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shifra

A Jewish Feminist Magazine



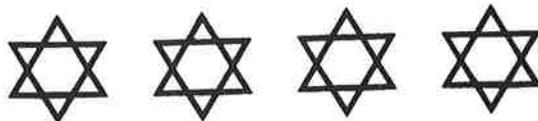
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FIRST ISSUE

DEAR Shifra * * * * *

"I was really excited to hear about the mag. How wonderful!! Mazeltov even!"

- Ellen, Birmingham



"Words fail me! As a Jewish Feminist in a town where both Jews and Feminists are more than rare and the combination of the two, to my knowledge, numbers one (!), it is hard to explain how reassuring, liberating, positive and indeed, as one friend in Manchester wrote to me, validating is the knowledge that Shifra will appear."

- Sue Krasner, St. Andrews

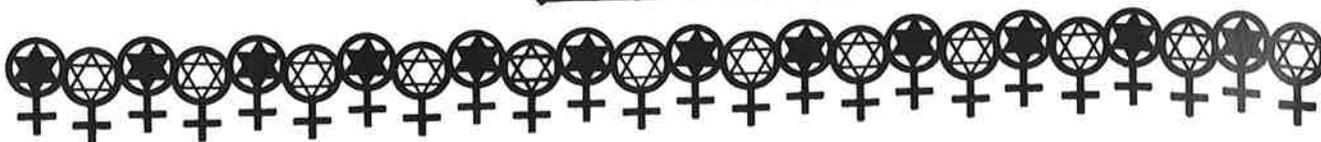
"The enclosed contribution comes with my greetings to the Shifra collective. I applaud your intention and hope that the magazine, once launched, will go from strength to strength."

Maisie Mosco



"I am delighted to hear that you are getting a Jewish feminist magazine together and I'd like to be able to help in any way I can."

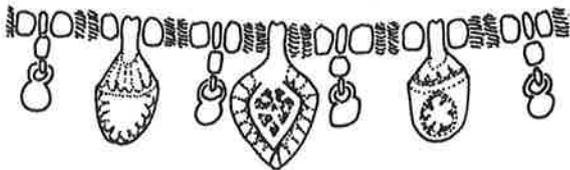
- Miriam David, Bristol



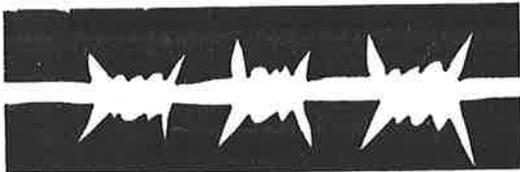
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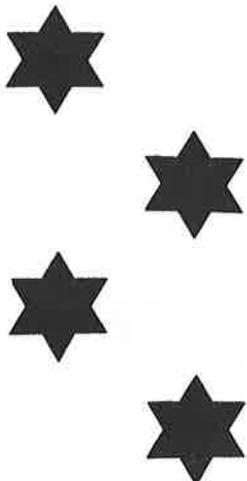
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 * THIS ISSUE *
 * IS DEDICATED *
 * TO OUR MOTHERS *

EDITORIAL

Welcome to Shifra. We have come together as Jewish Feminists to produce a magazine which will provide Jewish women with a forum to understand our experiences in all their diversity. Exploring our experience of oppression is a form of resistance. Shifra is part of an ongoing resistance movement. Through articles, sharing personal experiences, history and poetry, we challenge the privileges of men over women, non-Jew over Jew, white over Black, heterosexual over Lesbian.

Shifra was a Jewish woman whose surname (sire-name) is unknown. Active in the Warsaw Ghetto resistance, she chronicled the suffering of her people. She was caught by the Nazis on the Aryan side of the city, tortured and murdered in 1943.

There have been many thousands of courageous Jewish women - we know very little about their lives and experiences. We chose Shifra because she speaks to us in her own name and not in the name of a father or husband. Shifra symbolises our purpose in creating this magazine.

Shifra is a collective of ten Jewish feminists - with at least eleven opinions - continuing the Jewish tradition. Yet the Jewish tradition for the most part describes the experience of Jewish men. Our experience is women-centred. We want to claim our heritage as Jewish women. It is essential for us to redefine the words 'Jewish' and 'feminist' from our points of view. We recognise the need of all women who experience racism to organise autonomously.

As Jewish feminists we have a particular relationship to Israel. We understand why Israel exists and we defend the right of Jews to a homeland. We do not believe that this should be at the expense of the Palestinian people. Israel is the homeland of many Palestinian Arabs who have the right to live without oppression. The organisation and structure of Israel, like that of all other male-dominated societies, is based on hierarchies, racism and the oppression of women. As feminists we are committed to challenging and changing these structures, so that all people can live without fear of exploitation and oppression.

As Jewish women we want to build a strong, effective presence which comes from the experiences of our foremothers, and is firmly part of the Women's Liberation Movement. The struggles of Jewish women, past, present and future, live in Shifra.



We would like to thank all those who have contributed, both creatively and financially. Shifra is a non-profit making voluntary organisation, entirely dependent on donations and subscriptions. We cannot exist without your help, so please keep sending your articles and remember to take out a subscription if you haven't already. We would like to thank the individuals and groups of women, both Jewish and Gentile, who have given us encouragement and support, who have organised fundraising events, and helped Shifra on its way to publication.



shalom

shifra collective: Bev Gold, Elizabeth Sarah, Jane Black,
Leah Ruth, Libby Lawson, Linda Bellos, Marilyn Fetcher, Riva Krut,
Scarlet Pollock, Sheila Saunders.

OPEN LETTER

FROM THE



newsletter and awareness groups. These activities are vital to us as individuals and as groups, and our security is dependent upon the women workers who co-ordinate them.

We are writing this letter because of our concern about recent events at A Woman's Place (A.W.P.) We feel that the employment of an individual who is well-known to have been involved in anti-semitic and anti-feminist activities has made A.W.P. an unsafe place for women to meet.

Racism, including anti-semitism, on the part of any of the workers at A.W.P. is intolerable. In threatening the security of any feminist group to meet or pass information through A.W.P., what was once a feminist centre becomes exclusive. In becoming exclusive it becomes anti-feminist. In whose interests is it to defend this anti-semitic racism, this exclusion, this threat to feminism?

