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## Women's Image in a Polish Magazine: *Midrash*

**Abstract:** *Midrash*, a Polish social and cultural profile magazine (published since April 1997), is a monthly journal that is a representative of the so-called 'minor press'. The magazine is connected with the Midrash Library publishing house. Its founder was Konstanty Gebert and the current editor is Piotr Paziński. The articles of *Midrash* magazine give answers to such questions as: How are women described and treated in modern patriarchal Judaism culture? In what context is it possible to talk about issues connected with women and Zionism. *Midrash* magazine also deals with a positive interpretation and presentation of women via the multitude of interviews and articles concerning strong, talented, and determined women. Despite their hard lives these women were and are able to create successful careers and wonderful families. Their voices are an important element in discussions that refer to culture, faith, and historical heritage. The image of the woman as presented by *Midrash* will be confronted with the cultural recognition of the woman in the Jewish community. This article will use quantitative analysis (the linguistic method and literature studies) with help from the qualitative case study research method.

*Keywords:* Jewish women, woman's magazine, women's image, woman's media discourse, Jewish culture

### Introduction

The main purpose of this research study was to define what types of women's images were presented in the Polish *Midrash* magazine. The secondary purpose was to show how the position of the woman changed in the Jewish community, especially after World War II. The aim of the paper is to produce a description and characterization of the image of women in *Midrash* magazine – an image that is different from the traditionally accepted concept of women in Jewish culture. This image of women will

then be compared with the classical point of view as excerpted from Jewish culture on this topic. It is important to note that the role of women in culture in general and in Jewish culture changed greatly after World War II.

How exactly is the image of women described and perceived in the patriarchal culture of the Jewish community? In what context are the problems of women and Zionism discussed? In what way is the narration in *Midrash* magazine of all the above-mentioned terms presented?

The publisher of *Midrash* magazine in Poland uses all sorts of format correlated with press and paper articles, e.g. dialogues, interviews, reportages and so on. *Midrash* refers to different contexts, such as the historical background of Jewish culture and the social aspect of family and ties between people (Pleszczyński, 2013, p. 226). The core meaning of materials published by *Midrash* magazine is wide and can refer to social and cultural processes as a whole.

A specific language and terminology are used and a characteristic type of narration has been created by *Midrash* magazine (Pisarek, 2012, 2012, p. 47.). The presented context (including a strong narration regarding the Holocaust tragedy) and via the articles, *Midrash* can create or even change the meaning of topics and images of social models. According to the specification presented by Melvin DeFleur (1982), four different ways can be classified of giving meaning by the media in public dialogue and discourse (p. 29). These are the:

1. Creation of new patterns in the way of thinking about a specific topic,
2. Increase in the capacity of meaning for a specific term or topic,
3. Adding (or deleting) a new meaning to the existing terms and topics in place of the old meanings,
4. Giving stability to the existing meanings, terms, and topics.

All of the above-mentioned ways of meaning creation can be observed in the articles of *Midrash* magazine. This is a continuous process of awareness building that can lead to the creation of a distinct point of view in the eyes of the recipients of the information. Most of the materials presented in *Midrash* are in the position of a dialogue with the history, sociology, culture, and religion of the Jewish community.

### ***Midrash*: a Profile**

*Midrash* is a magazine with a socio-cultural profile (published since April 1997). It is a bi-monthly magazine which is a representative of the so-called "minority press". It is associated with the "Midrash Libraries" publishing house, thanks to which less known positions of Jewish literature appear. The magazine's founder was Konstanty Gebert and the current editor is Peter Paziński.

*Midrash* magazine is addressed to all those interested in Jewish life in Poland and throughout the world. Its main components include numerous reviews, interviews, opinions, and reviews of translated Jewish literature. According to its assumptions, the magazine presents two aspects of Jewish culture, i.e. the old civilization of images, primarily through literature and source texts, as well as the more modern civilization that is present in the art and culture of the new world. According to the magazine's creators, the range of topics should oscillate around Jewish identity, tradition, and history. The main subjects should refer to the Christian-Jewish dialogue, Judaism, books, films, and Jewish literature. The main section of the journal is *Midrash Talks*, which is devoted to interviews with inspiring people and artists in the field of Jewish culture. Opinions and reviews, which is another section, provides information on important cultural texts that are published throughout the world. Literature, which is a part of this section, combines the aforementioned aspects of Jewish culture (old and contemporary) with the use and exemplification of literary works from different periods (classic and contemporary texts).

