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text also sheds light on the history of Jewish law, particularly the reception offered to the *Shulḥan 'aruk*, an important legal code that had just been published.

Fram investigates these issues while locating Slonik's efforts in their bibliographic and historical contexts. Chapter One examines the characteristics of early halakhic handbooks, explores some of the practical obstacles to reading in the age of manuscripts, and discusses how rabbis sought to maintain a rabbinic aristocracy by opposing both formal education for women and the linguistic vulgarization of the halakhah. Chapter Two traces the geographic shifts of the Ashkenazic community in this period. Fram suggests that the accompanying upheavals weakened traditional attitudes against popularization of the law and help explain why the "women's commandments" texts moved from the German lands to Italy and later to Poland. Chapter Three offers a treasure trove of information on the place and roles of women in late sixteenth-century Polish-Jewish society; Fram thus creates a composite picture of how Slonik—and other men of his time—perceived the main audience for his work. Finally, Chapter Four analyzes the presentation and content of Slonik's handbook to show how he popularized the law and incorporated *Shulḥan 'aruk* in it.

The study is accompanied by a transcription of the 1585 edition of the *Seder miṣvot ha-nashim* and facing-page English-language translation of the Yiddish text.

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*Cover illustration:* Cover of a prayer book in Hebrew and Yiddish for women by Moses Coutinho, Amsterdam, 1704 showing the three "women's commandments." Note that the man is instructing the woman in candle-lighting and hallah baking. The woman in *niddah* sits alone.

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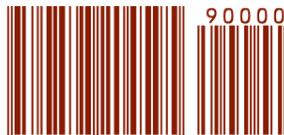


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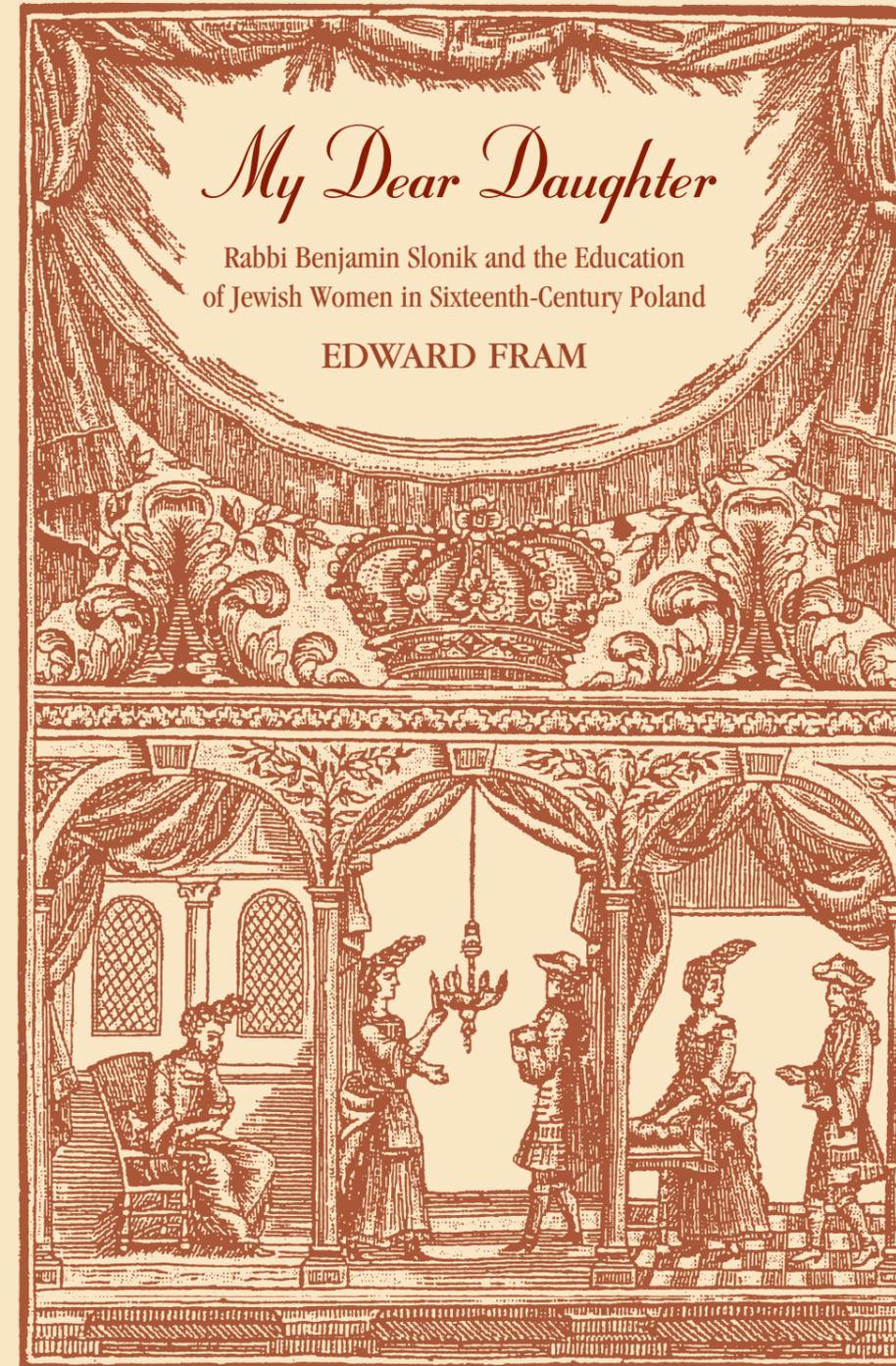


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FRAM

*My Dear Daughter*

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AN I. EDWARD KIEV LIBRARY FOUNDATION BOOK

## *My Dear Daughter*

Rabbi Benjamin Slonik and the Education  
of Jewish Women in Sixteenth-Century Poland

EDWARD FRAM

Jewish life in late sixteenth-century Poland was characterized by the observance of rabbinic law (halakhah) and numerous rituals, and customs. Although social pressures were potent forces in persuading people to maintain a pious lifestyle, one area of religious observance that was generally removed from social controls was the sexual life of couples within the context of marriage. Based on passages in Leviticus, rabbinic law dictates that Jewish women who experience uterine bleeding are prohibited from having physical contact of any kind with their husbands. The intricate laws of *niddah* (enforced separation) spell out exactly when and under what circumstances physical marital relations, even simple touching, can be resumed.

How did sixteenth-century women learn all the rules and regulations of such an intimate subject? As in other areas of ritual life that concerned the household, it would seem that their primary source of information was other women. Often, however, particularly difficult issues could only be addressed by rabbis or other learned men, for women rarely, if ever, attained the level of rabbinic scholarship necessary to parse the details of these complicated laws.

To educate both men and women, but particularly women, in a more systematic and impersonal manner, a young rabbi, Benjamin Slonik (ca. 1550-after 1620), who later became one of the leading rabbinic authorities in eastern Europe, harnessed the relatively new technology of printing and published a "how to" book for women in the Yiddish vernacular. His book, *Seder miṣvot ha-nashim* (The Order of Women's Commandments) not only illuminates the history of Yiddish printing and public education, but is a rare remnant of a direct interface between a member of the rabbinic elite and the laity, especially women. Slonik's

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