As feminists we come together on the basis of our shared oppression as women. We need each other and we must work together if we are going to be successful in our fight against male domination. Yet there are also enormous differences between us in our cultural backgrounds, and the economic class and racial oppression which we experience. If we are to be able to work together we will have to show awareness of these differences and respect for each other.

It is within the power of the A.W.P. collective to make the space at A.W.P. either welcoming and available to feminists, or exclusive and therefore anti-feminist. This raises two questions: the basis upon which women are selected to become workers at A.W.P. and how the collective proposes to reassure feminists that A.W.P. workers will not threaten the security of any feminist group, whatever their culture, race or class.

A.W.P. has, until recently, provided feminist groups – both regionally and nationally – with a relatively safe meeting place. It has also acted as a centre where information can be exchanged within and between feminist discussion, campaign,

We think it inappropriate for the individual worker involved in recent anti-semitic activities within and outside of A.W.P. to continue to hold the powerful position of an A.W.P. worker. We call upon the A.W.P. collective to address the questions which we have raised. We ask all women to confront the issue of how we as different groups of women can work together as feminists.



invites Jewish women to send material to us for Issue Number 2, which will be out around Pesach. Please send letters/written/visual contributions, by the end of January, 1985, to:

shifra, Box No.2, 59 Cookridge Street, Leeds 1. England.

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THE JEWISH FEMINIST WOMAN

Being a woman means

you have breasts,
a clitoris,
a vagina,
a womb
at least when you're born.

It means

You have menstrual periods
boys chat you up
you want to be attractive
you are expected to have children
to look after your parents
to be motherly.

It means

people depend on you
you're a good friend
men will tell you their innermost thoughts
you will inspire them.
It means you give more energy to creating an artist than
to being one.

It means

self sacrifice
it means, giving
it means self pity, regret, bitterness, resignation
it means
as you grow older, you come to terms with things.

Being a jewish woman means

they call you a princess
even though your father was poor and your mother dressed
badly.

It means the terrible history of your forebears.

It means

you're the sister, daughter, wife and mother
of men who are oppressed

it means

rabbis
whose wives wore wigs, their hair was shaved.

It means

you're self conscious when you eat a prawn
about your grandmas foreign accent
the fact you don't cook well
you worry about
marrying out of the faith
will your child be called 'dirty jew'
about not getting married.

It means

not knowing your lineage
or where your great grandparents are buried
the original spelling of your name
whether your friends are anti semites
does the school have a quota system
if it does — so? It's their right.

Being a jewish feminist means

You feel oppressed

by non-jews

By jews

by blacks — even.

It means resenting Zionism because

It produces a conflict of loyalties

about your country

your race

your sense of yourself

your wish to survive

to be identified

as an individual and as a member of the group.

It means

you question jewish history as written by men

by Josephus

by chassids

by Koestler

You learn that

jewish women converted to Christianity for money in order that
their husbands could continue to study the talmud
that their children could grow up well fed
that their children should grow up.

It means

hating having to cook

trying to relate to non jewish women and nearly succeeding

It means

deciding whether or not your son is circumcised
should go to Israel

It means

having nothing to do with your family
feeling guilty because your family are jewish
and proud

have suffered

have been gassed.

It means

knowing your father wanted you to
marry well

integrate

remain jewish

have upward mobility

care about your roots

never forget.

It means never wanting to step inside a synagogue
and when you do

feeling tenderness and loss and then

remembering

the women sat upstairs

It means separating out national and racial cultures

It means

like all women, having no country

unlike other jews

no homeland

No jewish feminist has visualised the promised land.

You remember

Golda Meir looked like Lyndon Johnson

that people think maybe Mozart was a jew

that

Rosa Luxemburg

Eleanor Marx

Emma Goldmann

were jewesses and no-one mentions that

It means

you are the mother, the daughter the sister the wife
of the chosen race

that you had no choice

it means

being Portnoys complaint

and Freuds life work

and recognising the fact that

you're stuck with being a jewess

so you might as well

try and define it.

But remembering

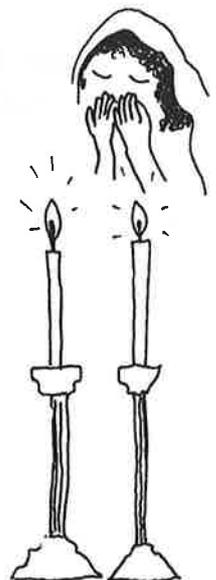
bagels and cheese

are a ball and chain

and my sister in Morocco

has never heard of Kvetches.

Liane Aukin



RECOVERING JEWISH WOMEN'S HISTORY

The history of the Jews in Britain has to a large extent been that of the Jewish male. Even in more radical works, little attention has been directed to the experiences of women, and emphasis has been given to the typically male-associated 'public' arenas of trade unionism, paid work, synagogal affairs and political activity — areas where, it is assumed, women had no active role to play.

Why have Jewish women been so neglected by the historians of Anglo-Jewry? In the first instance, one may point to a pervasive male-centred view, which defines women's activities in relation to men and thus sees women as peripheral to the main thrust of history. Jewish women of the late 19th and early 20th centuries are viewed as pre-eminently home-makers, model exemplars of the ideal of female domesticity. Yet few writers have actually examined the extent to which Jewish women may have been active outside the home environment, and fewer still the actual content of women's domestic role. Female domesticity is seen as 'given': unchanging and self-explanatory, existing outside time.

This view is gradually being challenged as more women become interested in recovering their past, drawing on perspectives developed by feminist historians. But there is also a practical problem: women's activities tend to be under-represented in the documentary records generally used by historians and this has made it more difficult to piece together evidence about their lives. If we are to restore to women their rightful place in history, we need to find new ways of recovering their past.

In this article, I would like to describe a pioneering project undertaken in Manchester. Whilst not exclusively concerned with Jewish women, it has sought to recover and reflect their experience as an integral part of communal history.

On March 25th, 1984, the Manchester Jewish Museum opened its doors to the public, amid considerable local excitement and extensive public acclaim. For those of us who had been involved since the early days of the project, this marked the climax of five years' dedicated work: fund-raising, developing a publicity programme, collecting and cataloguing exhibits, collaborating with volunteers and carefully planning the restoration and conversion of the beautiful Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, in which the museum is based.