The journal is published with funds granted by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and with grants from the Minister of Administration and Digitization. Moreover, the sponsors include: the Jewish Community (Warsaw) and the Joods Humanitair Fonds foundation. The purpose of this paper was to analyse the content of *Midrash* issues in 2014 (numbers: 177–182) in terms of the image of women in the journal. The development of periodicals related to national minorities in Poland after 1990 is an intensive process of illustrating the multiculturalism and transformations that have been taking place in both social awareness and culture in Poland. For this reason this topic is important and worth attention.

## **Jewish Women in Terms of Culture**

Every culture, as the work of human activities including both tangible and intangible creations, is composed of a particular set of values, beliefs, and archetypes. Within cultures, aspects of spiritual development are determined along with the relationships between individuals and groups and between femininity and masculinity (Szerej, 2011, p. 5). In the framework of such structures we can identify specific patterns of behaviour, patterns of personal as well as social, moral, and legal norms. However, there are elements that are fixed and there are subjects that change over time. Followed by a kind of updated beliefs and cultural aspects of the terms of the passage of time and changes with which the culture contact. It is seen some kind of updated beliefs and cultural aspects of the terms of the passage of time and changes that culture meets. The analysis of both constant and variable values is related to specific systems,

seeks to find the truth about humans, and in the framework of the truth it shall also attempt to determine a formula perception of femininity, both in terms of tradition and through the prism of the present. The fact is that in Jewish tradition the woman plays an important role in both the social and the religious life. The question that arises is: How is the silhouette of women presented and perceived in the contemporary culture of dialogue? How is the image of women in this culture created now? The key to finding the answers to these questions is to analyse the basic texts on Jewish culture, the Talmud and the Holy Bible and texts relevant to contemporary forms of culture (the *Midrash* magazine was selected for the study).

The problem of women and femininity in Judaism is an expansive topic. It is not possible to present all of the problems in this area within this short paper. This article focuses only on selected items related to building the image of Jewish women in a selected medium (*Midrash*) as well as a basic cultural analysis of the image.

The woman in Jewish culture is presented as the bedrock of family life, the caretaker and nurse of traditions and, above all, the mother who gives birth and fulfils the act of the greatest blessing. The woman in Jewish religion is seen as a 'home'; when analysing the text of the Talmud we come to the statement: "The house of a man is his wife". The woman is a signpost and counsellor to the man, and the man has to offer support and assistance, he should also provide hope, especially in times of crisis (Levians, 1991, p. 33).

The position of women in Judaism can be interpreted in a variety of ways, on the one hand, the woman is a temple of love and the centre of the world for a man, but a woman will never take on any divine qualities and forms (Levians, 1991, p. 33), despite her role in the practice of religious rites connected with the Sabbath (the woman starts this sacred time through the symbolic lighting of Shabbat candles on Friday evening). Such an understanding of the feminine in the Yiddish culture was based on two messages: the first concerning the lack of circumcision (which is a symbolic covenant with God) and the second relating to the designated menstruation, which was the reason women were moved away from the centralized, religious life (Dragańska, 2015, p. 409). Such a devaluation of the woman and their partial removal from religious education enabled women to gain knowledge in other fields. "The traditional role of women in the study of Torah is in encouraging and enabling their husbands and sons to pursue it" (Biale, 1984). The wife as support for her husband when dealing with algebra, foreign languages or other fields may be useful in the context of the interests held by the man.

