



MILTON KEYNES AND DISTRICT  
REFORM SYNAGOGUE

# Listen



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## Status of Jewish Women in the Middle Ages

Isabella Wilson

Each time I open a history book I hear these words :

**“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” - L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between***

And they indeed did ...

The more I read and researched into various books about Jewish Women in the Middle Ages I realised that this is indeed a vast subject which is now being studied and written about by various scholars. I strongly believe that the foundations for the independent spirit of Jewish women were

formed in the early Middle Ages mainly by, but not only, Rabbi Gershon ben Judah who forbade polygamy. Thanks to the great Rabbi - we are, now, all Jewish Princesses whose motto is “do not tell me what to do”.

Bringing together a variety of sources including halachic literature, biblical and talmudic exegesis, ethical literature and philosophy, love songs, folklore and popular literature, gravestones, and drawings, historians were able to reconstruct the hitherto unrecorded lives of Jewish women during the Middle Ages.

Although it is well known that **Urania, daughter of Abraham**, sang before female congregants in Worms. Another cantor, **Richenza**, is mentioned in *The Memorial Book of Nuremberg*. **Dulcia**, wife of Rabbi

**Eliezer of Worms**, taught women prayer words and songs. While today female teachers and cantors hardly seem shocking, these women lived during the medieval era when, as has long been historically accepted, women held little power, leadership or communal roles.

The High Middle Ages saw a distinct improvement in the status of Jewish women in Europe relative to their status during the Talmudic period and in Muslim countries. If, during the 12th century, rabbis applauded women as "**pious and pure**" because of their major role in the martyrdom of the Crusades of 1096, then by the end of the 13th century, rabbis complained that women were becoming **bold and rebellious**.

Two main factors fostered this change: first, the transformation of Jewish society from agrarian to "bourgeois," with women performing an increasingly important function in the family economy; and second, the openness toward women in Christian Europe, where women were not subjected to strict limitations based upon conceptions of modesty, as was the case in Muslim countries.

One young woman, an orphan whose brothers had arranged her engagement, married and established her own household while she was just eleven-and-one-half years old. A year later, "when she reached her majority [according to Jewish law, twelve-and-one-half]

she sued her brothers for her proper share of her father's estate.

### **Early Marriage: Sin and Economics**

Why were children married so young? One commentary on the Talmud from the 13th century gives the following explanation: "The reason we nowadays are accustomed to betroth our daughters even while they are minors is that our life in the Diaspora is becoming harder; consequently if a person is now in a financial position to give his daughter a proper dowry, he is apprehensive lest after the lapse of some years he will be in no position to do so and his daughter will remain unwed forever."

But there were other, less negative motivations as well. One would be the religious desire to remove young people from the sexual tensions and temptations that might lead to sin. Economic factors were also operative. Favourable business conditions meant that a well-dowered young couple could support themselves immediately, learning the business at the same time. Moreover, marriage could form an enduring and profitable partnership between two wealthy families, contributing to the prosperity of all. Marriages might also have a social aspect, for settling a young daughter well proved her desirability and increased her family's prestige.

## Big Dowries, High Standing

Daughters were given large portions of their parents' property as dowries; and the size of the dowry could also enhance the social standing of the bride's relations. Since the capital with which a young couple started life had its origin mainly in the bride's portion, parents demanded strong guarantees in the marriage contract that the bride would be treated with respect, that her marriage would have some permanence, and that she would have financial security. Thus, the high level of dowries could assure a wife a prominent position in her household.

There was one woman who definitely fits the bill and was well known for business acumen and her charitable works: **Doña Gracia Nasi** was born in 1510 to a family of Spanish exiles who moved to Portugal in 1492 and was forced to convert in 1497. So, we're talking about a family of converting Jews. Doña Gracia herself was Christian at birth, but came from a family that had very strong ties to its Judaism. She married a fellow converso, had a child and was widowed rather young. She realized that it was dangerous to stay in Portugal because the Inquisition was being established, so she proceeded to move to Antwerp, where her brother-in-law had a thriving business and she joined him. As an internationally known woman she helped fellow conversos flee by establishing an underground

railroad. She had business agents all over the countries of Europe.

