

The rabbi + the magnificent 7

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You might call Rabbi Tirzah Firestone a spiritual archaeologist. She spent a decade digging through records, holy books and annals searching for the elusive holy women who were omitted from Jewish history texts. The result is her latest book, *The Receiving, Reclaiming Jewish Women's Wisdom*, in which she chronicles the lives of seven extraordinary yet obscure Jewish women. Some were sages, others mystics and a few were scholars. Some of them grappled with misogyny and disrespect because of their conservative surroundings and, most of all, their gender. Others were respected teachers and scholars yet received little acknowledgment after their deaths.

The book spans a time period stretching from the Second Century to the early 1970s with a common thread running through each of the seven chapters – women finding their way to God despite the obstacles.

Dulcie, a young woman who lived in 12th century Worms, in the Rhineland area of Germany, was married to a great scholar, Rabbi Eleazar. Dulcie ran a successful money-lending business, so successful, in fact that she was able to support her

three children, her husband and all of his students. In addition to running her business and taking care of her home and family, Dulcie was also a renowned scholar and gave public discourses about the Torah portion on Sabbath afternoons to the residents of Worms. Although Dulcie was as learned as any man in her community, she was unable to become a rabbi because of her gender. Her primary duties were to take care of the home and the family.

When Firestone was 18, she spent a summer in Jerusalem where she met Leah Shar'abi, the only one of the seven who lived in modern times. Leah was married to a well-known Kabbalist, Rabbi Mordechai Shar'abi and was a selfless woman who devoted all her energy to helping impoverished immigrants. Her time was spent feeding, clothing and helping to heal people who had nothing but misery in their lives. When she walked the streets of Jerusalem's slums, people would rush up to her, kiss her hands and send her blessings. Leah expected nothing in return because her role in life was to find the spark in others, to raise their souls and give them opportunities to overcome their poverty.

You won't find Leah's story in books or magazines but her teachings impacted the lives of many people, including Firestone, who at 18, had only been exposed to traditional Orthodox Judaism. Leah taught Firestone about Kabbalah and how it affected everyday living. In the chapter titled "Bringing Purpose into Action", Firestone explained one of the lessons she learned from Leah.

"Leah, and a myriad of unchronicled women throughout history, knew that nothing, not even the most seemingly menial act, is devoid of God. Every action and interaction is an opportunity for holiness and the raising of life's sparks."

Finding these remarkable women and writing the book changed Firestone's perceptions as a rabbi. But first you have to understand her long and winding path to the bimah. Raised in a strict Orthodox home in the Midwest, Firestone felt starved and disaffected by her restricted world. At age 20 she rebelled and left her family to embark on what would become a life-changing journey.

"I left (Orthodox Judaism) and went on an odyssey searching for spiritual meaning. Some of it was very hair-raising and I did

all kinds of wild experiments. I got involved in a Hindu cult and various (other) things. I ended up marrying a very devout Christian who was actually a minister. Through that first marriage I was, in a sense, confronted with where I stood with my own religion. I came back in a very paradoxical way to Judaism, by virtue of being in an interfaith marriage," Firestone explained.

In the mid 1980s Firestone felt a calling to become a rabbi and began studying under Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, founder of the Jewish Renewal movement. In 1992 Firestone received her rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi, Rabbi Gershon Winkler, Rabbi Shoshana Leibowitz and Rabbi Akiva Mann. Soon after that, she founded the Jewish Renewal Community of Boulder, Colorado.

The Jewish Renewal movement began in the early 60s and incorporates traditional songs and rituals with spiritual enlightenment and Kabbalah. It is sometimes referred to as "neo-Hasidic" Judaism because it seeks to restore spiritual vitality characteristic of the Hasidic movement of pre-war Europe. It is an all-accepting movement inviting interfaith couples, Jews by choice and gays and lesbians to participate.

The word "receiving" is very symbolic to Firestone. In the book, she explains the mysteries of Kabbalah from a women's perspective. The word "Kabbalah" means, "that which is received". To be a Kabbalist you must be ready to receive and women are intrinsically receptive to information, guidance and inspiration. And, sex-

ually, women are the natural receivers. But it was her deep connection with these seven amazing women that truly made the word "receive" come to life.

"Every morning I would light candles and say my (morning) prayers and I would ask, from my heart, to receive any wisdom from these women that they were willing to give me. I really felt that these women came alive for me. I really felt their presence," Firestone recalled.

Once the book was completed, Firestone, who is also a Jungian therapist, felt a major shift in her outlook as both a rabbi and a counselor. The seven women taught her to embrace the sacred in the everyday occurrences in women's lives and to help other women do the same.

"I think you write books to help yourself, to help you learn something, to help yourself learn different lessons. I really shifted (after writing the book) and it has very much affected my work with people and working with women. For me, it was more about learning the value of the feminine. In my work with people now I'm helping women to understand that what they're doing at home, how they're parenting their children and how their artwork and their cooking and the fine things that women do with their hands are spiritual practices," Firestone said.

For Firestone, there is a fine line between spiritual counseling and psychotherapy. Some of her therapy clients come to her because they want more spirituality in their relationships and they want to have a better understanding of their partner's spirituality. In those cases,

Firestone's advice comes from her experience as both a rabbi as well as a therapist.

"Having a peaceful, beautiful home where there's real respect for each other, to me that's all about spirituality," she explained.

Firestone hopes that women who read her book will feel empowered by it because writing it was such an empowering experience. She feels that women have a unique way of expressing their spirituality and connecting with God and expects that her female readers will find a little bit of themselves in each of the women depicted in the book. One of her goals is to "right" the history of the Jewish people by continuing to teach people about remarkable women who have been overlooked throughout the years.

"To me it's such a shame that the Hebrew schools do not have books illustrating the lives of holy women," Firestone explained. "Kids go through Hebrew school and (Jewish) day school thinking that it's only men with beards that are holy. That's one of the other purposes of the book, to start shining a light on these women's lives."