Women were also subject to the strict rabbinical plan, as men would allow them to gain an education at free universities. This was one of the reasons why Jewish women played the more important role in culture that was often written down in the history

of Yiddish culture. However, culture was not the main zone assigned by the Jewish tradition to the woman, as the family was the most important. The woman in Jewish culture was marginalized, and her most important role was that of a mother, while the role of a sister or daughter was not a significant one. The most important distinction was to be married to a man who was respected in society (e.g. a lawyer or doctor) (Grącikowski, 2010, p. 386). According to tradition, women played a secondary role in the process of creating the Jewish identity and *halakhab* – the Jewish law (Bale, 1984). The idea of a woman's recognizing her true potential outside of the institution of family was contradictory to the established understanding of the woman's role in the family environment. It was unsuitable or even farcical for a woman to have an 'autonomous existence' (Yalom, 2001). The woman as a part of society was perceived via her marriage status.

The Jewish woman in Poland needed to cooperate with the native culture in the process of acculturation without assimilation (Mendelshon, 1981). This was especially important in the interwar period, when women played the most important role in the survival of Jewish culture, tradition, and family. The woman as a figure started to be perceived as a vital segment of the Jewish community, especially with the growing problems of linguistic polonisation. Another problem was the growing aggression towards Jewish groups in Poland in the interwar period. Despite this and the anti-Semitism or social exclusion of Jewish groups, the process of spontaneous assimilation proceeded (Landau-Czajka, 2006). The growing role of women as presented by Mendelshon or Landau-Czajka is rather undeveloped if we compare it to the image of women presented by the Polish *Midrash* magazine. Most of the women in articles published by *Midrash* were even more important for Jewish society in Poland than either of the above-mentioned authors described. The reason behind this is probably the closer type of narration as presented in *Midrash* (interviews, memories).

Before World War I, the history of the Jewish community was focused on men and their political, spiritual, or cultural impact (Roth, 1959). The first articles concerning the role of women in society or culture were written by Jacob Katz, who was interested in social history and the different axes of history and narratives (social roles, context, men and women in Jewish society). For Katz, one of the most important parts of Jewish culture was the family with women as its centre. Jacob Katz created a new way of thinking about Jewish history, i.e. in order to understand the history of the Jewish people there is an even greater need to understand the history and role of Jewish women (Katz, 1945). The women were as important to history as the men, particularly in the economy department where the woman was an equal partner for the man and an important part of the commune.

The importance of the role that women held in Jewish society was far greater than the perspective presented by Katz, yet his works and articles were very important in the process of creating the women's narrative in Jewish society and postmodern Jewish history (Rosman, 2011, pp. 200–202).

After the war period, Jewish culture and Jewish people were important in Poland as a topic of the political or cultural discussion (Krajewski, 1997). Today, the Jewish community in Poland is slight, but the 'problem' of Jews is still present. It is a problem that concerns the relations or attitudes towards Jews even more than the problem of the presence of Jewish culture in the public space (Krajewski, 1997).

Today, the woman has become an equal participant in the synagogue liturgy, she is presented as an educated, wise, and free woman. She complements the man and in the same way that the man complements and determines her femininity. But to understand the history of Jewish women it is necessary to understand the history of women in Jewish society and culture. Combining the historic description with an interpretation and presentation of the women's narrative helped to develop postmodern Jewish history in general (Rosman, 2011, pp. 207–210), as it was all about experience and perspective. *Midrash* magazine published many articles based on the personal experiences of women in Jewish culture. This type of image creation is closely connected to the postmodern Jewish history. It is a great example of the importance of Jewish women in Poland and Polish society that grew together with Jewish culture. People such as Amelia Hertzówna, who is a writer, journalist, and educated person, or Erna Rosenstein, who is a poet, painter, and generally a talented artist, helped in the laborious process of changing the perception of women in Jewish culture. It can even be stated that it was their rebellion against the formula of the patriarchal communities from which they originated that was the inspiration for their work and activities.

### **The Image of Women in the Polish *Midrash* Magazine**

In terms of the category of gender, a multi-level study of culture can be carried out. Every society can be described from the perspective of the role models of both women and men. In order to understand and internalize the history of Jewish society in Poland it is necessary for the narration to come from Jewish men as well as from Jewish women. A great portion in the part of the Jewish women's narrative can be observed in articles presented by the Polish *Midrash* magazine. This connected approach (telling a story from both the men's and women's side) proved to bring great results in telling the story of the new historiography and the process of transformation of the Jewish community (Parush, 2004).

