

and Grau, \$27.50), edited by Aliza Lavie, contributes more Israeli, Persian, and North African voices to this canon.

The original Hebrew version, *Tfilat Nashim* (Yedioth Ahronot, 2005), brought together women's prayers for the holidays, life-cycle events, home ceremonies and crises culled from (but not limited to) rabbinic literature, siddurim, and collections of *tkhennes* (women's prayers in Yiddish, dating mostly from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries). The new volume retains the content and formatting of the bestselling original, with the Hebrew prayer texts now accompanied by English translations.

As an anthology, whether in Hebrew or English, the volume is both a treasure trove and a hodge-podge, delighting and frustrating the reader in equal measure. Aside from broad topical divisions, some expected and some unanticipated (e.g., "Holidays" is there with "Prayers for Peace and Redemption"; "Rituals and Customs" alongside "Prayers for Mothers"), there is no apparent organization within each topic, so a late-medieval Italian source can be found alongside a contemporary Israeli composition, followed by a rabbinic selection, followed by *tkhennes*—maddening for someone who wants coherence, but a wealth of choices nonetheless. Also heartening are the numerous selections from the Arab and Persian Jewish communities, as well as contemporary Israeli writers, which all together help to distinguish this volume from previous collections of *tkhennes* (Devra Kay, Chava Weissler and Tracy Guren Klirs have previously mined that material), and leaves it most resembling Ellen Umansky's and Dianne Ashton's *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality*, although without its North American bias.

This is a book not meant to be read sequentially, but rather dipped into, which can leave the reader oftentimes wondering who a writer is and when she lived. There is frustratingly little information about the sources of some of the texts, especially those from the Yiddish. The Yiddish original is also not printed, which seems a pity, considering how many Yiddish readers there are among us.

*A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book* does not have the bibliographical value or historical treatment that Umansky, Ashton and Weissler brought to their work, but it does successfully capture a sense of Israeli women's spirituality in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. As such, it promises to be an important addition to our growing library of women's rituals and prayer texts.

DEBRA REED BLANK

## Intergenerational Secrets

*An enticing glimpse at a little shtetl on the Canadian prairie.*

*Holding My Breath* by Sidura Ludwig (Shaye Areheart, \$23), a coming-of-age story set in Winnipeg's shtetl-like North End in the middle of the 20th century, brings to life a time and place with such detail, both sensual and factual, that someone who grew up in that time and place—like this reviewer, born on the very same street where the protagonist lives with her family—finds herself on nearly every page.

What is so remarkable about this coincidence is at the very heart of the book. Growing up in Winnipeg in the 1950s, we used to read longingly about the world outside the isolated prairie. There were no books then about a Jewish girl coming of age in Winnipeg. We made do with *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. It is this intimate, hidden world, this northern outpost hothouse that Sidura Ludwig recreates with tenderness.

The story unfolds in the voice of Beth, an only child named for her zeyde, who was Binyamin Rabinowitz in Russia but Ben Rosen in Canada. In the character of Beth, Ludwig harvests the stories of the generation that preceded her, the transition generation that was born into the Winnipeg shtetl and struggled to escape the stranglehold of tradition, family, security and, not least of all, geography. It is Beth who says, at the beginning of Chapter Two, "I have become my family's narrator.... I have strung together all of these disconnected stories and details, and made them flow in a narrative."

Beth's mother represents duty and acceptance, finding "naches" in her home and family. Beth writes about her mother's attraction to her father. "My father smelled like everything she thought she wanted in her life—the McAdam Avenue house, four children, a membership to Hadassah." Her mother's path of escape from the stultifying, odiferous shtetl life was not to leave Winnipeg but to be a "Successful Jewish Woman" whose achievements include setting a nice table, serving as an upstanding member of the artistic and literary "Monday Group" and raising a successful daughter. It's understood that this daughter, in seeking independence as an adult, may want to leave the North End, but only to journey as far as a new home in the upwardly mobile South End—"as far as any Monday Group member imagined her daughter moving."

But Beth's mother has two sisters who chose very different paths. Carrie, who never married and works as a seamstress, still openly mourns the loss of their only brother in the war while hiding her real grief. Her bid for freedom, as Beth learns eventually, was a pregnancy that ended with temporary banishment to Montreal and a baby given to an adoption agency. The youngest sister, Sarah, is a beauty who wants to make a name for herself as an actress. But she succumbs to an appropriate Winnipeg beau, gives birth to a daughter and only then leaves to follow her dream, which never really materializes.

These are familiar stories, and the characters never come fully alive. They slip in and out of the narrative, functioning more as cautionary tales than as flesh and blood. Both the strength and weakness of *Holding My Breath* is its documentary quality; one wanders through this book as if through a marvelous museum. Ludwig, a talented and promising young author, captures the past even in the smells she invokes, from Beth's dying Baba, who smelled "like pea soup and sweat" to an old house which was starting to smell "like fifty guests, sweaty and nearly spoiled like the chicken soup."

JUDY GERSTEL