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Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society (The Tauber Institute Series for the Study of European Jewry)

Iris Parush

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In this volume, Iris Parush opens up the hitherto unexamined world of literate Jewish women, their reading habits, and their role in the cultural modernization of Eastern European Jewish society in the nineteenth century. Parush makes a paradoxical claim: she argues that because Jewish women were marginalized and neglected by rabbinical authorities who regarded men as the bearers of religious learning, they were free to read secular literature in German, Yiddish, Polish, and Russian. As a result of their exposure to a wealth of literature, these reading women became conduits for Haskalah (Enlightenment) ideas and ideals within the Jewish community. This deceptively simple thesis dramatically challenges and revamps both scholarly and popular notions of Jewish life and learning in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe. While scholars of European women's history have been transforming and complicating ideas about the historical roles of middle-class women for some time, Parush is among the first scholars to work exclusively in Jewish territory. The book will be a very welcome introduction to many facets of modern Jewish cultural history - particularly the role of women - which have too long been ignored.

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