She helped refugees, she helped build synagogues and study houses, she fostered the translation of the Bible into Spanish so that her fellow Sephardim could read it. She came up with the idea of a major ban on the Port of Ancona because they had arrested and imprisoned and killed a number of her fellow conversos. She also came up with the idea of establishing a settlement in Tiberias, which she did not live to see and which eventually fell apart because of her death.

## Monogamy and Stable Businesses

In recognition of this social reality, as well as under the influence of the prevailing mores of the Christian environment, Rabbi Gershom ben Judah (c.960-1028), the first great rabbinic authority of Ashkenazic Jewry, is credited with the ruling that polygamy (already rare in this Jewish community, although still legally permitted) was forbidden and more significantly, in opposition to rabbinic law and practice, that no woman could be divorced against her will.

Familiarity with money led many women to take the initiative in business matters, and often they supplied a part of, or even the whole of, the family income, sometimes allowing their husbands to devote themselves to study. During their husbands' absences on business, women ran the families' affairs...

Women engaged in all kinds of commercial operations and occupations, but moneylending was especially preferred.

Widows would frequently continue their financial activities, occasionally in partnership with another woman. Such undertakings, which could be extremely complex, undoubtedly required literacy and training in mathematics and bookkeeping skills. Some women were probably involved in craft activities as well, and there are also some references in Christian sources to independent Jewish women who practised medicine.

The level of religious education among Western European Jewry certainly included literacy in Hebrew for all men, and for a small elite, considerably more. Occasionally, these higher standards also applied to women, particularly those from families distinguished for their learning. In the early 12th century one of the daughters of **Rabbi Shlomo ben Isaac (Rashi)**, the preeminent biblical and Talmudic commentator of the Ashkenazic Middle Ages, is known to have recorded responsa (answers to legal questions) from her father's dictation, an undertaking requiring knowledge of rabbinic Hebrew...

**Rashi's daughters** were the three daughters and only children of the Medieval Talmudic scholar **Rashi** and his wife Rivka. Their three daughters were **Yocheved, Miriam**

and **Rachel** (11th–12th century). They each married their father's finest students and were the mothers of the leaders of the next generation of French Talmudic scholars. Almost every Ashkenazi rabbinic dynasty traces its ancestry back to either Yocheved or Miriam, and the majority of the tosafists were recent descendants of Rashi's daughters. All born in Troyes, France, their descendants inhabited Germany, France and Italy in the early 11th to 15th centuries, with the majority later moving to Eastern Europe, where they established several notable rabbinic dynasties.

The intellectual roles of learned Jewish women, however, remained ancillary to mainstream “male” Judaism, consisting either of assisting the male members of their family or providing elementary instruction and synagogue leadership to young girls and other less privileged women. To call these women's activities ancillary of course, is not to invalidate their spiritual depth and religious meaning for the participants...

Since most ordinary Jewish women were cut off from the knowledge of Hebrew that would enable them to read the traditional liturgy and holy books, during the Middle Ages, a separate women's vernacular literature of tekhnines (supplicatory prayers specially directed towards women's needs and concerns) began to be produced—sometimes by women—and simplified “women's Bibles” to fill women's spiritual

needs were written. These volumes had great appeal for less-educated male members of the Jewish community as well.

## Chairman's Report

### Priscilla Dorrance

At the beginning of December, it looked as if things were finally getting back to normal. We were able to hold a hybrid Shabbat morning service, which was well attended both in person and online. Then the day after we held our Chanukah Party which 37 people attended. We were all socially distancing and wearing masks, but it was fantastic to see people face to face.

Unfortunately, the Omicron variant meant that we had to take a few steps back in January and revert to holding services on Zoom. We were pleased to have Student Rabbi Shulamit Morris-Evans return to lead the first service of the year. I'm delighted to inform you that we have arranged for Student Rabbi Shulamit to lead a service a month, starting in March.

With Covid more under control, Council has decided that from the beginning of February all Saturday Shabbat services will be in-person only (i.e. not on Zoom). Friday evening services will continue, for the time being, on Zoom.

When attending in-person services, please continue to wear masks (unless medically exempt) and take a lateral flow test before coming. If you aren't feeling well, for whatever reason, please stay at home.