Yet the opening of the museum represented the culmination of a still longer process set in motion some fourteen years ago, when historian, Bill Williams, embarked on a study of Manchester's Jewish community. Whilst Williams' authoritative account of the early history of the community (*The Making of Manchester Jewry 1740—1875*, Manchester University Press 1976) drew on conventional documentary sources, in researching the more recent period, still within living memory, he became aware of the wide range of sources potentially available: archives of all kinds housed in ordinary people's homes and work places, old films and family photographs and, perhaps most evocative, the memories of elderly people which might be recorded in oral history interviews. Such material had the capacity to expand the scope of historical enquiry and counteract the bias towards well-known individuals and middle-class organisations in existing public record collections. At the same time, it was often in critical danger of damage or destruction.

The same problems existed with respect to records of the wider Manchester community and in 1974 the Manchester Studies Unit was founded as a research team concerned to recover, preserve and communicate the history of working people in Manchester. An active programme of archive retrieval was initiated and, as a result of newspaper



Prior to WW1, many Jewish women worked in tailoring. This is a Manchester Workshop.



Jewish women have often assumed active economic roles and were often the breadwinners in their families. This was the case with Dora Black, a well known Jewish midwife in Manchester in the early part of this century.

and radio appeals and even door-to-door leafleting within defined localities, a vast quantity of records have been recovered and deposited in public record offices. Extensive photographic, film and oral history archives have also been assembled and, in addition, a programme of travelling exhibitions devised to take material out into the community, to locations such as schools, shopping centres, libraries and old people's homes.

Following Bill Williams' impetus, research into Manchester's Jewish community has formed an integral part of the work of the unit, individual projects being carried out on the development and transmission of anti-semitism, the acculturation of the children of Jewish immigrants and the changing role of Jewish women, all three projects focusing on the period between 1880 and 1930. More recently, research has begun on the experiences of refugees from the Nazi oppression of the 1930s and 40s. A central concern of those working in the unit has been to stimulate a new interest in the recent past and to reinstate the experiences of women and working-class Jews as a legitimate part of Anglo-Jewish history.

Our archive retrieval programme within the Jewish community has brought to light a wide range of material, including records from charities

and institutions, for example the annual reports of the Manchester Jewish Ladies' Visiting Associations and log-books from the Jews' School, and domestic archives, such as letters and post-cards, diaries and memoirs, account books, membership cards, posters and programmes. The day book of a German Jewish family, living in the fashionable area of Victoria Park in the 1870s, provided a detailed account of every item of expenditure incurred over a period of eighteen months, ranging from the cost of the house and furniture to daily outgoings for food, taxi fares and society subscriptions. Most poignant was the diary of a woman of German Jewish background, which opens with a description of Kristallnacht. It shows how a sensitive 13 year old girl came to terms with the incredible events of Nazi Germany, and against this background established her identity as a woman and a Jew.

In our oral history interviews we have sought to document the lives of ordinary Jewish men and women; the processes of immigration and the problems which immigrants encountered on their arrival in England; where they settled, how they found work and the kinds of social life which they evolved. We have looked at the experience of the children of immigrants growing up, with the competing influences of home and religion, on the one hand, and school and street life, on the other, and at the ways in which immigrant women managed to provide for their families, juggling slender resources to make ends meet. Our tapes suggest that immigrant women often assumed an active economic role, sometimes acting as primary breadwinners. They also indicate the importance of women's activities within the neighbourhood, establishing networks of communication and mutual aid. Nor were women absent from political life; they appear both as supporters of the socialist cause and as early Zionist pioneers.

These life histories are illustrated by a collection of some 5,000 photographs within Manchester Studies' more extensive photographic archive. Copy negatives and contact prints are made from photographs loaned by individual donors. The photographs document Jewish immigrants and their children at different points in their life: prior to and following migration; at work and at leisure; at marriage, school, Hebrew class and club. They also record the contrasting lifestyle of members of the established Anglo-Jewish community. A recent project, funded by the British Friends of the Diaspora Museum, brought in photographs from all over the country. These will be shown in a major exhibition of Anglo-Jewish history at the Diaspora Museum in Tel-Aviv and the complete collection is also available at Manchester Studies.

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Knowing No Bounds

... or ... WHAT'S A NICE JEWISH LESBIAN DOING HOLDING THE SEFER-TORAH?



I could write about being a lesbian and a Jew — in both a cultural **and** a religious sense — in a number of ways. And I've tried many of them out (in my head) for as long as I first began to acknowledge that my Jewishness did not fit neatly into a slot marked 'culture'. In fact, I haven't stopped trying to articulate all the **different** parts of me ever since I first began to recognise that there were different parts that **needed** articulating.

In the Beginning . . .

I was born Jewish and I have always lived with the Jewish year regulated by the Jewish festivals and their special flavours and aromas and object-lessons — with **Sedars**, with Friday nights, with Yiddish and Hebrew songs, with stories, with political debates, with Eastern European Jewish chopped liver and chicken soup and lemon tea and (when we could afford it) Viennese Jewish goulash and schnitzel and kaffee-mit-schlagobers — but until three years ago I lived my Jewishness **outside** feminism and despite it.

My mother, the ninth child and seventh daughter of parents who fled the Russian Pale of Jewish settlement in the wake of **Pogroms** in the early 1900s and found refuge with thousands of other Jews in Whitechapel, East London, rejects Orthodoxy, yet loves **Yiddishkeit**, is a passionate socialist and a passionate zionist — and a feminist too. My father, a Viennese Jew whose immediate family managed to escape Nazi Europe before all the exits were sealed (but not before his father had been beaten to a pulp in Dachau, protesting, 'but, I am an Austrian . . .'), is fervently anti-nationalist and individualist, a 'liberal' who is forever looking beyond the parameters of Jewish concerns, and yet cannot help being part of them.

And my parents are part of me. The battle between Eastern European and Central European Jewish life, between two 'murdered worlds', fought out in the kitchen and around the dining table, in Yiddish and in German, with music and with silence, is part of me. And I am also a lesbian and a feminist who is **choosing** new Jewish parts as well as old ones, who is engaged in creating and preserving, who is claiming all the 'strong' women and all the 'weak' men, and who is drawing on the sustenance of **Torah** and a dynamic tradition of remembrance, celebration, humour and hope — as much as on the insights and analysis of feminism, past and present.

