

shifra

NUMBER 2

SHAVUOT, 5745/MAY, 1985

A Jewish Feminist Magazine



£1.50

EDITORIAL

Welcome to the second issue of **SHIFRA**, and greetings for Shavuot.

Our first issue provoked many and varied responses (see letters pages). And judging from the range of contributions we have received since **SHIFRA 1**, it is clear that we are beginning to realise one of our main aims: lots of different women are reading **SHIFRA** all over the place!

This issue includes: aspects of Jewish tradition explored by feminists on our own terms, articles centering on the politics of Jewish feminism, personal accounts of women's experiences, prose/fiction, poetry, reviews, recipes, conference reports and contacts.

We recognise that as Jews, we come from a variety of cultures and backgrounds, and we hope this is reflected in the magazine: the **Glossary** includes definitions of words which may be familiar to some of us and not to others – and that goes for the definitions themselves

We see one of the strengths of **SHIFRA** as providing a forum for all Jewish feminists. Although we acknowledge the diversity within feminism (and that includes our collective), there are certain feminist principles women on **SHIFRA** all share: the power of men over women is a reality for which men are responsible, and which feminists must challenge. However, we are aware that patriarchy is a complex reality: all men do not have equal power over women. As Jewish feminists, we oppose abuse of power in all its forms, and are seeking to explore these issues in **SHIFRA**.

We welcome lots and lots more contributions from as many Jewish women as possible – photographs would be wonderful! At the moment, each issue seems like a miracle – it would be lovely to have enough copy to plan several issues ahead!

It would also be nice to have enough money to be able to plan ahead. Several women have commented on the high cover price of **SHIFRA**. It is very expensive to produce a 48 page magazine, and we are barely covering our production costs. We do not receive funding from any source, and rely totally on sales, subscriptions and donations.

Thanks to everyone who made this issue possible!

THE SHIFRA COLLECTIVE Bev Gold, Dena Attar, Elizabeth Sarah, Jane Black, Leah Ruth, Libby Lawson, Linda Bellos, Marilyn Fetcher, Riva Krut, Scarlet Pollock, Sheila Saunders.

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שִׁפְרָא 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 **שִׁפְרָא** because she speaks to us in her own name and not in the name of a father or husband. **שִׁפְרָא** symbolises our purpose in creating this magazine.

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Shifra invites Jewish women to send material to us for Issue Number 3, which will be published at Rosh Hashonah (copy deadline will be the end of July 1985).

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.

Front cover photograph: Pearl Golombek, a machinist in a Manchester tailoring workshop, in her 'Shabbos best'. 1920s. Thanks to Manchester Jewish Museum for the photograph.

DEAR

Dear **Shifra** Collective,

This is a very belated letter to say how much I enjoyed the first issue. I read it from cover to cover, greedily absorbing every item. Like others I know, I found Elli's article especially moving and stimulating but genuinely enjoyed it all. Of course there are criticisms I could make – to criticise is easy and besides I'm sure there's nothing I could say that you haven't thought of yourselves. What is much harder, is to get out an interesting, diverse and entertaining magazine for Jewish feminists and other Jewish women. And you did it . . . with no paid workers, no massive GLC grant, just your own hard work and tenacity.

I do hope you're actually going to allow yourselves to enjoy your achievement!

With love and appreciation,
Francesca (Klug),
London.

*See Francesca Klug's review of "Bessie", by
Lawrence Bush, on Page 22.*

Dear **Shifra**,

I am a Jewish woman of the older generation (O.A.P.), and the Women's Liberation Movement (W.L.M.) is a joy to me. After the war, in the '50s, everything went backward and reactionary as far as women were concerned – till 1969 that is.

I can't send a donation this time because I am sending to the Women's Support groups – but next time I will.

I take 'Spare Rib' and its one-way anti-Zionism really turns me off – I belong to MAPAM* so you'll know my ideas regarding Israel and the Arabs (why don't they allow us a voice?) – so it's a relief to welcome Shifra – may she long live to grow stronger! If you have any more details of Shifra, please may we have them – or any other unknown (buried) Jewish heroines.

Keep going – like the miners' wives!

Dorothy Grey (Ms)
Enfield.

P.S. Just read your editorial and review of a book of poems – it's no good! – you've got to have a donation!! So I've opened the envelope and made out a new cheque.

*MAPAM is a left-socialist Zionist Israeli political party, allied to the Hashomer Hatzair Kibbutz movement and Peace Now. It advocates self-determination for both Jews and Palestinians.

Dear **Shifra** Sisters,

Thank you for the first issue. The article by Franzie Goldberg reminded me that my grandmother had come over from Vienna to Liverpool in 1938 too, and it occurred to me that they might have met. It transpired that Grandma claims to have been the second refugee in Liverpool, and has remained friends with Franzie Goldberg until now, and that they still live around the corner from each other. I'm sure she'd like to read the article.