Writing connected with Midrash culture presents a specific recognition of the world, provides texts and creations of culture to a wider audience, and creates reviews, opinions, and interviews. It is a source of knowledge about Judea and has an impact on the perception of the Jewish community and its representatives in the field of culture (in literary, historical as well as visual terms) (Sikorski, 2015, p. 562). The analysis of contents (a case study analysis of creating the image of certain women) published in *Midrash* magazine in 2014 shows that there are distinct types of femininity listed in social terms, e.g. the issue of roles in society, the impact that texts published by the sender could have on the collective imagination. Among the questions raised in the course of the analysis of the material were: How is the woman described in *Midrash*? Are women involved in the publication of texts presented by *Midrash*? What is the role of culture? Where is the new context of femininity formed? How important is the figure of the woman in the modern history of the Jewish people? Literature studies were conducted to present the issue in more detail.

The first text published in *Midrash* in 2014 that concerned a woman was an interview from the January edition. The heroine of the text was Erna Rosenstein (poet, writer, and artist connected with the theatrical form), whose life story was the theme of the January issue of *Midrash*. Rosenstein, the sister of Paweł Rosenstein Rodan, was a student at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts. During the war she was living in L'viv and escaped from the L'viv ghetto. She hid under a false name in Warsaw and then in Częstochowa. Her paintings are full of ghetto images and war themes. The interview was conducted by Urszula Usakowska-Wolff (2014, p. 24).

The first part of the interview refers to Rosenstein's biographical information, her childhood and period during World War II. The artist presents her memories through the lens of her father (an Austrian judge who opened a legal office after moving to Poland). The Rosenstein family moved with their father and his place of work; in the interview the figure of the man can easily be seen as presenting the role of the mentor (the same approach is presented by Erna Rosenstein in relation to her first husband, Allan Kosko). There are two other topics that are discussed in the interview: the Warsaw Uprising and the painter's artistic development after 1949. The main aspect was the establishment of the Second Krakow Group which was founded in 1957 (its members were Tadeusz Kantor, Jonas Stern, Kazimierz Mikulski and Jadwiga Maziarska). In the interview Erna Rosenstein is presented as a strong and independent woman. She says about herself: "I was stubborn ... this also resulted from my attitude, that I never intended to give up". An image of the artist devoted to her convictions appears. The artist is not able to agree on something she does not believe in (her opposition against socialist realism after 1950, which ended with a reprimand, party boycott, and artistic boycott).

Another text in the same issue and by the same author complements the interview, it is titled *Reflections on canvas, words that do not become silent. Memories of Ernie Rosenstein* (Usakowska-Wolff, 2014, p. 28). The text is in the form of private memories of the text's author about Rosenstein and her works of art. Thanks to this article the image of this woman-artist is more clear as a creator not so much of life as of art. Her work based on the transformation, appreciation, and destiny of objects of all kinds is described (Usakowska-Wolff, 2014, p. 29). Usakowska-Wolff presents her heroine as an artist who is separate and distinct and for whom art was life. Rosenstein's multimedia activities and her wide range of works, i.e. paintings, drawings, assemblages, poems, fairy tales as well as theatre and film scripts are underlined clearly. She did what she liked, without compromise and without regard for the consequences. She was great and modest as an artist and as a woman. Another woman presented on the pages of *Midrash* was Francis Themerson. She was described in an article along with her husband, Stefan Themerson (Kłossowicz, 2014, p. 70). The main subject of the article was a festival called Themerson Days, which was held in Warsaw where the two artists' achievements were presented. Novels and biographical films were discussed and presented during the event. The main topic of the discussion was the nature of the Themersons' joint work. The author of the article, John Kłossowicz, described the image of talented women who are equal partners in art as the men. In the foreground, the aspect of cooperation between the artists appears along with their differences. The author gives information on Frances Themerson's individual exhibitions, as she presented her works in, among others, London, Edinburgh, France, Sweden, or Italy. Kłossowicz states that the exhibitions largely pertained to the joint work of Stephen and Frances. The scenery from 1963 for the play *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry is considered to be the artist's largest success (the art was prepared for the Marionetteatern in Stockholm). The show's main advantage, which gave the tone, were supposed to be only the decorations, costumes, and puppets made by Frances Themerson. The show ran for twenty-four years. It was also shown in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Scotland, Czechoslovakia, Italy, and Japan, and also in Mexico and Venezuela. *Ubu Roi* was the most exciting spectacle of the sixties.

