**Open the Curtain: Tour Script**

**Duration**: 45 minutes

**Introduction**

**Starting Point: Women Trailblazers (3rd Floor)**

* Talk about how ANU strives to also include women in their narrative and provide their perspective.
* A few examples to mention:
	+ [Women Trailblazers](https://index.anumuseum.org.il/display_center/women-trailblazers/)
	+ [Dona Grazia](https://index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/text-the-amazing-journey-of-dona-gracia/)
	+ Stories about women from the Torah and Talmud on the second floor
	+ …

In Women Trailblazers, you can even mention specific women, such as:

* Golda Meir
* Gertrude Stein
* Rosa Luxembourg
* Judith Butler

But! The museum still also presents a lot of stories (and histories) from the male perspective.

Therefore, the aim of this tour is to point out overlooked/hidden stories of women connected to artifacts on display that are commonly mentioned during tours in ANU and are usually presented from a male perspective.

**1. Jewish Literature: Bashevis Singer (3rd Floor)**

Artifact on display: The Typewriter Used by Isaac Bashevis Singer on His Visit to Israel in the 1970s ([index](https://index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/the-typewriter-used-by-isaac-bashevis-singer-on-his-visit-to-israel-in-the-1970s/))

About Bashevis

* Born in a village near Warsaw
* Moved to New York in 1935
* Became the Yiddish writer best known to non-Yiddish readers via many translations
* Received a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978
* Visited Israel repeatedly, also probably because his son lived in the kibbutz Beit Alpha (North of Israel, at the bottom of Mt. Gilboa)
* His Israel travelogues from the 1950s that he wrote in Yiddish for Forverts in New York were translated into Hebrew (מסעות בשביס בארץ ישראל, 2021)
* Not the only literature talent in Singer’s family; his brother Jehoshua Singer also became a famous writer

Esther Kreitman

* It is not that well known that Bashevi’s sister Ester was the only female writer in their family, one of the most prominent families in Yiddish literature.
* Her literary work has often been overshadowed by the work of her brothers
* Her literary success is even greater given that her parents didn't want to provide her with a formal education and that she developed an interest in international literature despite that.
* Her Yiddish writing in support of the Haskalah brought a unique female voice.
	+ Her description of women’s place in Hasidic society is as painful and fresh.
	+ For instance, in her autobiographical novel *Der Sheydim Tants* (Deborah), she wrote:

“In his heart of hearts, Reb Avram Ber disapproved of his wife’s erudition. He thought it is wrong for a woman to know too much, and was determined that this mistake should not be repeated in Deborah’s case. Now there was in the house a copy of Naimonovitch’s Russian Grammar, which Deborah always studied in her spare moments, but whenever her father caught her at this mischief he would hide the book away on top of the tiled stove out of her reach, and then she would have to risk her very life to recover it.”

* Bashevis praised novels by their brother Israel Jehoshua Singer frequently but usually failed to mention the writings of his still-living sister. In his own writings, he referred to her by her name Hinde (given to her at her birth) which further distorted her identity as a writer.
* Bashevi’s story “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” is believed to be partly based on Ester’s thwarted desire for education; which is often criticized in its feminist reading.

**Medieval/Early Modern Period (2nd Floor)**

“The next example we are going to talk about presents a very different story. It is a story of a preacher and teacher for women from the early modern period who could succeed also because of the support of her father, a rabbi, who allowed her to study.”

**2. Rivka bat Meir Tiktiner (? – 1605)**

Artifact on display: Text: Rivkah bat Meir Tiktiner ([Index](https://index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/text-rivkah-bat-meir-tiktiner/))

* Originally (probably) from Tykocin, near Bialystok, in Poland
* Buried at the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague
	+ Her tombstone and the *Memorbuch* both mention that “she preached day and night to women in every pious community.”
* The first woman author of a Yiddish book: the moral homiletic *Meineket Rivkah* (Prague, 1609 and Krakow, 1618)
* Her unique scholarship and wisdom, which were uncommon for women of her era, are obvious in her writing. It if full of:
	+ The enormous number of Hebrew biblical quotations, narratives based on Talmudic and Midrashic aggadot, and quotations from Hebrew and Yiddish ethical literature
	+ The employment of many concepts and methods from rabbinical exegesis…

