



# **The Fruit of Her Hands: The Story of Shira of Ashkenaz**

*Michelle Cameron*

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*Based on the life of the author's thirteenth-century ancestor, Meir ben Baruch of Rothenberg, a renowned Jewish scholar of medieval Europe, this is the richly dramatic fictional story of Rabbi Meir's wife, Shira, a devout but rebellious woman who preserves her religious traditions as she and her family witness the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe.*

Raised by her widowed rabbi father and a Christian nursemaid in Normandy, Shira is a free-spirited, inquisitive girl whose love of learning shocks the community. When Shira's father is arrested by the local baron intent on enforcing the Catholic Church's strictures against heresy, Shira fights for his release and encounters two men who will influence her life profoundly—an inspiring Catholic priest and Meir ben Baruch, a brilliant scholar. In Meir, Shira finds her soulmate.

Married to Meir in Paris, Shira blossoms as a wife and mother, savoring the intellectual and social challenges that come with being the wife of a prominent scholar. After witnessing the burning of every copy of the Talmud in Paris, Shira and her family seek refuge in Germany. Yet even there they experience bloody pogroms and intensifying anti-Semitism. With no safe place for Jews in Europe, they set out for Israel only to see Meir captured and imprisoned by Rudolph I of Hapsburg. As Shira weathers heartbreak and works to find a middle ground between two warring religions, she shows her children and grandchildren how to embrace the joys of life, both secular and religious.

A multi-generational novel that vividly brings to life a period rarely covered in historical fiction.

## **The Fruit of Her Hands: The Story of Shira of Ashkenaz Details**

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# From Reader Review The Fruit of Her Hands: The Story of Shira of Ashkenaz for online ebook

## jordan says

Historical fiction is always a delicate dance between accuracy and steps off that path taken to weave a successful novel; Michelle Cameron moves deftly in "The Fruit of Her Hand: The Story of Shiraz of Ashkenaz." The narrator Shiraz, a creation of Cameron's imagination, is the daughter of a prominent rabbi in 13th century France. Intelligent, opinionated, and passionate, through her eyes we see the pivotal events of her Jewish Community as they struggle against persecution and violence.

While Shiraz is fictive, many of the other characters are drawn from individuals who played a part in this crucial period. Shiraz's husband, Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg, was one of the outstanding leaders of European Jewry in the Middle Ages. The same is true of the villain Nicholas Donin, a Franciscan Friar and converted Jew who preached making bonfires of holy books and caused the murder of thousands of Jews throughout the land of modern France. Shiraz stands at her husband's side after the great Rabbis debate with Donin before the Queen of France, and watches the torment of Paris's Jewish community as houses are defiled, pages burn, and the street runs with blood. Through the device of Shiraz's children, she travels far and wide through Christian Europe, including witnessing the blood libel leveled against the Jewish community of Lincoln in Britain for the death of "Saint" Hugh, including the hanging of eighteen Jews for this imagined crime.

In the end, however, "The Fruit of Her Hand," is most of all a historical romance, and a passionate one at that. While Shiraz as a character can at times be less than complex, one never doubts her ardor for husband or her love for her children. It is this, as much as the rich historical detail, which carries the reader from one page to the next, in what is a page turning good read. Readers who enjoyed works like "Rashi's Daughters" will enjoy this novel which benefits both from superior research and a less melodramatic style.

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## Laurel Corona says

This book is a must read for anyone interested in medieval Jewish life. I hope to read more by Michelle Cameron.

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## Misfit says

Cameron retells the story of her ancestor with the fictional character of Shira - daughter of a rabbi in 13C France she is eventually wed to esteemed scholar Meir ben Baruch and they settle in Paris. The persecutions of the Jews reach new heights and Meier is among those who defend the Talmud but to no avail. They leave France to start a new life in Germany which is happy and successful at first, although the persecutions of the Jews in Europe continue to increase.

That's pretty much the basic plot outline, although of course there's quite a bit more to it than that - I'm just not too inspired today. While I did enjoy learning about a period and culture that I know little about, the author just didn't \*suck\* me into her world. I think those more interested in this topic might find it more

interesting than I did, if you're not sure get it from the library. It's a good book; it's just not a great one.

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### **Korri says**

Other than Rashi's Daughters, I haven't come across much Jewish fiction set in the the middle ages, let alone one with a female protagonist, so I was excited to read *The Fruit of Her Hands*. Cameron makes her ancestor Rabbi Meir ben Baruch accessible through the fictionalized life of his wife, Shira, herself a formidable scholar.

