

Chava Weissler papers

Ms. Coll. 1311

Finding aid prepared by Shevi Epstein.

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University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts

2017 August 11

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Summary Information

Repository	University of Pennsylvania: Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts
Creator	Weissler, Chava
Title	Chava Weissler papers
Call number	Ms. Coll. 1311
Date	circa 1982-1999
Extent	6.75 linear feet (8 boxes)
Language	English
Language Note	This collection contains English, Hebrew, Yiddish, Aramaic, French, and German.
Abstract	<p>Dr. Chava Weissler has been the Philip and Muriel Berman Professor of Jewish Civilization in the Religion Studies Department of Lehigh University since 1988. Her areas of interest are women in Jewish history, Jewish folklore, classical Jewish texts, and Jewish and American popular religion. This collection, dating from 1982 to 1999, contains writings by Dr. Weissler, as well as her personal notes and research documents. The bulk of the materials document the research and writing of Dr. Weissler's first book, <i>Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women</i>, published in 1998.</p>

Cite as:

Chava Weissler papers, circa 1982-1999, Ms. Coll. 1311, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania

Biography/History

Dr. Chava Weissler has been the Philip and Muriel Berman Professor of Jewish Civilization in the Religion Studies Department of Lehigh University since 1988. She has been immersed in the field of Jewish Studies since her undergraduate education at Brandeis University. Her areas of interest are women in Jewish history, Jewish folklore, classical Jewish texts, and Jewish and American popular religion. She has authored several seminal works within the field including, *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women*, and *Making Judaism Meaningful: Ambivalence and Tradition in a Havurah Community*.

In 1970, after earning a degree in library science, Weissler worked at the Library of Congress cataloging Hebrew, Yiddish, and Albanian books. In the summer of 1974, the Library sent her to the summer program in Yiddish language run jointly by Columbia University and the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (YIVO) for Jewish Research. In the fall of 1975, she began the doctoral program in Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania, specializing in Jewish folklore. Weissler began to look at Judaism and Jewish life from the perspective of a folklorist, with attention to the religious lives of ordinary people rather than elites, ritual, food, narrative, devotional literature, and the aesthetics of everyday life.

Weissler completed her dissertation, entitled *Making Judaism Meaningful: Ambivalence and Tradition in a Havurah Community*, in 1982. She then accepted the position of Mellon Preceptor of Modern Judaism in the Religion Department at Princeton University, where she taught until 1988. While there, she began her next major research project: a study of the religious lives of Jewish women in Eastern Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. This pioneering project explored the devotional literature in Yiddish (the European Jewish vernacular) for women, a subject to which little previous attention had been devoted.

Weissler began this research in earnest during the 1984-1985 academic year, when she spent the spring semester at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In the catalog of the Jewish National and University Library, she found over 900 cards for tkhines, prayers in Yiddish written for and sometimes by women. She returned to the United States with pounds of photocopied texts. Weissler then spent the 1986-1987 academic year as a research associate in Women's Studies in Religion at Harvard Divinity School.

In 1988, Weissler began working at Lehigh University as an associate professor in the Department of Religion Studies, serving as the Philip and Muriel Berman Chair of Jewish Civilization. She received tenure in 1990, and spent the 1990-1991 academic year as a fellow at the Center for Judaic Studies (then called the Annenberg Center) in Philadelphia. There she continued work on her study of the tkhines, in the company of other scholars working on issues of women's history in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Upon her return to Lehigh, she became chair of the Religion Studies Department, and the responsibilities of that position delayed all further thoughts of serious research until her term was over in 1994.

During a sabbatical leave in the fall semester of 1997, Weissler completed her book. Entitled *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women*, it was published by Beacon Press, Boston, in 1998. A paperback edition was issued in 1999. The book won the Koret Award for Outstanding Work in Jewish History for 1999, and was a finalist for a National Jewish Book Award.

Weissler was promoted to full professor in 1999, serving as the Philip and Muriel Berman Professor of Jewish Civilization.

Scope and Contents

This collection contains writings by Chava Weissler, PhD., as well as her personal notes and research documents. The collection is arranged in two series: Chava Weissler research and writings and Published ephemera in Yiddish and Hebrew, with materials dating from 1982 to 1999. The bulk of the materials document the research and writing of Dr. Weissler's first book, *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women*, published in 1998.

The majority of the collection (contained in Series I. Chava Weissler research and writings) covers the evolution of Dr. Weissler's book *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women*, with research, notes, and drafts of each chapter. The book focuses on tkhines, prayers in Yiddish written for and sometimes by women, for all different occasions. As such, many of the documents in the collection are copies of tkhines and academic articles about tkhines. There is also a great deal of academic writing on a variety of topics including Yiddish, Jewish life cycle events, women and religion, and Eastern European Jewry. These documents grant insight into how Weissler conducted her research, the context in which she wished to understand tkhines, and how she, eventually, formulated her book.

The collection also contains samples of Weissler's other writings from her career including lectures, reviews, and academic articles. Weissler has a wide variety of interests within the field of Jewish Studies, which are also represented within this collection. There are photocopies of articles, photocopies of excerpts from books and a few booklets touching on Jewish folklore, Jewish customs, women and religion, Yiddish writing and printing, Hebrew writing and printing, Sabbateanism, and Hasidism, to name a few. Although all of Weissler's research and writings date from the 1980s and the 1990s, the original documents from which copies were made date from the 16th to 20th centuries.