Another exciting project we are working on is a proposed MKDRS trip to the Czech Republic in November 2022. As you will know, one of our scrolls comes from the town of Pacov, about 130 km south-east of Prague. All 97 of the Jews in Pacov were deported in November 1942 and only 6 survived. There are no Jews living in Pacov now. However, the residents of Pacov have set up an organisation called Tikken Pacov and have managed to buy the old synagogue and have started the process of restoring it, with the aim of turning it into a museum and memorial. They have invited us to a ceremony to commemorate 80 years since the deportation in November next year. More details will be coming out shortly, but please pencil in 11-18 November in your diaries and let me know if you are interested in joining the trip.

Our community is run by volunteers and, while this sometimes puts a lot of stress on key people, I also feel that it is one of our strengths. Thank you to everyone who helps to make MKDRS a supportive and vibrant community.

Unfortunately, it looks likely that we are going to be losing some key members of our Council at the next

AGM. If you could spare a bit of time to help steer the synagogue in the right direction, and would like to know what's involved, please let me know.

Standing for Council isn't the only way you can help. If you would be willing to help with 'meeting and greeting', security, phoning members to check they are OK, organising a social event (to name just a few things) – please let me know. If everyone were to help out 2-3 times a year, it would make a huge difference.

I wish you all the best for 2022!

## Tu B'Shevat Malcolm Pruskin

In 2022, Tu B'Shevat began at sunset on Sunday, Jan. 16 and ended at sunset on Monday, Jan. 17.

Tu B'Shevat or the "birthday" of all fruit trees, is a minor festival. The name is Hebrew for the 15th of the Hebrew month of Shevat.

In ancient times, Tu B'Shevat was merely a date on the calendar that helped Jewish farmers establish exactly when they should bring their fourth-year produce of fruit from recently planted trees to the Temple as first-fruit offerings.

### The Tu B'Shevat Seder

In the 16th century, the Kabbalists (mystics) of Tzfat (the city of Safed)

in the Land of Israel created a new ritual to celebrate Tu B'Shevat called the Feast of Fruits. Modelled on the Passover Seder, participants would read selections from the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic literature, and would eat fruits and nuts traditionally associated with the land of Israel. The Kabbalists also gave a prominent place to almonds in the Tu B'Shevat Seder, since the almond trees were believed to be the first of all trees in Israel to blossom. Carob, also known as Bokser or St. John's bread, became another popular fruit to eat on Tu B'Shevat, since it could survive the long trip from Israel to Jewish communities in Europe. Participants in the Kabbalistic Seder would also drink four cups of wine: white wine (to symbolize winter), white with some red (a harbinger of the coming of spring); red with some white (early spring) and finally all red (spring and summer).

Tu B'Shevat is also close to Shabbat Shirah. On Shabbat Shirah, we celebrate a very special moment in the Torah, a very musical moment in Jewish biblical history. It is the Sabbath of Singing. Many congregations highlight this Shabbat by creating services brimming with extraordinary music to celebrate Moses and Miriam leading the Israelites across the Sea of Reeds (The Red Sea) and out of Egypt.

On this Shabbat we read Parashat B'shalach from Chapter 15 in the book of Exodus. This section is

important for several reasons. It is visually, liturgically and musically important. Shabbat Shirah gets its name from part of the Sedra known as Shirat HaYam (song of the sea).

Visually, this song/poem is laid out very differently from the rest of the Torah so it is very obvious to the reader and to the congregation during Hagbah that something special is happening. Liturgically, this is the part of the Torah from which the Rabbis selected Mi Chamocha to become part of our worship.

## AWMK Group Update

### Viv Pollock

**Exciting MK Arts Project: first meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> February.**

We are very excited to announce the launch of our art project.

First, a little history:

You may be aware that the women's group, MKMJ (Milton Keynes Muslim and Jewish Women), originally founded by our member Lynda Gilbert, has recently expanded to include Christian women, hence the change of name to "Abrahamic Women- Milton Keynes" (AW-MK), to reflect our shared Biblical heritage.

Covid curtailed many of the events we had planned for last year, but we

were able to hold a picnic in Campbell Park last September. Luckily it did not rain and we were able to catch up and welcome some Christian ladies new to the group.

Last year we heard that Arts and Heritage Association - MK (AHA-MK) were taking applications from community groups to engage an artist who would create a work of art to represent their group. AHA-MK would award a grant of over £8000 to each group's chosen artist.