Getting down to 'basics' . . .

In many ways, my eclectic approach is more Jewish than it is feminist. Jewish survival has always demanded myriad Jewish responses, while feminism, however radical its break with masculinist thinking, like other explanatory 'systems' which attempt to isolate what is 'wrong' with the world and what it is that needs to be changed, is not geared to acknowledging **complexity** and non-resolvable contradictions. A central assumption of feminism is that the identity **woman** is a fundamental one; that everything an individual woman is can be reduced to one **basic** fact: she is a woman. It is this assumption that has led to another: the identity of **all** women in our essential womanhood — **sisterhood**: **basically**, we are all sisters because our shared womanhood underlies all other experiences — individual, cultural, economic — which separate us. The prototype feminist of the 1980s is not the prototype feminist of the late '60s and early '70s (more of that in a moment), but her 'basic' feminist impulses remain: she is a woman who has experienced the 'click' phenomenon, and with the truth revealed, has 'cast-off' all the old bonds which tied her — to family, to class, to culture, to religion, to nation — to emerge a new woman, unfettered and eager to join hands with her sisters across the globe and create a new world.



Well, this had been the theory of it. In practice, some of us had to cast-off more than others. The new woman, early '70s variety, could be white, middle class and culturally Christian, because that is the norm in the countries where modern feminism initially developed — and so, nobody noticed; she couldn't be black, working class, Jewish² — because that would mean her 'loyalties' were subject to conflicting pulls, and anyway, we all know how much **more** patriarchal these 'other' cultures are . . . Yet, lots of 'other' women did **try** to become 'new' women too: rejecting, denying, repressing, forgetting, or simply camouflaging — with the rhetoric and new reflexes of 'sisterhood' — 'old' rituals, habits, customs, fears and allegiances.

We **tried** — and then we stopped trying. I don't think it is possible to isolate a particular moment in time when the 'other' feminists decided that weren't going to keep our 'otherness' discreet and **apart** from feminism any longer. I do know that by the time I began to think about being Jewish **within** the Women's Liberation Movement, 'sisterhood' had already lost its 'rosy glow' for me, the



divisions — between heterosexual feminists and lesbian feminists, between different groups of lesbians, between different feminist 'styles' and approaches — were bitter and anguished enough to indicate that 'sisters' were capable of hurting one another and that some 'sisters' were 'sisters' and some weren't. But it was only when I found myself caught up in these conflicts that I became aware of the extent to which the assumption prevailed that all feminists **should** share the **same** experience, and the extent to which, that same experience we were all supposed to share, excluded large parts of me and my experience.

The 'other' feminists have now begun to make our presence felt **inside** feminism — so much so, that in the last two or three years the terms of feminist discourse have actually changed slightly: are less one-dimensional and simplistic. Feminists now say words like 'diversity' with increasing frequency (and decreasing meaning?); feminists speak of 'multiple' oppressions; feminists are beginning to acknowledge (although this acknowledgement is often little more than token), that women do not share the same experience — that differences in 'sexuality', class, race, culture, religion, make for differences **between** women, as do the differences which are less systematic, but no less significant in a hierarchical society: the experience of mothering; physical and mental 'disablement'; variations in body size, and many more. Feminists are beginning to recognise that 'sisterhood' is neither a simple, nor an automatic, bond. And feminists are also beginning to acknowledge that if diversity exists between women, it certainly inheres within individual women; that it's not simply a question of accepting that there are black women and Jewish women and lesbians and mothers and women with disabilities — a single woman may have all these 'identities' (and others as well).



The fit-ness obsession . . . and some fit-ing strategies . . .

Well, whatever the limitations of current feminist understandings, when I first began to bring my Jewishness within the orbit of my feminism and to think of myself not only as a lesbian and a Jew, but as a Jewish Lesbian, a feminist vocabulary which could accommodate me was not yet available, and so my overriding concern was to make my Jewishness 'fit' and to ensure that my feminist profile remained intact. The first strategy I adopted was to use the **language** of my lesbian consciousness for my new-found consciousness as a Jewish lesbian. I could make being a lesbian and being Jewish 'fit' because they were **symmetrical** experiences: 'coming out' as a lesbian in a society dominated by institutionalized heterosexuality; 'coming out' as a Jew in a society dominated by institutionalized Christianity.

The second strategy acknowledged that it was a bit more complicated than that (but only a bit). Being a lesbian and being Jewish were not symmetrical experiences; they were **different**. However, while different, they were **equal** (a familiar argument?). The fact that they were both equally

important to me and equally fundamental to my existence, urged me to give them equal **value** . . . On the surface, this may seem like a sensible approach. The problem was, I spent a lot of time trying to **prove** that they were equal: quantifying them, measuring them up against one another — using indices of 'pain' or 'joy' or both . . . oy yoy yoy . . .

These fit-ing strategies have involved 'sorting things out', 'smoothing out contradictions'. When emphasising the symmetrical nature of my lesbian and Jewish experiences, I have had to **select** those aspects that are symmetrical (almost): 'coming out'; the place of **separatism** as both means and ends in the survival strategies of Jews and lesbians. When granting equal status to my Jewishness and my lesbianism, I have attempted to evaluate things that could not be easily evaluated, to comprehend the incomprehensible: centuries of anti-Jewish persecution and the **unique** horror of the Holocaust; the burning of 'witches' and 'faggots' in medieval Christian Europe and the exclusion of lesbians and gay men from the terms of the Law of Return: Israel may be a refuge for **heterosexual** Jews only.

My **attempts** to make being a lesbian and being Jewish 'fit' did not emerge in a linear fashion; I draw on both strategies from time to time, depending on my state of mind, while trying to develop a third — a sort of anti-strategy to help me resist 'making sense' of my experience, while encouraging me to acknowledge as much of it as I can. This anti-strategy became necessary when I realised that the neat way in which I had managed to **contain** my Jewish experience wasn't working any more. Not only was I giving it more than equal space in my life — feeling overwhelmed by the imperative of Jewish survival **after** Auschwitz — it was **changing** . . . in ways I had never predicted: I was 'getting' religion — or it was 'getting' me — or both. Needless to say, it is difficult to 'fit' what you can no longer 'predict', so when the realm of the 'spiritual' started to complicate matters, I stopped trying



The Getting of . . . Religion: Opiate or Antidote?