It was difficult to see Shira's talent stifled under the need to support the yeshiva through endless drudgery and housework. Since Shira's knowledge and intelligence are the qualities that made her interesting, I found myself a bit disconnected from her as the novel wore on. Shira always managed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time--Paris for the burning of the Talmud, Lincoln for the blood libel against the Jews. The tightening restrictions against Jewish life are historically accurate and the well-traveled Jewish family made sense considering the diaspora--even if Shira's eyewitness accounts seem a bit too fortuitous. Shira made an excellent witness to these events, but I wish her personality shone through more.

Cameron describes many of the prayers, rituals, and customs, which would be interesting for a reader unfamiliar with Judaism. Since I know what a *mikveh* and *mishloach manot* are, I wish the author would've spent more time talking about the emotional significance of these customs to Shira.

(NB: I finished this on the 9th of Av.)

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### **Amanda says**

I didn't enjoy this novel as much as the Rashi's daughters' series, despite the fact that I think it was somewhat better written. The writing is very lyrical, but the plot doesn't seem to really go anywhere. Some of the rituals seem a bit anachronistic as well -- meant to appeal to us in our present time, but I'm not convinced completely as they were done in time of the characters.

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### **Shomeret says**

Why did I decide to read this book? It's about a medieval woman who studied Talmud and married a very prominent Rabbi. I have read Maggie Anton's books about Rav Hisda's daughter, and I'm interested in reading about other Jewish women who were scholars. Unlike Rav Hisda's daughter, who is mentioned in the Talmud, the protagonist of this novel is fictional.

The description of this book says that the protagonist, Shira, was rebellious. Shira's father, a Rabbi in Falaise, France, had allowed Shira to study in the same classroom as his own students when she was a small child. She never assumed that she would be limited to the domestic sphere when she married. Considering how repressive her husband was toward women in general in his official pronouncements, modern readers might not think she was rebellious enough. Although her relationship with her husband, Meir, had its stormy periods, she evidently loved him and was notably loyal to him even when she didn't agree with his opinions.

She tried to do what was expected of her as a Rabbi's wife. As such, she played a supportive role in his life.

As students of medieval history know, the situation for Jews in medieval Europe continuously declined. Shira and her husband had to deal with all the terrible manifestations of Christian persecution. If there was any peace and joy to be had in Shira's life, it was temporary. I was impressed by Shira's ability to persevere and recover from every horrible trauma that she and her community endured. Shira may not have been a feminist in our terms, but she was a strong woman. I am here today because there were women like Shira who sustained their families, and picked themselves up after every disaster.

For the blog version of my review see

<http://shomeretmasked.blogspot.com/20...>

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### **Cheryl says**

Shira grew up a rabbi's daughter. Shira's mother died when she was about five years old. Since then her father and nursemaid, Jeanne, a Christian have raised her. At an early age, Shira was very interested in books and learning. While it was not usually a woman's place to learn in the schools as the boys, Shira's father could not deny her in his class room. Shira grows into a lovely, educated young lady.

One day, Shira's father introduces her to a group of new students. Two of those young men are Nicholas Donin and Meir ben Baruch. Meir ben Baruch would later become a very respected and famous Rabbi scholar. Nicholas and Shira were serious with each other to the point that they almost married but Shira refused him. It was just as well as because due to Nicholas's arguments against the lessons taught in the Talmud and his refusal to accept the Jewish ways, he was excommunicated.

Shira and Meir grew close and became husband and wife. They were very dedicated to their religion and the words of the Talmud. Years later, a huge battle between Christianity and Judaism would take place. The man leading the charge against the Jews and the book of Talmud would be none other than Nicholas Donin. Shira will have to make a choice whether to stand strong in her faith or discard all her beliefs in order to save her people.

I know nothing about Rabbi Meir ben Baruch and his life or his teachings. All I know is that after reading this book, I have now found myself a new favorite author in Michelle Cameron. *The Fruit of Her Hands: The Story of Shira of Ashkenaz* is one of the best books of 2009! I had mixed feelings about this book, even before I picked it up and started reading it. Instantly I was transported to another world. I lost myself in Shira and Meir's story. I liked how this book was split into different sections. Each one covering a different time period expansion. Michelle Cameron didn't just tell a story, she painted a portrait. Don't just take my word for how good this book is. Pick up a copy of *The Fruit of Her Hands: The Story of Shira of Ashkenaz* for yourself.

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### **graveyardgremlin (formerly faeriemyst) says**

I'm having a remarkably hard time gathering up my thoughts to review *THE FRUIT OF HER HANDS*. The

book is a mixed bag as far as I'm concerned.

