Seder Nashim


Reviewed by Ilan Fuchs, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

*Seder Nashim* is the title of a special Siddur printed in Salonika in 1565 CE. Written in Ladino using Hebrew letters, *Seder Nashim* was designed for women’s use. Edited in a way that would be most useful for women who do not frequently join communal prayers, the Siddur’s content and order was intended for women who wished to worship throughout the day, at breaks between their domestic responsibilities. The original introduction to the Siddur states that only the prayers obligatory to women have been included.

In the original *Seder Nashim*, there is no mention of the individual, who compiled and edited the prayers. However, scholars have identified its editor as Rabbi Meir Benbashat, who is known for compiling a Ladino adaptation of the *Shulḥan Arukh*.

This current edition of *Seder Nashim* is a critical edition edited by Ora (Rodrigue) Schwarzwald from Bar-Ilan University. She is a scholar of Judeo-Spanish studies and in this project she focuses on the linguistics of the text. In her introduction and a subsequent article by Aldina Quinta, linguistic concepts such as morphology and phonology are discussed at length.

Schwarzwald’s critical edition is, however, not only of interest to students of Judeo-Spanish. Her *Seder Nashim* is an important source of information for scholars of gender and religion, and much insight can be gained regarding the daily life of Jewish women in the sixteen century. *Seder Nashim*’s original editor attempted to create a handbook of sorts, offering clear and concise guidelines that would curtail the amount of time required for prayer practiced by men, and acknowledge the dilemmas faced by women whose primary responsibilities were in the home.

This editorial goal is manifested in quite simplistic ways in *Seder Nashim*. For example, the Halakhic requirement to pray in a clean environment is discussed in the *Shulḥan Arukh Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 76-82. In *Seder Nashim*, the editor instructs women not to pray in the presence of naked children or dirty diapers (pp. 65-66). The laws for ritual hand washing, a basic practice in traditional Jewish homes, are described in a detailed, yet easily understood, manner (pp. 86-66).
Seder Nashim also gives guidance in Halakhic questions that are relevant to a Jewish woman’s ritual practice, such as the question of when to recite the blessing over the Shabbat candles. Some Halakhic authorities rule that the blessing should be recited before the actual lighting of the candles, as is common with other actions that require a blessing (Shulḥan Arukh Ḥalakot Ḥayyim 263:5, 10). Other authorities, suggesting that reciting the blessing signifies the beginning of the Shabbat, rule that it would then be forbidden to light the candles and instead instruct women to light the candles and only afterwards recite the blessing (Rema 263: 5). In Seder Nashim, the editor instructs a woman to verbally declare that she does not accept the prohibitions of Shabbat until after the candles are lit, then recite the Shabbat candle-lighting blessing, and finally light the Shabbat candles (pp. 91-92).

These and other Halakhic instructions included in Seder Nashim teach us much about women’s participation—or lack thereof—in Jewish religious life. On Purim, the Siddur instructs women to send mishloah manot (ritual food baskets) and donate money to the poor, but only if she does not have a husband to deliver them in her name (p. 122). At the end of the Siddur, the editor added Halakhic instructions about issues that he felt were of special interest to women. He explains that women need to take special care in following the commandment of ḥallal (dough offering) as this commandment is traditionally assigned to women so they can atone for Eve’s sin (p. 239 and Mishnah Shabbat 2, 6). He also includes a short list of instructions concerning family purity laws, warnings against women’s custom to apply makeup on Shabbat, the need to finish baking bread before the Shabbat starts, and a warning against gossiping (p. 240-246).

Seder Nashim is a special text that offers us a glimpse into the daily and private lives of Jewish women living in another time and place. Because these women preformed their religious obligations in the privacy of their own homes, they were not active in communal worship and their lives and experiences are not recorded in the common canonical texts of religious literature of the time. Seder Nashim, as well as other sources like it, provides scholars with a unique opportunity to learn about the domestic life of Jewish women living in the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth century.