We decided to apply and AHA-MK gave us guidance on how to write an artist's brief which we submitted last summer. It was published online and soon we had expressions of interest from *seven* different artists, ranging from sound and music artists, performance artists, poets, and artists working in textile, metal, fused glass, wood and Perspex (and some in more than one of these media).

Our brief asked for an artist in the visual arts who could represent us in a project that explored similarities in designs and patterns in the traditional artwork (such as illuminated manuscripts) of the three communities of Jewish, Christian and Muslim women in Milton Keynes.

We created a shortlist of four artists whom we interviewed via Zoom in December. They were very talented and made favourable impressions with all of us. Unable to decide between two finalists, we

interviewed them again at the start of January and chose Salina Somalya as our artist. You can view her gorgeous works of art on her website: <https://www.salinasomalya.com/>.

Salina has proposed a tryptich of arches decorated with patterns and symbols which represent our three faiths. She will work with us in a series of workshops to create the motifs for the arches in a number of different media.

Any women interested, please join us on 14 February for the first workshop, and an opportunity to meet Salina and discuss ideas for the project. The workshop will be held at 1pm at a venue in Milton Keynes still to be confirmed. Please let me or Lou Tribus know if you'd like to come.

## School visits resume

### Lou Tribus

It didn't take very long after the 2021 Autumn Term started for the schools to start contacting MKDRS asking either to visit or to have someone visit the school.

By the end of that term, we had six school groups visit MKDRS, ranging in age from Reception class (5 year olds) to GCSE students (15-16 year olds). We also visited a Year 2 class in Northampton and had a virtual visit to a school in Wellingborough.

We've had some return visitors: St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Primary School has sent their Year 2 pupils to visit us regularly for quite a few years now. They still ask for "Mr Stan" to be there when they visit us. Fortunately, "Mr Stan" is available again this year to help me with this group. Tickford Park Primary School is also returning for their second visit, bringing Year 2 pupils.

There have also been some firsts. Viv and Brian Pollock and Sarah Katz and I spent the whole of Monday 1 November hosting two separate GCSE groups from St Thomas Moore Catholic High School. We were all very impressed with the depth of the pupils' knowledge about Judaism and the intelligent questions that they asked. Viv, Brian, Sarah and I made a good team and called extensively on Brian's experience as a Senior School teacher. The photos below are from the St Thomas Moore visit.

The other first was a virtual workshop with all the pupils at St John Rigby Catholic Primary School. I spent 10-20 minutes with each class, from Reception to Year 6 via Microsoft Teams, answering questions about Judaism. Their head of RE is very keen to visit the synagogue once the school is allowing school trips again.

I enjoy these visits. They are important on many levels and I am delighted that we are "back to school" again at MKDRS.



<https://forms.office.com/r/DwwNfipSQ6>



allowing MK residents, employees and visitors to provide feedback on anti-social behaviour and crime concerns. You can also have your say on the priorities for the Community Safety Strategy for the next 3-5 years.

### **Terrorism**

The rating is on Severe at the moment but there is no specific information concerning a threat and the rating is reviewed regularly.

### **Thames Valley Police Update**

There is a targeted Stop & Search initiative in the Wolverton and Westcroft areas at the moment because of tensions between the two areas.

There have been a number of distraction thefts, during daylight hours, at ATMs in CMK (Lloyds Court), Westcroft and Bletchley but they could occur anywhere. Be vigilant! The police think it is an out-of-area gang doing a sweep of MK. e-Scooters are a menace and the police are addressing this problem. Because of lockdown burglaries were down by 44% in the last year.

## **Report from the Independent Advisory Group meeting in December**

Sandra Bonn

### **Neighbourhood Policing**

A case study of a racial incident concerning a carer and the client and the steps taken to address it.

### **Community Safety Survey**

There is an ongoing survey to be found at

## **An unusual Chanukah**

Sheila and Andrew Goldsmith

As everyone knows, we were in Lockdown during Chanukah 2020,

which meant that our family couldn't come into our house to light the candles with us, and receive their Chanukah gifts.

So, just like Baldrick in Blackadder, we came up with "a cunning plan".