Overall, the book was informative and easy entertainment, but it lacked depth. For the most part the characters were either good or bad, with no shades of grey, which made them unrealistic and led to my feeling of detachment. Shira was a sympathetic and capable main character during the first third of the book and looked to be an interesting Medieval wife. Unfortunately, after she became married, she lost her personality. I realize that it was an accurate portrayal of Jewish wives back then, but Shira had been scholarly, while still seeing to her duties, up until this point and then turned into a boring protagonist. What set her apart and made me want to read about her was her attitude about learning the Talmud like the men. What interested Meir in the first place was Shira, who he thought unusual; not that I was shown their love, I was just told about it. The chemistry was lacking between them, but that may be in part that I didn't get a good sense of who Meir was as a person, other than he was brilliant, a revered scholar, et cetera. No one felt real in this book and that's a shame.

What was perhaps done best were the details and information about the Jewish people and their faith. Generally, it was written into the story quite well, even if Shira was conveniently placed right in the way of big events. I learned much and am grateful for the history of that time. My one problem with it was that although I felt the pain and suffering the Jewish endured, it was just a little too clean. More realism and grit would have added much to the book.

Perhaps the scope of the book did a disservice to the story as a whole, and it might have benefited a few scenes taken out. As a whole, it's a decent book and a good debut, but it still lacks that something that makes me what to say "read it".

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## **Harvee says**

From the Author's Note:

" I don't remember the first time my mother told me I was descended from a famous rabbi who lived in Europe in the 1200s....I stumbled upon a reference to Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenbert, the Maharam....

I had never known that in 1242 an apostate Jew named Nicholas Donin, having been excommunicated by the chief rabbi of Paris, convinced the Pope and French royals to burn every copy of the Talmud in a Paris market square. My ancestor, Rabbi Meir ben Baruch, was among the witnesses.... I learned how, years later, Meir ben Baruch settled in Rothenberg, founded a Jewish seminary, and became known throughout Europe for the wisdom of his responsa, letters written in response to Talmudic questions."

I was amazed and impressed by the way in which the author took her research on her ancestor, Rabbi Meir ben Baruch, and wrote an historical novel based on his life. Although she knew little about his wife, the author recreated her, Shira of Ashkenaz, as the main character in her book.

The novel details the childhood of Shira and her interest in biblical studies, created a love connection to the apostate Nicholas Donin, and gave him an additional motive for his hatred of the Jewish religion - his unsuccessful bid for Shiraz's hand in marriage. The book develops the character Shira as the perfect woman and mother, a "pearl" of a wife to Meir ben Baruch.

Those interested in the history of religion in 13th century France, Germany, and England, and in the conflict

between the Jews and Christians on an official basis and in the daily life of the time, will be fascinated by the research as well as by the fictional story of Shira as wife and mother.

My thanks to the author/publisher for an advance copy of *The Fruit of Her Hands* and the opportunity to review it.

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### **Marie Z. Johansen says**

Studying my own ancestral lines gave me an appreciation of the pleasure that knowing where you came from can bring. I totally understand how amazing the story of Rabbi Meir ben Baruch is and how fascinated Ms. Cameron must have been when she discovered that he was her ancestor. An amazing amount of research went into the writing of this book!

The central character in this book is names 'Shira' and the story of her life offers us a clear portrait what it must have been like to have been Jewish in medieval times. Anti-semitism has, most unfortunately, had a long history and this book allows us to live through some of the darkest of times along with 'Shira as she moves through this tale spanning several generations of this Jewish family. The book is historically very well researched and is also very well written; teaching us not only about the history but also about Jewish traditions, travails and triumphs during this time of upheaval in Europe.

An amazing first book for this author. I will be waiting for her next book!

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### **Michael Alan Grapin says**

This is the story of a dauntless woman who chose to defy tradition and study like a man of the Jewish faith in 13th century Europe. Her story is a multi-generational tale that brought her in direct contact with some of the most influential rabbis of her time, but it is also the story of religious intolerance between Jew and Gentile, persecution and attempted eradication through exile and/or assimilation. Although an historical fiction, much of the story has a bases in fact and rings of truth.

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### **Lauren says**

I have encountered few novels that deal wholly with Jewish life in the Middle Ages. Thus, I was delighted to discover this novel, as it combines several areas of interest for me - Jewish history, the middle ages, and more generally, medieval Jewish culture. Because of this dearth of similar novels (I haven't seen too many others set at this time, other than the Rashi's daughters series) I think the book tries to do too much - tell the story of one man and his wife as well as the story of the entire Jewish community of Europe in thirteenth century Europe.

