 in Christian Iberia were more likely than men to maintain their Jewish practices through the secret observance of *mitzvot* (precepts). This finding demonstrates the remarkable resilience of Jewish women in preserving their religious practices and identities despite societal pressures and expectations. In Christian Iberia, where many Jews were coerced into converting to Christianity, women who had converted faced significant social and religious pressure to conform to Christian beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, by secretly adhering to Jewish traditions, these women were able to resist these pressures and assert their own agency and identity.

Francesconi and Winer (2020, p.15) note, “When life in the modern Western world led most assimilating Jewish men to abandon traditional Jewish culture and limit their religious expression to periodic appearances at synagogue and the performance of some communal service, their wives absorbed the dominant societal expectations of women as the guardians of religion . . . retaining some domestic aspects of Jewish tradition, including customary foods, and transforming others into ostensibly secular family celebrations, such as the Friday evening, rather than Sunday, dinner.” This surfaces another example of how Jewish women adapted and transformed traditional Jewish practices in response to social changes and pressures, and demonstrates how even when the men assimilated into the non-Jewish world, Jewish women were able to maintain the religious

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<sup>1</sup> Francesconi, F., & Winer, R. (Eds.) (2021). *Jewish Women's History from Antiquity to the Present*. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press.

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tradition and heritage to combat assimilation. This aligns with Moss (2014, para. 5), who in an assessment of gender and spirituality states that “women are far ahead when it comes to spiritual strength,” suggesting that women tend to be more attuned to spiritual matters, more accepting of faith-based ideas, and more naturally drawn to the divine than men. Francesconi and Winer assert that the women have a special capacity for understanding abstract and intangible concepts that are beyond the reach of the male soul, inherently making the woman a more spiritual person. Therefore God instructs Abraham, the first Jewish man, to listen to his wife Sarah because she is a greater prophet than he is, with a more intuitive soul.

Chapter authors build on the discussion of religious leadership and examine how Jewish women's experiences have been shaped by their social and cultural contexts and how they have responded to the challenges and opportunities presented to them. Historically, Jewish women in many societies have faced limited opportunities for economic and social mobility due to patriarchal structures and discriminatory laws. Across the Jewish diaspora, “Jewish women likewise were involved in moneylending, trade, handicrafts (including making veils and coral beads), weaving, work in furs, shoe selling, and manufacturing.” (Francesconi & Winer, 2020, p. 102). For example, sixteenth century Jewish women in Venice organized themselves in female communities of artisans, thus challenging the anonymity that characterized their underpaid work in the sector of silk production.

Overall, *Jewish Women's History from Antiquity to the Present* presents a fairly comprehensive collection of essays that highlights the significant contributions and struggles of Jewish women in shaping their communities and societies. The contributing authors showcase the diversity of Jewish women's experiences across different regions and times. The book is a good addition to the Jewish Studies and Gender Studies literature and may be useful to readers focused on a gendered historical narrative. The writing is accessible and informative and is recommended for both undergraduate and graduate studies programs, as well as the lone reader with interest in the subject.

## References

- Francesconi, F., & Winer, R. (Eds.) (2021). *Jewish Women's History from Antiquity to the Present*. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press.
- Moss, A. (2014). *The gender gap - are women more spiritual?* Chabad.org.  
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