**3. Cairo Genizah**

Artifact on display: Diorama: The Discovery of Cairo Genizah ([Index](https://index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/diorama-the-discovery-of-the-cairo-genizah-mid-19th-century/))

Text: Forgotten Poetesses ([Index](https://index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/diorama-the-discovery-of-the-cairo-genizah-mid-19th-century/))

About the Genizah

* Located in Ben Ezra Synagogue in [Fustat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fustat) or [Old Cairo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Cairo), [Egypt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egypt)
* The world's largest and most varied collection of medieval manuscripts, covering the entirety of Jewish history in the Middle East, North Africa, and Iberian Peninsula between the 6th and the 19th century CE
* The Genizah texts are written in various languages, especially [Hebrew](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_language), [Arabic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_language) and [Aramaic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aramaic_language), mainly on paper, but also on [papyrus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus) and cloth.
* In addition to containing Jewish religious texts such as [Biblical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_Bible), [Talmudic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmud) and later [Rabbinic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbinic_Judaism) works (some in the original hands of the authors), the Genizah gives a detailed picture of the economic and cultural life of the Mediterranean region, especially during the 10th to 13th centuries.

“Discovery” of the Geniza

* Other explorers noticed the genizah earlier and believed that it might be of significant importance
* But the main research work and academic recognition of the genizah started after the sisters [Agnes S. Lewis and Margaret D. Gibson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agnes_and_Margaret_Smith) brought from Egypt textual fragments from the genizah to the UK in 1896 and showed them to [Solomon Schechter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solomon_Schechter) at Cambridge

Cairo Genizah and Women

* Women were not in the mainstream of Genizah society but we can still learn a lot about them and their position in the society from the texts
* A rich store of documents, including letters, wills, business arrangements, marriage documents, court cases, and rabbinic responsa bringing a lot of information about Jewish women’s lives in the Muslim world which used to be unknown.
* Examples of documents written by women found in the Cairo Genizah:
	+ Hebrew poetry by the wife of the famous tenth-century poet Dunash ibn Labrat
	+ Letters sent to or by women primarily in Judeo-Arabic.
		- Mainly news updates for husbands, fathers, and brothers who had traveled for business purposes in which women expressed their concerns.
		- A letter sent by a brother to his sister Rayissa after their mother died
			* It shows her literacy - she could read not only the letter her brother sent but also books of consolation in both Hebrew and Arabic.
	+ Wills
		- Left by men who bequeath to women or who appoint them as guardians, in charge of their children and/or their assets.
		- Wills left by women
	+ Ketubot (usually in Aramaic)
		- Including Ketubot of Karaites couples (written in Hebrew)

**4. Hallelujah Gallery**

“As I mentioned, many texts in the Cairo genizah were religious, including the oral and written Torah. Thinking about texts that were originally created much earlier, in ancient times, and talking specifically about the Torah can bring us to a synagogal space as a place shared by both men and women where they were exposed to Biblical passages every week.”

* But did their “common” experience was really shared?

Synagogue as an Institution

* There was no separate women's section or internal divider when the synagogue was established during the Second Temple period. Women were required to sit and pray alongside the men.
* Philo of Alexandria told of synagogues where women and men prayed in the same hall, but in separate locations.

**The Old Synagogue of Sardis (**[**Index**](https://index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/the-old-synagogue-of-sardis/)**)**

* Great example can be the Synagogue of Sardis
* The largest of the ancient synagogues outside of the Land of Israel
* Its building was established at the end of the 2nd century CE and was converted into a synagogue in the 3rd century. We see here how it looked after renovations in the 4th century.