In Series II. Published ephemera in Yiddish and Hebrew, researchers will find a small group of materials from Weissler's collection of Yiddish children's ephemera. There are Yiddish coloring books, trading cards, story books, and stickers.

Administrative Information

University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts

2017 August 11

Finding aid prepared by Shevi Epstein.

Access Restrictions

This collection is open for research use.

Use Restrictions

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Source of Acquisition

Gift of Chava Weissler, 2016.

Controlled Access Headings

FORM/GENRE(S)

- Drafts (documents)
- Printed ephemera
- Research notes

SUBJECT(S)

- Academic writing
- Authors
- Authors, American--20th century
- Folk literature, Yiddish
- Folklore
- Hasidism
- Hebrew language--Writing
- Jewish women--Prayers and devotions
- Jews--Europe, Eastern
- Jews--Social life and customs
- Judaism--Customs and practices
- Women authors
- Yiddish language

Collection Inventory

SERIES I. CHAVA WEISSLER RESEARCH AND WRITINGS, CIRCA 1982-1999.

A. VOICES OF THE MATRIARCHS: LISTENING TO THE PRAYERS OF EARLY MODERN JEWISH WOMEN , CIRCA 1982-1999.

	Box	Folder
Chapter 1: draft, circa 1982-1998.	1	1
Chapter 1: research and notes, circa 1982-1998.	1	2-12
Chapter 2: draft, circa 1982-1998.	2	1
Chapter 2: research and notes, circa 1982-1998.	2	2
Chapters 1 and 2: draft with notes by Alex Owens, circa 1982-1998.	2	3
Chapters 1 and 2: notes and research, circa 1982-1998.	2	4
Chapter 3: draft, circa 1982-1998.	2	5
Chapter 3: notes and research, circa 1982-1998.	2	6
Chapter 4: draft, circa 1982-1998.	2	7-8
Chapter 4: notes and research, circa 1982-1998.	2	9
Chapter 5: draft, circa 1982-1998.	2	10
Chapter 5: notes and research, circa 1982-1998.	2	11

Chapter 6: draft, circa 1982-1998.	2	12-13
Chapters 6 and 7: notes and research, circa 1982-1999.	3	1-4
Chapter 8: draft, circa 1982-1998.	3	5
Chapter 8: notes and research, circa 1982-1998.	3	6-9
Chapter 9: draft, circa 1982-1998.	3	10
Full penultimate draft, circa 1982-1998.	3	11-12

B. ASSORTED WRITINGS, CIRCA 1982-1999.

	Box	Folder
Assorted writings on women and tkhines, circa 1982-1999.	3	13
Assorted writings on women and tkhines, circa 1982-1999.	4	1-4
Assorted writings on women and Yiddish kabalistic prayers for candle lighting, circa 1982-1999.	4	5
Assorted writings on women, gender, and Judaism, circa 1982-1999.	4	6-11
Assorted writings on women, gender, and Judaism, circa 1982-1999.	5	1-3
Assorted writings on women, family, and Jewish burial practices, circa 1982-1999.	5	4
Assorted writings on women in paradise, circa 1982-1999.	5	5
Personal notebooks, circa 1982-1999.	5	6

C. ASSORTED RESEARCH AND NOTES, CIRCA 1982-1999. 1 BOX.

	Box	Folder
<i>Book of good conduct</i> , circa 1982-1999.	5	7
Folklore, circa 1982-1999.	5	8-11
General women's history, circa 1982-1999.	5	12
Hassidism, circa 1982-1999.	5	13-14
Jewish education, circa 1982-1999.	6	1
Jewish practice, prayer, and scripture, circa 1982-1999.	6	2-3
Lists of Hebrew and Yiddish books, circa 1982-1999.	6	4
Memoirs of notable Jewish individuals, circa 1982-1999.	6	5-6
Polish and German Jews, circa 1982-1999.	6	7
Printing, publishing, and typography, circa 1982-1999.	6	8
Sabbatianism, circa 1982-1999.	6	9
Tkhines, circa 1982-1999.	6	10
Yiddish and Hebrew language and translation, circa 1982-1999.	6	11
Yiddish and Hebrew literature, circa 1982-1999.	6	12-13
Yiddish and Hebrew literature, circa 1982-1999.	7	1-3
"Yiddish cooking and comedy", circa 1982-1999.	6	14
Assorted materials ranging from a letter to an excerpt from the Zohar, circa 1982-1999.	7	6

SERIES II. PUBLISHED EPHEMERA IN YIDDISH AND HEBREW, CIRCA 1982-1999.

	Box	Folder
Assorted children's publications in Yiddish and Hebrew, including coloring books, story book, trading cards, and stickers., circa 1982-1999.	7	6
Assorted children's publications in Yiddish and Hebrew, including coloring books, story book, trading cards, and stickers., circa 1982-1999.	8	1-2
Yiddish to Hebrew dictionary, circa 1982-1999.	8	2