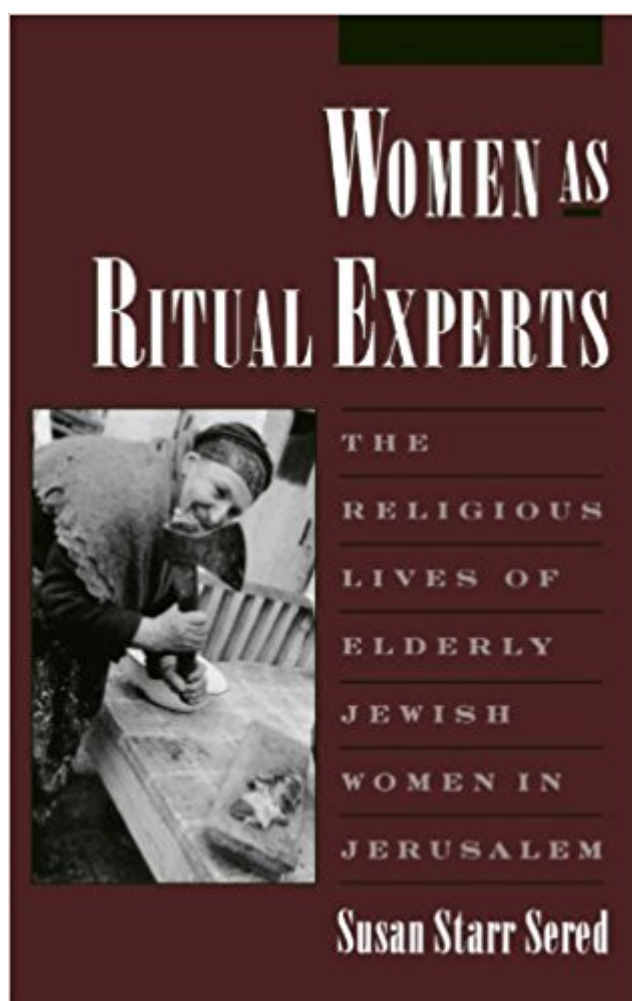


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Women As Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives Of Elderly Jewish Women In Jerusalem



Synopsis

This ethnography explores the religious beliefs and rituals of a group of elderly Jewish women, originally from Kurdistan and Yemen, who now live in Jerusalem. Sered visited the women in their homes and accompanied them on trips to holy tombs, local ethnic synagogues, and Judaica classes. She finds that, though mainly illiterate and excluded from formal religious practices, the women are experts in rituals aimed at safeguarding the well-being of their extended families. By analyzing their rituals, daily experiences, life-stories, and non-verbal gestures, Sered uncovers the strategies these women have used to circumvent the patriarchal institutions of Judaism, and how they have developed their own "little tradition" within and parallel to the "great tradition" of Torah Judaism.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"This splendid and often lyrical ethnography of Kurdish and Yemenite elderly women expands upon a growing body of scholarship about the experiences of women in patriarchal religions from a more nuanced feminist perspective about the meaning and function of ritual and the sacred in women's lives. From the onset, Susan Starr Sered's work situates itself on the cutting edge of both her discipline and the study of religion. Her contribution is considerable....An engaging account of women bound by tradition but also active in the creation of their own religious experience....Sered not only brings a fresh perspective to the study of women's experiences in traditional religious

settings but reflects without polemic on the androcentric biases in the study of religion itself."--The Journal of Religion "Sered lovingly and graphically portrays how religion permeates the everyday lives of elderly Jewish women in Jerusalem....I recommend Sered's book to my colleagues and would include it in student reading for anthropology, sociology, and religion courses....It is excellent in-depth case studies such as this one that demonstrates the power and necessity of qualitative studies."--Sociology of Religion

This ethnography explores the religious beliefs and rituals of a group of elderly Jewish women, originally from Kurdistan and Yemen, who now live in Jerusalem.

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At the time when Sered examined Jewish elderly women as ritual experts in a Day Center in Jerusalem, there were few studies about women in Judaism from the perspective of the folk, domestic sphere. That has changed a great deal now. There is a great deal of literature dealing with women's roles in patriarchal, monotheistic religions. But Sered's work still makes for interesting reading. She examines how largely illiterate, Kurdish Jews carve out a niche for themselves in the overwhelming male and literate world of Judaism. They do this by often turning certain time honored notions on their heads, and by reinterpreting pejorative notions about women and their role in Judaism in a more positive light.Sered's study is key to exploring folk-female religion in Judaism and to a larger extent, a good gateway to exploring other communities with similar dynamics. It also throws light on the normative, male tradition, exposing its flaws and prejudices.

You don't have to be a student of religious studies to enjoy this book. Though it's an anthropological study, it's highly readable & I found myself often continuing on ahead, further than what was assigned for the day. The elderly Jewish women of Sered's study are brought to life & I found them fascinating. The book concluded far too soon. Susan Starr Sered, in researching & writing about the religious lives of elderly Jewish women in Jerusalem, "hope[s] to challenge preconceptions about the very nature of such concepts as the sacred, the holy, and human spirituality" (3). By talking & listening to the illiterate, uneducated women in her study group, observing & interpreting their activities & gestures, Sered finds that 50% of Judaic practice & belief is developed outside of

prescribed law & ritual. Women's Judaism is far different from men's, yet no less complex, meaningful, & vibrant. Through interpretation & innovation, women restructure paternalistic & androcentric religious beliefs & traditions. By creating living, useful, & meaningful spirituality appropriate to their own unique needs, these elderly Jewish women can provide inspiration for all women who too often feel alienated & excluded from male-dominated religious institutions.

Very informative, women's cultural rites.

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