Another *Midrash* issue (March–April 2014) also commences with an interview with a strong woman (as it did in the January issue), i.e. a translator associated with literature issued in Yiddish – Bella Szwarcman-Czarnota (Paziński, 2014, p. 4). The conversation was conducted by Peter Paziński (the meeting took place during the XVI Days of Jewish Books, June 2013) and the main topic was her translation of the work *Chelemer Majses – the Rabbi without a head* which had been published in 1930. Szwarcman-Czarnota shows her great knowledge about the origin of these stories, is familiar with the various theories about them and refers to other writers who, as



opposed to Menachem Kipnis (the author of *Chelemer Majses*), described the town of Chełm as a place of abundance and prosperity. Bella Szwarzman-Czarnota was presented as a specialist of a specific subject. She was a woman of great knowledge and skills (both literary and linguistic). The first article from *Midrash* in 2014 which fully reflects the traditional (in the classical sense of Jewish culture based on patriarchy) approach to the image and social role of the woman is Monica Krajewska's text titled "Fragrant Seder Haggadah". In this text the author describes the preparations for the celebration of Passover. For a woman who is a housewife preparing for the festival consists of three phases: panic, mobilization, and action (Krajewska, 2014, p. 28). The basic obligations of the 'housewife' in this approach include cleaning and cooking. As for the spiritual dimension, the woman is obliged to prepare the Haggadah or collections of stories designed to present a symbolic journey. A very important element of the Haggadah are the illustrations. This is the driving force of the imagination, i.e. combining what is imagined with the written word.

The woman was very important in Jewish culture after the events of World War II. First, she was important because she could give birth to the next generation, and her gender turned out to be the stronger one if it was to survive the turmoil of war to transfer the memory and history to the children, thus arises the appearance of the woman in survivor cultures. An interesting example of such a figure was presented by Dorota Kulig in *Midrash's* March issue (2014) in an article containing the memories of Dora Zins. Dora Zins was born in Mszana Dolna on June 24, 1919 (Kulig, 2014, p. 54). She talks about the Nazi Germans who came to her hometown (on September 3, 1939). The Zins family was deprived of any means of livelihood and was placed in a makeshift ghetto, where there were hunger, suffering, and repression, "We lived like plants without soil", she says. Zins talks about the Jewish-German and Polish-German relations in the area of Mszana Dolna and about helping her parents to decide to leave to Krakow (during the occupation every person of Jewish origin was not allowed to move without a permit). In 1942, while she was working in Krakow, Dora Zins heard the tragic news that all members of her family were murdered by the Germans (Kulig, 2014, p. 55).

The next heroine was resettled from Krakow to Tarnow and then to Płaszów. She was in the camps in Auschwitz, Zwodau, and Gundelsdorf. She relates her feelings from April 1945 from the last camp: "I felt very lonely, I had the impression that besides me there are no more Jews in the world". The formula of the article (memories) allows to tell it in the first person narrative, thus making the story more vivid and more direct. World War II is an important aspect of Jewish culture that is difficult to apprehend and is still deeply inherent in the everyday narrative and media. As a part of this article the image of a woman who survived the turmoil of war was presented;