Once I got over the initial shock, it did not seem at all surprising that my Jewishness had a religious dimension. Being 'open' to the Jewish heritage **available** to me; wishing to explore what Jewishness has meant to Jews historically — to women and men, to Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities; wanting to understand a little of how Jews have lived and endured, has meant confronting religion. Yes, many of the Jewish festivals have cultural and agricultural referents: 'liberation' (Chunukah, Purim, Pesach); the cycle of the seasons (Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot) and these are very important. The Jewish people were, indeed, 'born' in the liberation/Exodus from Egypt, and Pesach, the festival which commemorates the Exodus occurs in the **Spring**, during the **first** month of the Jewish year — Nisan (New Year — Rosh Hashanah — occurs during the **seventh** month: Tishri). But the

birth of the Jews was not simply an act of revolt on the part of an oppressed people, it was a sign of Divine intervention; an acknowledgement of human limitations and an affirmation of faith in the One, unfathomable, God of Deliverance.

Like many good radicals intent on **revolution**, the thought of God (**when** I thought of God) used to strike me as both absurd and repugnant: to acknowledge that people were not capable of doing and creating anything we chose was tantamount to blasphemy (secular variety); to suggest that 'something' might **transcend** human beings, seemed an admission of pre-ordained hierarchy (with humanity occupying the second rung); to 'believe' in that **non-provable** 'something' was completely **irrational** (a very grave crime indeed). Now, I am less certain — and more humble. I do not and cannot know **what** God is; if God exists. What does seem fairly clear, however, is that the **idea** of God may be an essential antidote to the arrogant pretensions of human beings. As committed 'revolutionaries', we (feminists and socialists) want to **control** our own lives, to **empower** ourselves, to **overthrow** (however non-violently) existing (oppressive) social arrangements — and all on the basis of the assumption that when we are no longer oppressed, oppression will **cease**; the world will be a better place. But how do the oppressed liberate themselves without becoming dangerously arrogant and self-righteous in the process? (viz. developments in the Soviet Union, Israel, North Vietnam — the list goes on.) I don't know. And feminists who try to avoid the issue by viewing domination and violence as somehow inherently male (on the basis of either **biological** or **historical-conditioning** arguments) are doing feminism a disservice: **power** lies in the hands of those (any one/any group) in a **position** to exercise it.

Significantly, **Torah** acknowledges the fact that the experience of oppression does not transform people into morally superior beings. The ex-slaves — still wandering in the Wilderness — were **commanded** to 'Love thy neighbour as thyself' and not to oppress the 'stranger' in their midst. But these **commandments** beg an important question: do ethical standards regulating conduct between people (and peoples) have to be regarded as Divinely ordained for them to be recognised as **Absolute** and binding on **everybody**? It's a difficult question. As far as I am concerned, if there is such a thing as The Absolute, it **certainly** doesn't exist **within** the world. Human beings don't and can't know everything, and I'm much happier taking The Absolute **out** of human affairs. This does not mean I submit to passive fatalism: the fact that we can never grasp The Absolute Truth, Perfection, does not mean that we shouldn't **strive** continually to perfect the world, to re-shape and re-create it — this, after all, is what being a feminist is about: modern feminism at its best has always emphasised **process**, the **means** by which we liberate ourselves, rather than the **end** of liberation.



The role of Religion in the overthrow of 'Systems': some heretical thoughts

Both Marxism and Feminism are concerned with changing the world — with removing 'power' and 'inequality', 'hierarchy' and 'oppression' — although these 'problems' are defined differently within each framework. For **both** Marxists and Feminists the impetus to change the world is provided by commitment to a **system of ideas** which explains what is wrong with the world and what it is that needs to be changed. But these systems of ideas are necessarily incomplete; any system by virtue of its coherence leaves out of account anything that cannot be resolved and made to fit. The 'crunch' comes when, in the unity of theory and practice which is at the basis of any connection between our ideas about the world and our will to change the world, our ideas prove to be too limited to encompass the complexity of social reality. What do we do when changing the world in accordance with our ideas becomes much more difficult than we expected? There seem to be a number of options: we can change our ideas slightly, modifying the system we subscribe to while still upholding it (a common Marxist approach); we can look to an entirely different system; or, if we've exhausted all the available systems, we can become pessimistic, deciding that change is impossible. Sooner or later, large numbers of 'revolutionaries' find themselves left with this 'option'.

But perhaps there is another alternative. Perhaps one way a continual commitment to changing the world can be maintained in the absence of workable 'solutions' and the entrenchment of the Power we oppose — Patriarchy, Capitalism, Imperialism, Institutionalized Racism — is if the impetus to create change is acknowledged as an **ethical imperative** which is **not** dependant on the efficacy of any particular system of ideas: opposing 'wrong' and creating 'good' is the purpose of our existence. Or, to put it more Jewishly: Life is a commandment. And to live life to the full, we have to **hope** and dream and work and learn and struggle to perfect ourselves and the world. Of course, the notion of such an ethical imperative is not confined to religious thinking. Humanists, for example, believe not in God, but in the 'inherent goodness of man' (sic). However, as with belief in God, this belief demands **faith** which is not contingent upon reality. In fact, religious people are often more realistic and pragmatic: religious Jews, for example, seeing human beings as limited, with a capacity for good **and** evil, regard belief in God and God's commandments as the ethical imperative, compelling people to strive for good. Somehow, the idea of God, more awesome than fallible humanity lays a stronger claim to my belief.

Knowing No Bounds . . .

These are some of my recent thoughts on 'religion' and 'God' . . . and while I don't expect women to accept them (God forbid!), I do **expect** women — feminists — to **respect** them . . . because, like it or not, I'm a feminist too . . . And if this 'respect' isn't possible within the terms of feminism as we know it, then perhaps we need a new feminism to do justice to all our lives and all our dreams — and



that 'we' includes white, gentile, middle class feminists as well as all the 'others' . . .