* According to documents from the Cairo Genizah, some women received a Jewish education at home and learned to read and write so that, among other things, they can participate in prayer.
	+ A girl’s father was responsible for her education, and in rare cases adult women tutored girls.
	+ Wealthy women often financed the construction and renovation of synagogues and their upkeep, as well as oil for the lamps for the worshipers to study at night.
	+ It seems that for hundreds of years the term *ezrat nashim*, meaning women’s gallery, was not in use at all.
	+ Several documents from the Genizah mention there was “sha’ar nashim” (women’s gate) in the synagogues of Egypt, proving that in the 11th century at the latest, special entrances were created for women through which they would go up to a gallery above the main hall to pray
	+ In Ashkenaz, a term “beit knesset nashim” (women’s synagogue) appeared in the 12th century.
		- It was a physical structure separated from the “general” synagogue (and could be located in a distance from the other synagogue (for men\_
	+ Individual prayer services for men and women were held in these separate locations but women joined men in the synagogue on special occasions
* The first exception was the synagogue in Worms in Germany which was built in 1175 and included a women’s gallery (added in 1213)

**Old New Synagogue (**[**Index**](https://index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/the-old-synagogue-altneuschul/)**)**

* The second, similar example is the Old New Synagogue built in the last third of the 13th century
* Originally was called New or Great Shul
	+ It was a second synagogue built in the Jewish quarter after the so-called Old Shul
* When other synagogues were built in the Jewish ghetto from the 16th century onward, it was renamed Altneuschul (Old-New Shul/Synagogue)
* Enveloped in numerous legends and tales, including the legend about a golem (created by Maharal)
* Currently still in use by the Prague Jewish Community (weekly for Shabbat services and holidays)
	+ It is believed to be the oldest extant and active synagogue in Europe

**“**Only in the 16th century were partitions and galleries built at Ashkenaz to allow for the merger of the men's and women's synagogues, following practices that had originated in Egypt centuries earlier.”

* The widespread use of the term ezrat nashim in the sense of a “women’s gallery” comes from this time.

**Tlomackie Synagogue (**[**Index**](https://index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/model-tlomackie-the-great-synagogue/)**)**

* An example of a synagogue with women’s gallery
* One of the grandest synagogues constructed in the 19th century, the largest Jewish house of worship in existence at the time
* Had space for over 2,000 worshipers
* Opened on Rosh Hashanah in 1878
* Although not Reform, the synagogue retained some modern practices including a sermon in Polish; an all-male choir accompanying services; and an organ that played only at weddings
* There was an invocation of Shma Israel, including twice the full tetragrammaton in the synagogue which was “Unacceptable for most Warsaw Jews, who usually replaced the name with the double Yodh letter.”
	+ Bernard Singer said: “[The average Warsaw Jews] were even afraid of the synagogue in Tłomackie Street. This was because it was located on a hill, so no longer in accordance with the verse: ‘Out of the depths I cry to you o Lord’, it had a choir, organs, a cantor, a preacher with trimmed hair, who dared call on the Lord in Polish.”
* The synagogue was destroyed in 1943

**Conclusion: Chodorow (**[**Index**](https://index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/model-synagoge-chodorow/)**)**

* Beginning in the 16th century, wooden synagogues were constructed all over the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.
* Their golden age occurred during the 17th and 18th centuries.
* Most of them were burned to the ground or demolished during the war

About Chodorow

* One of the synagogues that was also destroyed was Chodorow
* Built in 1652, the Chodorow synagogue was made entirely of timber
* Tell the story about its preservation/reconstruction

* In Chodorow as in many other shuls, the walls were richly painted with large prayers and psalms, making them easily readable to the seated congregants.
	+ During the tours, the visitors are often asked to think about what people praying in the Chodorow synagogue saw when they looked up at its beautiful ceiling.
	+ But what did the women in Chodorow see from their balcony on the first floor?
		- Probably they couldn’t admire all the beautiful decoration but only part of it as the angle in which they looked at the celling would not allow them to see all of it.

Final Question:

How can we also include the perspective of Chodorow’s women in the story? As well as the perspective of all the women seemingly hidden behind many great men or lost in the masculine narrative of Jewish history?