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**Parush, Iris. *The Sin of Writing and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.**

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I encountered Iris Parush's *Reading Jewish Women* (2004) early in my graduate training, through by that time, it had already been out for over a decade in English. I recall being awestruck by its scope and implications—it completely transformed everything I thought I knew about gender and literacy in Eastern European Jewish life. Just shy of two decades after *Reading Jewish Women* first appeared, Parush has given us another substantial monograph in English. *The Sin of Writing and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature* (2022) explores the contestations over reading and writing Hebrew in nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish culture, drawing upon literary theory, anthropology, sociology, and book history in doing so. There are small arguments throughout, but her most significant point is deceptively simple: in Eastern European Jewry's transformational encounter with modernity, "the changes in the field of reading, as important as they were, were less significant than the ones that occurred in the field of writing" (327).

Parush begins her analysis (chapter two) by first turning the reader's attention away from the Eastern European Jewish context and toward how philosophers, namely Plato and Jacques Derrida, have depicted the relationship between speech and writing. This seeming diversion helps situate how the New Literacy Studies has impacted her book. As Parush summarizes, there is not one literacy but "a variety of literacies, which must be studied within their social contexts and in terms of the power structures and ideologies that surround them" (25-26). The remainder of the book, therefore, unpacks literacy as it existed in a particular social context.

In this reader's view, one of the standout chapters is chapter three. Most scholars of Jews and Judaism, pretty much the world over, are likely well acquainted with the idea that Jewish textuality fostered universally literate Jewish societies (at least among males, that is). Building off scholarship that has already called into doubt the "myth of universal literacy," Parush marshals an impressive array of life-writing to challenge notions of widespread writing in the Eastern European Jewish context—there was, in fact, a scant array of individuals who could write and a general lack of writing instruction. Even training in reading was typically centered on rote performance, not

comprehension. Another aspect of Parush’s scholarly intervention is the recognition that Eastern European Jewish culture not only gendered Hebrew (masculine) and Yiddish (feminine), but also orality (masculine) and writing (feminine). Rabbinic authorities understood writing, a skill to which many young women had greater access than young men, as a potentially destabilizing, subversive force, and thus sought to control it. Chapters four and five show how two competing sectors of Eastern European Jewish society, the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim, interpreted writing as a practice needing to be controlled. Among other reasons for controlling writing, Hasidim seemed to recognize its threats to charismatic authority and mystical knowledge. The Mitnagdim, on the other hand, decried writings deleterious effects on a culture of memorization and feared its potential for widely distributing misinformation about oral teachings. Perhaps Parush’s most fascinating insights relate to the fact that when the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim became aware of the written word’s necessity in modern times, they remained deeply suspicious of it and denigrated it.

Chapters six through nine will be of particular interest to scholars who study Jews and gender. Here, Parush shows how traditional norms surrounding language and literacy shaped the Maskilic subversion of those norms. Since traditional authorities gendered writing as feminine, Maskilic writers reframed it as a masculine pursuit, which in part influenced their choice of writing in Hebrew (masculine) rather than Yiddish (feminine). The Maskilim faced some hurdles with this choice, most notably the widespread, intentional dearth of instruction in Hebrew grammar, a means by which rabbis maintained authority and power. Said more forcefully by Parush herself: “The battle between the Maskilim and the rabbinic authorities over grammar was thus a battle for the control of language. It was meant to answer decisively who would be *ba’al halashon*, i.e., the ‘master/owner of the tongue,’ and who would thus be able to shape the consciousness of society, its beliefs, and its ways of life” (220). In describing their own side of this battle, young yeshiva students on the road to enlightenment (or *Mitmaskelim*) narrated their transformation through “literacy events,” such as learning Hebrew grammar, mastering Hebrew writing, reading forbidden books, etc. Transformative literacy events not only helped them place themselves within the wider Maskilic world, but also helped with reestablishing their male gender identity, one “inspired by the image of European bourgeois masculinity” (265). Even then, both rebellious, liberating energies and sinful, fearful guilt accompanied learning to write.

*The Sin of Writing and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature* contains more insights than can be listed here, and it would be simplistic to criticize Parush's study for making claims too totalizing of Eastern European Jewry writ large. Such a criticism would be unfounded, I think. In the introduction, Parush admits that her book details the "general principles that shaped the culture of literacy of Eastern European Jewry of that period," and not "the literacies prevailing in different social circles and classes" (16). These caveats in mind, one can appreciate the book's broad vision without having to see its finer points replicated in every setting of Eastern European Jewish life. Like *Reading Jewish Women*, *The Sin of Writing and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature* promises to remain a decades-long conversation partner for Jewish studies scholars.