The only feminism worthy of its name is one which genuinely challenges patriarchy — patriarchy as a way of making sense of the world: of ordering, selecting, valuing and devaluing. And what we identify as patriarchy today was not a once-and-for-all event, born of a life/death struggle between two distinct forces/principles/modes of social organisation: Patriarchy versus Matriarchy; men versus women. Patriarchy did not happen, it has emerged. And as it has emerged, it has taken shape and gained definition. In the Torah, for example, we find multiple and contradictory truths and realities; the consummate patriarchal mode which has become most explicit in the last two hundred years with the rise of 'science' and accelerated historical development, knows of only one truth, one reality. And for all its theoretical sophistication, feminism, like socialism has been **formed** in a patriarchal universe in which 'truth' is simple and 'reason' supreme and 'progress' inevitable — and 'good' always triumphs over 'evil' . . .

It is not **inevitable** that feminism fulfil its patriarchal legacy, but it is **possible**. After almost two decades of 'women's liberation', some feminists are now deciding just how far 'other' feminists may take our Jewish/Black/Working Class identification — and still call ourselves feminists. And the message I am receiving is, that it is okay to be **Jewish culturally** — that is, within a liberation-culture framework — but not religiously; it is okay to make connections with Jewish women's traditions, as long as the traditions of Jewish men are rejected in the process. In other words, if I keep my Jewish identification strictly limited within existing feminist parameters, I can do no wrong. But as it happens, I'm making no promises . . .

As it happens, I am a lesbian and a feminist who expresses her Jewishness both culturally **and** religiously — an entity which doesn't exist in either Jewish or feminist terms, and yet here I am. It doesn't all 'fit', but it is me — not because I was 'born that way', and not because this is what some definition of 'correct' political practice **dictates**, but because this is what I have **chosen**. I am a Jewish lesbian feminist who is choosing to explore what Jewishness — in all its dimensions — means and has meant to Jews — to women and men, to Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities. And in choosing to explore the meanings Jews are making and have made, I am also choosing to explore my own Jewish life and the meanings I might make — it is an exciting, daunting, bewildering, exhilarating process.

And I am choosing much more than I have been able to write here: language is limited; it cannot contain me. I will not and cannot predict what I will be thinking and saying tomorrow — although I'm sure that whatever it is, I'll do my best to be persuasive! The only certainty I have is that I'm learning all the time. And I hope I never succeed in suppressing, diminishing, ignoring anything I learn which is difficult or challenging or incongruous — but no doubt, like anyone else 'making sense' of things, I'll try . . .

Elizabeth Sarah

Footnotes:

1. In Sheila Shulman's untitled poem which begins with the words, 'Rosh Hashanah/came and went', two lines read: 'I hear the voices/of a murdered world' (*Spinster* 6, Winter 1983/84: 7–8).
2. 'Lists' of oppressions are problematic — and sometimes dismiss more than they acknowledge. This list isn't definitive — and the list of dominant assumptions isn't either.

"That's Funny, You Don't Look Anti-Semitic."

An anti-racist analysis of anti-semitism

by Steve Cohen, edited and produced by Libby Lawson and Erica Burman of the Beyond the Pale Collective, 1984.

Reviewed by Francesca Klug.

One day last Summer someone sent me the draft of a pamphlet about anti-semitism among left-wing groups in Britain by Steve Cohen of the Manchester Jewish Socialist Group. Its arrival was timely. Anti-semitism had been pouring out of the cracks in the women's movement against the backdrop of the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in August 1982. It is not possible to detail the sequence of events which followed in any detail in this review, but in a nutshell, the focus of this anti-semitism was provided by the feminist magazine **Spare Rib** which carried two articles on Zionism (August and November 1982) that many Jewish feminists found highly abusive in their distortion of Jewish history and oppression. After the **Spare Rib** collective refused to publish any of the initial 40 letters it received in response to these articles a volcano of protest erupted which tore into the very heart of the feminist movement in this country. The veneer of sisterhood which had obscured the very real differences **between** women had been wearing thin for many years. It now appeared to break down altogether. In the attack and counter attack that followed, which widened out to embrace the whole issue of racism and cultural imperialism within the feminist movement, Jewish, Black and Third World women took the brunt of the abuse and pain — the very women who were attempting to challenge their oppression within the Movement.

It was in the midst of this mayhem that I read the manuscript on anti-semitism on the Left, now published as a pamphlet by the Beyond the Pale Collective as 'a contribution to the anti-racist struggle.' **That's Funny You Don't Look Anti-Semitic** is written by a man and edited by two women who presumably fought similar battles to that referred to above within the socialist movement. The pain they must have felt on encountering anti-semitism on the left, while not directly referred to in the text, seeps out of its pages and gives it an extra authenticity.

But this pamphlet has more to offer Jewish feminists than a parallel experience to that which they have known in the women's movement. Its contribution lies in its attempt to explain the common roots and pattern of anti-semitic ideology wherever it is found.



In this way the pamphlet provides the reader with the tools to recognise the way that anti-semitism works and the confidence to assert that a given statement is abusive to Jews whether it is disguised as anti-zionism, internationalism or a critique of a patriarchal religion. It is not necessary to agree with every line of argument and example given in the pamphlet to be persuaded of its immense value at a time when Jews in feminist and socialist groups find themselves denouncing as anti-semitic much of what passes for anti-zionism; while anti-zionists cannot or will not understand the nature of this criticism — often denouncing it as another zionist ploy.

Steve's central thesis is that anti-semitism, as a form of racism, 'is not simply a type of national chauvinism that happens to be directed against Jews' but that it is essentially an ideology based on the 'theory of the world Jewish conspiracy for international dominance.' While dating back to pre-Christian days this myth owed its development and durability to the spread of Christian theology and the oppressor role in which it cast all Jews. By the end of the last century Jew-devil imagery had been replaced by its secularised version in the Tsarist forgery, **The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion**, which purported to reveal the existence of a secret Jewish government exercising international power. When the Nazis and their modern heirs denounce Communism and Capitalism as two sides of the same coin of the Jewish/Zionist conspiracy to take over the world they are continuing the tradition of the past in the idiom of today.

The pamphlet goes on to demonstrate that in order to identify anti-semitism when it is dressed up in sheep's (or anti-zionist) clothing, it is essential to grasp its distinguishing features, which set it apart from other forms of racism. Although conspiracy theories lurk behind anti-black racism, or for that matter sexism, with anti-semitism 'the



conspiracy theory operates on the surface — it is visible. What gives sexism and racism their own unique irrationalism, however, is precisely the fact that notions of conspiracy are rarely explicit.' This is not to say that individual anti-semites are necessarily conscious of the conspiracy theory they have absorbed. Ideologies permeate collective thinking so that 'many Jew-haters just seize on particular anti-semitic images of Jews — as bloodsuckers, userers, or whatever.' But this popular conscious, however fragmented on an individual basis, has been so potent that it has on occasion been 'stimulated by demagogues into a mass psychology' — the most obvious example being Nazism and the holocaust.