it is an image that is often explored by *Midrash* because of the historical value of these types of memories and stories for the contemporary consciousness and for Jewish culture. Another view of the aforementioned topic was presented in the magazine's May edition in which there were two articles on the same topic: *Scars on the numbers* and *Without clothes we are all one colour*. The first of the texts, an interview with Dana Doron conducted by Agnieszka Wądołowska-Marczewska, concerns a document shot by Doron on the lives of former prisoners of Auschwitz 70 years after their liberation (Wądołowska-Marczewska, 2014, p. 5). Subjects related to the living survivors of concentration camps have been raised many times, among others by the prestigious magazine "New York Times", as part of the texts moved by the aspect of Israel's policy in relation to the Holocaust, an attempt to raise the rank and importance of this event in order to eliminate any other narratives. In the words of Dana Doron, the Holocaust at some point began to overshadow all relevant issues (such as social assistance for the survivors of this tragedy) and this has led to some kind of social numbing.

The heroine of the interview, who is the author of the documentary film and a doctor by profession, goes beyond the theme of her work during the interview and enters into the political aspects of the narrative of the Holocaust. She appears to be a strong and determined woman with strong opinions, policy, or communication (she considers the problem as to when teaching about the Holocaust should be started and whether it should be the most important issue for Israel). The second text, no. 179, also presents the image of a woman survivor from the camp. *Without clothes we are all one colour* returns to the memories formula as did the Dora Zins article (*Midrash* 03/2014). This time the text was sent to the Opinions and Reviews section.

The main axes of the subject are the memories of Anjy Lundholm (actually Helgierdtmann; the document's title is *Gates of Hell. Ravensbrück*), who was a political prisoner detained in the KL Ravensbrück camp since early 1944. Lundholm presents the camp's reality in a very direct way, avoiding any censorship of the media. This article closes the number thematically and encourages the reading of literature concerning prisoners who survived the concentration camps. The Holocaust appeared again in the October edition of *Midrash* in which Halina Birenbaum, in a conversation with Anna Augustyniak, discussed the 'Reconciliation after the Holocaust' debate which took place in Warsaw (Augustyniak, 2014, p. 5). Birenbaum, a writer, poet, and translator who was awarded the Order of Polonia Resituta (Order of the Rebirth of Poland), the Auschwitz Cross, and the title of Person of Reconciliation. In 2001 she was awarded the title of "Person of Unity" by the Council of Christians and Jews. At the beginning of World War II she lived in the Warsaw Ghetto, then she was moved to the concentration camps in Majdanek and Auschwitz. She was liberated from the Neustadt-Glewe concentration camp in 1945. Halina Birenbaum refers

to the process of reconciliation with Germany, about her time in the camp, about her work marked by the stigma of the Holocaust and about the mentality of people associated with World War II in this way. During the conversation the author's works are mentioned, including her first book titled "Hope is the Last to Die. A Coming of Age under Nazi Terror", which was published in Poland in 1967. The book was translated into English, German, Hebrew, Japanese and French. A documentary film was made on the basis of the document in 1992 under the title "Hope Dies Last", directed by Tadeusz Wudzki.

## Conclusions

The image of Jewish women is created on many different levels of perception, it can change and evolve depending on the influence of communication as introduced by the media. Most of the time it is created by using some references to the Jewish system or, on the other hand, in opposition from the main rules of the above-mentioned culture. Women and their images are presented in *Midrash* magazine in a very direct way, as it is centered between the old culture and the latest history of the Jewish community.

Women are in the centre of attention in many of the published articles; they are also the authors of some of them. The impact of Jewish women on culture is great and worth noticing, as the image of strong Jewish women presented by the *Midrash* magazine that is close to the image of men and sometimes even more important for the culture and history than the man itself. This is a new way of perceiving women in Jewish culture, and this type of thinking started after the Second World War.

The narration concerning women became a vital part of the content published by *Midrash* magazine. In the researched materials we can distinguish several different images of a woman:

- Woman as an independent artist (Rosenstein),
- Woman as an equal partner for a man (Franciszka Themerson)
- Woman as a specialist in a particular subject,
- Woman who survived the Holocaust tragedy, the keeper of memory (in the political, historical, and cultural axis).

The traditional way of perceiving women in Jewish culture is becoming the supplement to the overall view of social role and cultural status. The woman is defined by her strengths, talents, and abilities rather than by religion and tradition.

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