*The Fruit of Her Hands* begins with the story of the fictional Shira of Ashkenaz, the wife of the great Jewish scholar, Rabbi Meir ben Baruch, ancestor to the author of the novel. The novel begins in Normandy, in the

town of Falaise with Shira as a young girl living with her widower father, a great Rabbi. Shira studies in her father's yeshiva, an unconventional role for a girl. While at her father's yeshiva, Shira becomes swept into a debate enrapturing her community regarding the validity of Maimonides' view that the Torah, and not the Talmud, should be the center of Jewish study by a fiery pupil named Nicholas Donin. Donin is eventually expelled from the Jewish community and Shira reencounters him in Paris, where she is living as the wife of Meir ben Baruch. Donin becomes a Franciscan monk and uses his role in the church to revenge himself on the Jews who rejected him. Ultimately, Shira's family settles in Germany where they find some peace - but not for long. The novel recounts over and over the blood myth (that Jews use the blood of Christian children to make matzoh and engage in ritual murder of Christian children). The focus becomes one of Christian-Jewish relations, which is obviously very sad and poignant.

The author does a good job of making the reader understand that the Jews were reviled outsiders, useful to nobility and the Church only as a source of fundraising and not much else. Unfortunately, the characters in the novel are not that well developed. While the author tells us that Shira is intelligent and she is well-versed in Scriptures, she was a flat character. Similarly, the author tells us that Meir is a great scholar but I didn't develop a strong sense of who he was as a person until the last two chapters of the novel. The novel took large leaps in time to get from one horrible historical attack on Jews to another, with little plot or character development in between. The characters became tools to tell the story of medieval Jews rather than Shira and Meir's story. At times the plot seems contrived simply to get Shira in the "wrong place at the wrong time" (or is it the right place at the right time?) so that the author can bring up a particularly horrific account of extreme anti-semitism during the period.

I also have to comment on the poor cover art. The woman depicted on the cover is intended to be Shira, I presume. However, her clothing would never have been worn by a medieval Jew. The shoulders are virtually uncovered and the attire is immodest. Also the woman is depicted as writing, but Left to Right. Hebrew, in contrast, is written from Right to Left and the "real" Shira would have primarily written in Hebrew, not in the languages of her Christian neighbors.

Overall this is a good novel. It didn't quite rise to the level of a four star novel to me but it wasn't a three star novel either. It isn't perfect, but a good book in a rather vacant area of historical fiction.

UPDATE: My Mother read this book and LOVED it, as did all of her friends. None of them are die hard historical fiction readers like me, so they're probably less picky. But all of them are Jewish and enjoyed this look at Jews in the middle ages. If you fall into this category, I definitely think you should read this book.

\*\*\*Reviewed for Amazon Vine.

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## **Sandie says**

For readers craving great historical fiction, or a realistic romance novel, or a book about religion's place in history, *THE FRUIT OF HER HANDS* will more than satisfy your appetite. This wonderful saga puts into perspective not only the religious struggles faced by the Jewish community of 13th century Ashkenaz, a region of Europe that encompassed portions of France and Germany, but the traditions, values and rituals practiced in their every day lives.

Author, Michelle Cameron has skillfully blended the life experiences of her creation, Shira, with that of actual historical characters and given her readers a book that is not only historically accurate but entertaining and informative as well. The story follows Shira from her childhood home in Normandy and her marriage to



Meir ben Baruch, to a yeshiva in Paris and later to Rothenberg, Germany. Throughout her life and travels Shira's life is plagued by Nicholas Donin, a man whose marriage proposal and unorthodox religious beliefs she once rejected and who now seeks revenge against the Jewish community.

Non-Jewish readers will come away with a better understanding of the Talmud and the Torah as well as the customs, culture, and history of Judaism. I, personally, was amazed to learn that Jews of that era were required to wear a rouelle ("golden wagon wheel") stitched to their clothing to identify them.... just as Hitler enforced the wearing of the Star of David circa WWII. Hatred and intolerance seems to have been the order of the day with both Christians and Jews misinterpreting the others religion and beliefs.

Michelle Cameron has managed to intrigue her readers with an interesting approach to Jewish history that not only brings to life a long forgotten era, but also provides us with a moving story of one woman's love and devotion to her family, friends and a way of life. Although Shira was a creation of the author's imagination, Meir of Rothenberg and Nicholas Donin were actual men and I now feel compelled to learn more about their place in history.

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### **Susan Dashiell says**

#### **Excellent Read**

A well crafted story filled with rich characters, wisdom, and an insightful perspective of history. Would highly recommend to others.

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### **Dawn says**

This was an entirely wonderful story.

I added this to my ever growing list of books to read during a time when I was becoming very interested in the history of the Jewish people. I have read a few books since that time that expanded my knowledge of the political ramifications and general attitudes of the Christian world to them. This story gave me a wholly different view. It was a personal story and told one woman's story of her struggles with her own community and with the surrounding Christian population.

It gave me a fascinating look into a Jewish community, their practices, ideas, restrictions and views of themselves and outsiders.

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