The collective guilt syndrome, in which all Jews are blamed for the actions of some, is thus an extension of the conspiracy theory which perceives Jews as miraculously working in unison. On this basis all Jews become fair game for the attacks of anti-zionists, unless they are active in anti-zionist politics. The Socialist newspaper **Big Flame** argued in October 1982 that 'zionism is the monster that is doing most to fuel anti-semitism in the modern world.' But, as Steve argues, this kind of logic 'stands reality on its head.' The crime of the Israeli government was 'the attempted destruction of the Palestinians as a nation.' They must be condemned for that but anti-semitism, in the past or present, is the responsibility of anti-semites, not Jews.

Similarly, when the language of the Nazi holocaust is used to describe the oppression or even murder of Palestinians by the Israeli government or army this is abusive to Jews. This is not because of the difference in the scale of injustice concerned — the numbers involved is not the point. It is because terms like 'final solution' are no longer neutral but refer 'to all Jewish people — because it was the genocide of all Jewish people that was contemplated in the final solution.' By implication, then, all the survivors and their descendants become responsible for the horrors of the Israeli government.

There are many other arguments and descriptions contained in the valuable 100 pages of the pamphlet which there is no room to do more than mention here. These include a unique summary of the anti-Jewish agitation which led to the introduction of immigration control in Britain at the turn of this century; a discussion of the position taken by the 'founding fathers' of Socialism on the 'Jewish question'; and an analysis of the connection between the left's historical call for the assimilation of all minority groups and outright racism. Finally the pamphlet turns the 'Jewish problem' on its head, denouncing the 'non-Jewish problem' which the left, among others, has generally failed to recognise. As all white people have to challenge their own racism, so 'non-Jews have an independent responsibility to face up to the power of anti-semitism in all its aspects.' Without this 'a genuine socialism' will never be possible.

That's Funny You Don't Look Anti-Semitic is available from Beyond the Pale Collective, Box No. 6, 59 Cookbridge Street, Leeds LS2 3AW. Price £2.00 plus postage. Proceeds donated to Shifra.

AUSTRIANS 'ANTI-JEW'

Vienna: A survey by a Vienna scientist concludes that 25 per cent of Austrians are firmly anti-semitic and very few others are free of negative attitudes towards Jews.

The survey, by a Vienna University reader, Dr Hilde Weiss, interviewed a cross-section of Austrians between 1976 and 1980. Every fourth person of the 1,000 interviewed had "markedly anti-semitic attitudes" and a further 25 per cent showed "midway" anti-semitic views by agreeing with negative historical images of the Jewish people.

Only 15 per cent of the population showed absolutely no prejudice against Jews, according to the survey. The remaining 35 per cent had "mildly" anti-semitic attitudes. **Guardian 14.9.84**

NAZI GAME INVENTOR CLEARED

From Anna Tomforde in Bonn

A former policeman who invented a board game that provoked sharp protests from Jewish organisations both here and abroad has been acquitted with a court ruling that "thoughts are free."

The court, in Zweibruecken, said that while there was no doubt that Hans-Guenter Froehlich, aged 35, was the brains behind the game, that he had actually produced and distributed it had not been proven.

Mr Froehlich had been charged under laws forbidding incitement to racial hatred and the spreading of Nazi propaganda. His acquittal was greeted with cheers in the courtroom by neo-Nazi sympathisers clad in black leather jackets. The prosecution had demanded a prison sentence of one year and 10 months.

His companion, Ingeborg Schulte, a graphic designer, aged 30, was given a nine-month suspended prison sentence for designing and mailing copies of the game to Jewish organisations.

The game's title, "Jew Don't Get Angry", was taken from a popular German dice game. Designed in the hexagonal shape of the Star of David, the board bears the names of six big Nazi concentration camps.

The first player to get his (or her) counters round the board and back into the corner, symbolising the extermination of 6 million Jews, is the winner.

The Federal Justice Minister, Mr Hans Engelhard, commented yesterday: "This dreadful concentration camp murder game exceeds in perversity all neo-Nazi agitation observed up to now."

Guardian 22.9.84



Black Jew ?



The following article The Limitations of Identity Politics was written by me earlier this year for the Black Feminist Conference. I think that it is appropriate to include it in this issue of Shifra. My experience as a Black Jew has led me to almost despair at labels, though I recognise that they have their uses. The trouble with them briefly is that they lead to stereotyping. As though Jew means a set of physical and religious characteristics and practices, and those who do not subscribe to them are not Jewish. I have always acknowledged the faith of my mother, the culture that she passes on to me, but because

I am Black, my father is Nigerian, I have been looked upon with suspicion by other Jews. Going to Synagogue is something only now do I feel strong enough to do. But I still detect raised eyebrows and under the breath mutterings — what is a schwartzzer doing here! And at the same time within the Black community, to say nothing of the dominant anglo-saxon society, vast amounts of anti-semitism revealed to me because nobody assumes I'm Jewish, as though that makes a difference.

I am, we all are, more than our labels, much much more.

Undoubtedly our identities are influenced by who and what we are — being Black, and/or Jewish, being working-class, being Italian or Irish but, but, but. Being any or all of these things doesn't actually define our entire Identity. What I mean is that the fact that some of us may choose, or perhaps are compelled to work with women who share an identity with us, doesn't mean — and should not be taken by ruling class women to mean — that is the summation of our experience.

Being Black, as I am, I need to talk with other Black Women about being Black, the experience of day-to-day racism both within the WLM, and outside it. But listing all the other things I happen to be still doesn't sum me up. The fact is that I can be talking with a group of Black Women about racism, which we have in common and experience anti-lesbianism from them. Getting into even more refined political groups is only part of the answer, and anyway how many Black Jewish, working-class Lesbian mothers are there for me to join with. . . ? Instead I think the answer is for each of us to recognise the differences of our experience, even within ourselves. If we thought it was enough that we were all women, we have learned painfully that for some of us it is not enough. But for me a source of power and clarity has been to recognise the different things that might be going on in my life and name them. I do experience, like most women, many forms of oppression. If I can recognise what particular form is being experienced I can deal with it, but if I confuse oppression/prejudice and reduce everything to the fact that I am Black, I become frustrated and powerless, because it is not always racism that is going on.