We unlocked the garden gate, so that Suzanne and the children could come into the garden. We opened the back door to the garden, moved the kitchen table nearer to the back door, and they watched us light the candles from the garden (see photo). We sent their presents home with Suzanne, and then watched them open them on a video link. Thankfully in 2021 they were able to join us in our home to light the candles together.



## MKDRS CHANUKAH PARTY 2021

The Chanukah party on 5 December was a big success. Luckily, it took place before Omicron became a concern. Nearly 40 people attended the party, including several potential new families. Special guests included Cllr Mohammed

Khan, the Mayor of Milton Keynes, and some of the Jewish residents at the MacIntyre Care Home. We were delighted to have Andre Hemi play his guitar and lead us all in singing Chanukah songs. The wonderful display of fully lit chanukiot was especially bright this year as the party occurred on the 8th night of Chanukah.





Sunday, 6<sup>th</sup> February – Adult Education Session: Rabbi Sybil Sheridan will be talking about Jews in Ethiopia, 3pm (in the synagogue)

Friday, 11<sup>th</sup> February – Erev Shabbat Service led by Lou Tribus, 7.30pm (on Zoom)

Thursday, 17<sup>th</sup> February – Women's Reading Group, 1.45pm

Friday, 18<sup>th</sup> February – Erev Shabbat Service led by Richard Assenheim, 7.30pm (on Zoom)



Saturday, 26<sup>th</sup> February – Shabbat Service led by Priscilla Dorrance, 10.30am (in the synagogue)

Sunday, 27<sup>th</sup> February – Cheder, 10am-12.15pm

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## Diary (February – April 2022)

### February

Wednesday, 2<sup>nd</sup> February – Sewing and Craft Day, 10am-3.30pm

Saturday, 5<sup>th</sup> February – Shabbat Service led by Stan Cohen, 10.30am (in the synagogue)

Sunday, 6<sup>th</sup> February – Cheder, 10am-12.15pm

### March

Wednesday, 2<sup>nd</sup> March – Sewing and Craft Day, 10am-3.30pm

Friday, 4<sup>th</sup> March – Erev Shabbat Service led by Michael Lindsey, 7.30pm (on Zoom)

Sunday, 6<sup>th</sup> March – Adult Education Session: Vetta Alexis will be talking about Illuminated Jewish Manuscripts, 11.30am (on Zoom)

Saturday, 12<sup>th</sup> March – Shabbat Service led by Stan Cohen, 10.30am (in the synagogue)

Sunday, 13<sup>th</sup> March – Pre-Purim Party, 10am  
Everyone welcome!

Wednesday, 16<sup>th</sup> March – Erev Purim Service led by Richard and Cathy Assenheim, 7.30pm (on Zoom)

Thursday, 17<sup>th</sup> March – Women's Reading Group, 1.45pm

Saturday, 26<sup>th</sup> March – Shabbat Service led by Student Rabbi Shulamit Morris-Evans, 10.30am (in the synagogue)

#### **April**

Friday, 1<sup>st</sup> April – Erev Shabbat Service led by the Choir, 7.30pm (place to be confirmed)

Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> April – Cheder (Mock Passover Seder), 10am  
All children and families welcome

Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> April – Adult Education Session: Stan Cohen will tell us about his experiences of visiting Jews in prison, 4pm (in the synagogue)

Wednesday, 6<sup>th</sup> April – Sewing and Craft Day, 10am-3.30pm

Friday, 8<sup>th</sup> April – We will be joining SWESRS for their Erev Shabbat Service, time not yet known (on Zoom)

Friday, 15<sup>th</sup> April – First night Pesach

Saturday, 16<sup>th</sup> April – Community Seder  
(details still to be decided)

Thursday, 21<sup>st</sup> April – Women's Reading Group, 1.45pm

Thursday, 21<sup>st</sup> April – Erev 7<sup>th</sup> Day Pesach service, 7.30pm  
(place to be confirmed)

Sunday, 24<sup>th</sup> April – Cheder, 10am-12.15pm

Saturday, 30<sup>th</sup> April – Shabbat Service led by Student Rabbi Shulamit Morris-Evans, 10.30am (in the synagogue)

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## **From the Editor** **Isabella Wilson**

I would like to receive more articles, notes, memories from our members of MKDRS. Share your experiences with us – whether it be from your childhood or later in life. What were your grandparents like? Were you a naughty boy or girl? Please tell us ...

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with many thanks