Meneket Rivkah


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*Meneket Rivkah* (Rivkah’s nursemaid) is the moral-homiletic book written by Rivkah Tiktiner (b. unknown - d. 1605)—otherwise known as “Rivkah bat Meir,” and first published posthumously, in Prague in 1609 and subsequently, in Krakow in 1618. A copy of the first edition is preserved in the library of the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, while the second edition may be found in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. The book’s title is an allusion to *Genesis* 35:8, a passage that relates of the death of Rivkah’s nursemaid, Devorah.

Tiktiner’s work belongs to the canon of *musar* (ethical) literature, which was written in Yiddish and found particular popularity among women and uneducated men in the 16th-17th centuries. The publication of *Meneket Rivkah* was no small feat, given the timeframe in which it was written, when many Jewish women could neither read nor write—let alone, entertain the thought of composing a full-scale “normative book.”

Indeed, *Meneket Rivkah* is considered the oldest Yiddish language book ever written by a woman. By this token alone, it would seem to merit a great deal of attention by scholars and laypersons alike. Add to that, the intrigue associated with the fact that the book was believed lost from the late 19th century and not rediscovered until several decades later, in the late 1970s, and one might naturally assume that this work would have garnered far greater publicity than it ever did—certainly, since its rediscovery—over three decades ago.

According to Frauke von Rohden, the historian who recently reissued *Meneket Rivkah* in its first modern, annotated, and English translation as *Meneket Rivkah: A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women*, there are a number of reasons to account for the book’s lack of fanfare. For one thing, research of Old Yiddish Literature developed quite slowly. This negligent attitude may be further attributed to the fact that moral-homiletic literature was traditionally

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1 Tiktiner, Intro., p. 1.
2 Frauke von Rohden’s edition of *Meneket Rivkah* was published by The Jewish Publication Society in January 2009.
perceived as being secondary to say, rabbinical literature, with its associated halakhic, exegetic, and mystical currents. By extension, works written for a female readership were historically given short shrift, as compared to the deference given to literary works written by and for men. Finally, in the wake of the Holocaust, there has been a general lack of attention paid to Yiddish Literature written in the framework of traditional literature.

Von Rohden’s modern edition is based on the text’s first publication (Prague, c. 1609), and incorporates the Yiddish and German to English translations and annotations of Samuel Spinner and Maurice Tszorf, and aims to make Tiktiner’s words more accessible to a wider audience, as well as to broaden the literature pertaining to Jewish women in history. Moreover, it seeks to place *Meneket Rivkah* “within its contemporary Yiddish and Hebrew moral literature.”

In her introduction, Von Rohden provides an historical context for Rivkah Tiktiner’s words by piecing together the scant biographical details available concerning her origins, life, and overall literary output. For instance, even the question of Tiktiner’s place of birth remains enigmatic; her surname [Tiktiner] would seem to indicate that her roots lay in the town of Tiktin [Yid.]=Tykocin, in Polish=near Bialystok. However, it is believed that she spent at least the last years of her life in Prague, where she died and is buried in the old Jewish cemetery.

It also remains unclear whether or not Tiktiner was the daughter and/or the wife of a rabbi, since the epitaph upon her headstone refers to her as “Rivka bat morenu ha-rav rabi Meir Tikotin” [Rivkah, daughter of our teacher and master, rabbi Meir Tikotin] and she was eulogized on the title page of *Meneket Rivkah* with the titles, “darshanit ve-rabanit” [the female preacher/interpreter and female teacher/rabbi]. The latter may have been honorifics bestowed upon her, attesting to her depth of knowledge and instruction in and around Prague. It is also possible that she was a firzogerin—a Yiddish term dating back to the early modern period referring to Jewish women who explained liturgy to other women, sometimes even composing

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3 Tiktiner, p. xiv.  
4 Ibid.  
5 Ibid., pp. 4-5.  
6 Ibid., p. 7.
tkhines, and “translating prayers and at least parts of the sermon, praying with them and singing hymns…”

What does seem clear though is that regardless of whether or not Tiktiner stemmed from a rabbinic household, she possessed a rare fluency in Hebrew, Yiddish, biblical, rabbinic, and midrashic literature that was probably acquired from her childhood home. Indeed, it was her remarkable breadth of knowledge that prompted the printer to issue the following statement on the title page of *Meneket Rivkah*: “Who has ever heard of or seen such a novelty; has it ever happened in countless years, that a woman has written something of her own accord? And she has read numerous verses and midrashim…”

Until Rivkah Tiktiner’s *Meneket Rivkah*, Jewish exegetical works had all been composed solely by men. With her work came the rendering of new interpretations of the Torah’s written law and oral tradition that sometimes broaden rabbinic interpretations and offer an explicitly female perspective. For instance, the traditional rabbinical interpretation views menstruation and the pains of childbirth and labor as punishments for Eve’s sin of having eaten from the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. In contrast, Tiktiner distances herself from such a misogynistic approach—instead, attributing these physiological functions to “women’s natural character since animals, too, are capable of pregnancy and birth.” For this reason, Von Rohden states that we might even consider Tiktiner’s book an outright “feminization of exegesis.”

In keeping with other morality books of the early modern period, the main thrust of *Meneket Rivkah* is that of how a married Jewish woman is to conduct herself within domestic and social spheres. The book, which is divided into thirty-six folios and seven chapters, devotes the most space—in chapter five—to the rearing and education of one’s children. Ironically, although Rivkah Tiktiner was herself, clearly a role model for Jewish women’s education in her day and age, she does not explicitly advocate that girls should know Hebrew, nor does she outline any specific educational program for girls. According to Von Rohden, this noteworthy

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7 For further elaboration on the institution of the firzogerin (also known as zogerke), see for instance: *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* by Judith Reesa Baskin, p. 173. See also: Ibid., pp. 8-9.
8 Ibid., pp. 12, 80.
9 Ibid., p. 33.
void can only be understood in light of the times in which Rivkah Tiktiner lived: a society in which the education of girls and women was viewed at best with ambivalence, one in which limitations were imposed by powerful rabbinical leaders. In such a milieu, there was little room for “the development of a program of female education.”

In conclusion, *Meneket Rivkah* is a literary timepiece that provides a rare glimpse at the position of Jewish women in the early modern period, as well as the unusual insights and uncommon erudition of one such woman. Frauke Von Rohden’s newly edited version of Rivka Tiktiner’s original work—replete with its extensive and well-documented introduction—serves as a guide to comprehending a text that might otherwise appear daunting and anachronistic to today’s reader. *Meneket Rivkah* is a one-of-a-kind work that will be highly valued by scholars of Women’s/Feminist Studies, Jewish History, Yiddish Literature, Linguistics, and laypersons who are enthusiastic about these fields of study.

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10 Ibid., p. 47.