The problem *has* been that in dealing with our 'identities' a hierarchy of oppressions has been set up. If you are Black you are worse off — which as a Black Woman I find a patronising sentiment. If you are white and working-class you can't be racist, if you are Black you can't be anti-semitic or ageist, etc. Clearly none of this is

true, all of us are very capable of being oppressive to other groups of women, and even each other, but the point is that the way the WLM has dealt with 'identity' politics has been to make one compete with the other. This has arisen because in claiming our 'identities' we have allowed that to define our being; slowly we are moving away from this, and as far as I'm concerned the sooner we do it the better.

Black Women may also be incest survivors, and disabled. Jewish women may be working-class, Irish women may be middle-class. There are no neat little categories to sum up oppressions and then identities. But that has been exactly the response for some 'Ruling Class women' to 'identity' politics — to grasp a very convenient way of dealing with other women's demands that they change. Put them in pigeon holes, ". . . all Jewish women are white and middle-class and experience anti-semitism, whatever that is." "Black Women are angry and must be listened to. . ." These may be stereotypes — but dealing with oppression seems to have been reduced to slightly more sophisticated slogans, wrapped up with some feminist jargon.

The need to claim our identities is still necessary in my view, in a society that denies any cultural heritage other than the ruling one. But in doing so we are destined for disappointment if we expect that it says everything about us. Instead it is validating to that part of our lives that is important today, but tomorrow we may be hassled on the street for being lesbians or just for being women. It doesn't have to be one identity or another, not women or Black, women or Jewish, Lesbian or Disabled. We can be and are, any combination including oppressed and oppressors. And there is yet another layer understressed within feminism, which is our uniqueness, our individuality. Because even where we work with others who share similar life experiences, say of being brought up in the same town, or the same class or the same racial mixture as other women, we don't end up the same. We do react to life circumstances in

different ways, operate different choices, make sense of the world differently, and yet within the labelling of identity every one is reduced to sameness. Not all Black Women are the same, not all ruling class women are the same. If we mean to say that all Black Women's experience of racism is the same, or all ruling class women's experience of privilege is the same, then let us say it. Although personally I do think that both assertions are questionable, but rather than these sweeping generalisations that sum up experience we need a little more subtlety, we need to identify the differences, or where we see common links, to make them specific and clear.

I can say for example that I believe that all women in Britain experience male violence, or the threat of male violence within their lives. I hold this to be true, but from that I cannot assume that that fact — or opinion — makes all women the same. We are only the same in relation to the threat or fact of violence. How we react to it, what sense we make of it, how we avoid or ignore it also distinguishes us one from another. But it is precisely the kind of generalisation about sameness that has led to pain, frustration and hostility amongst feminists, because our slogans useful though they were no longer bind all women together — if they ever did.

So as we have become more sophisticated in dealing with our identities, we need to continue the process further and not rest on neat little labels like 'Black' or working-class to define us. Instead I am advocating that we use these labels as a starting point to listening to each other.

In my personal dilemmas and struggles around racism and anti-semitism within the WLM over the last two years, I have come to some awareness of my own need to cultural roots and political answers. One of the depressing things that has struck me is not only the lack of respect for other women's cultures, within this country, but also the lack of acknowledgement for English Culture. I have no desire to praise or blame it, simply to insist that it exists. But what I find is that many white English women refuse to acknowledge they have one. Culture is something only 'foreign' people have, it's what anthropologists study. If white English women would begin to claim their own heritage, to reject the bad, and accept the good, as many of us who don't 'belong' here have been doing with our own cultural heritages, maybe a new basis of understanding could exist between women, one firmly grounded on equality, instead of a hierarchy of oppressions.

Linda Bellos

WOMEN'S HEALTH — Subject of Israel's sixth National Feminist Conference

"The old-fashioned and sometimes harmful procedures still in use in this country . . ." show gynaecologists to be "way behind the times — as much as ten years — in modern medical research, literature and techniques of abortion."

So said Dr Susan Harlap, (professor of reproduction, contraception and abortion at one of Israel's leading universities) during the opening session of the Israeli Feminist Conference, held at Tel-Aviv in May. The whole conference was devoted to issues of women's health.

Four hundred women, from all over Israel, then heard other speakers talking about the regression in women's reproductive rights that had taken place under the Likud administration, including attempts by extremist religious and right-wing groups to make abortion illegal. Since in both religious and secular law, an embryo is defined only as a person **once it has been born**, this was seen as a misuse of the law.

The atmosphere of the conference was very relaxed — both opening and closing session being held outdoors — with children very much in evidence.

Funding had come from feminist groups in Israel, Jewish feminist groups outside Israel and a small grant from the Israeli Ministry of Health.

The first evening consisted of entertainment, with women reading poetry and singing songs about women and their lives.

Next day, about forty workshops were offered — led either by grass-roots feminist activists or women professionals in health or related fields.

Themes included: — 'the effect of menstruation on women's lives', 'menopause', 'prostitution and women's health', 'ageing', 'women and addictions', 'effect of rape on women's health', 'exploitation of women patients by male medical professionals', 'fashion, cosmetics and drugs as health hazards to women', 'Arab women's health problems', 'women's health in the conditions of stress in Israeli society', 'effects of violence against women on their mental and physical health' (this was led by Ruth Resnik, founder of the Herzliya Shelter for Battered Women).

Outside the workshops were stalls selling feminist literature in English and Hebrew, booths displaying various feminist projects from around Israel, T-shirts and jewellery with women's symbols and an Israeli Flag in pink and white!

The closing session saw a demand for the repeal of all legal limitations on a women's right to decide on reproduction (in Israel, women are encouraged to have more children) and as an interim demand — the repeal of the 'social clause' in the abortion law.

Finally, it was agreed that an umbrella organisation of all feminist groups be set up to act as a lobby for women's interests, and that all groups pressurise the political parties to improve their positions on women's status.

Libby Lawson.