I wonder if you could include some information in the next issue. Josephine Zara (whose 4 poems were published in the first issue) along with other Jewish women, (and some non-Jewish) is being published in a book which Brighton women writers are publishing. **Oooh women** will be available around Pesach, with 56pp of poetry; price £1.25 including postage from Brighton Women Writers, 22 Eaton Place, Brighton, Sussex.

I look forward to next **Shifras**.

Shalom,
Karen Adler,
Brighton.

Dear **Shifra**,

I enclose a poem that I wrote as a result of reading 'Rome on the 16th October 1943', printed in your first issue. I take no credit for the style or language used, for, as you will see, it takes exactly the same form as the poem by Josephine Zara (and needs to be read, I think, in conjunction with her poem). It makes the point that for at least one day, and probably for some time after the event, the Roman people **were** shocked by the anti-semitism that they saw on their doorsteps. The poem refers to the bomb attack at the Great Synagogue, Rome, in which a two year old child was killed and forty others were injured. I was living in Rome at the time (in the Jewish Quarter, very close to the shul) and the family for whom I worked were at the shul. The congregants were attacked after the service on leaving the building – with **hand** bombs, grenades and bullets from machine guns. The Romans were truly shocked and supported the Jewish community, joining in with prayers at the synagogue and by attending two subsequent protest marches. Some even closed their shops in protest.

All this has, perhaps, little to do with Jewish Feminism, but I thought it may be of interest to you – or to Josephine Zara.

I wish you all success with your magazine.

Yours sincerely,
Paula Savage,
Birmingham.

More Letters

Dear **Shifra**,

How much I appreciated the first edition! It was really wonderful to read all the diverse experiences of so many Jewish Feminists. I want to thank the collective and everyone who contributed for brightening up my life and making me feel part of something so BIG and EXCITING!

I would like, however, to make one point of constructive criticism. I'm sure you'll agree that Shifra should be as open and accessible to all Jewish Feminists everywhere. Unfortunately, the "Open Letter from the Shifra Collective" did not fit into this category. I'm sure there are many women, like me, who did not understand it as they were not aware of the full story, and may have felt alienated by it. That would be a shame. May I suggest that in future editions adequate background information is provided for any factual articles or editorials.

I hope this plea from an out-of-town Jewish Feminist is heard! And I promise that as soon as my exams are over I'll contribute an article.

With a big mazeltov and much love,
Naomi Fulop,
Bristol.

Dear **Shifra**,

First let me say personally how wonderful, yes wonderful, I found the first issue of Shifra, so thank you very much for that.

Secondly, the Archives here want to subscribe for a year, starting from No.1.

We hope you'll find the two issues of our bulletin interesting. Thanks and good luck for the future.

Yours,
Penelope Hamm
on behalf of the Archives Recherches et
Cultures lesbiennes, Paris.

Dear Sisters at **Shifra**,

I've just read the first issue and I'm very pleased that you're around. I would like to read more articles about Jewish women's history in particular, eg, our mothers' and grandmothers' experiences. Also, are you going to write about Zionism at all? I know it's complex and (for me) painful. Also, the Jewish religious view of women?

Looking forward to your next issue.

Love,
Pauline Allen,
London.

Dear **Shifra**,

Thank you for sending me a copy of the magazine, which is very impressive. I have two thoughts. The first is that I would love to see something on the specific nature of English anti-semitism, which seems to me quite unique – in literature, Disraeli, quasi-fascists, literary people, the Rothschilds round the second world war, to Lord Longford's peculiar organisation of his report on pornography, where the Jewish perspective is singled out in the strangest possible way. Second, I would love to see the magazine have more theory in it: how, why, all these elements of atrocity and subordination and marginalization get to be dynamic, useful parts of systems of power – how they change their forms but maintain their function.

Andrea Dworkin,
New York, USA.

Dear **Shifra**,

I think it is a good magazine, well written, well displayed, but for me it is claustrophobic. I am an agnostic but I am horrified at anything that is in any way anti people. When I was teaching in primary school I attended the religious ceremony each morning. At Easter the kids were taught that the Jews were responsible for the murder of Jesus Christ, and at a very young age kids accept dogma without question. By the time they are old enough to question dogma, the anti-Jew diatribes, learnt at school from the age of five, have become deeply ingrained in them. I am a member of the Humanist Association who seek to have religious teaching taken out of the school curriculum.

Best wishes for your success.

Yours sincerely,
Isabel Turner,
London.

Dear **Shifra**,

Congratulations on a very fine issue of your magazine. Thanks for finding such a suitable title for my story, it was the hardest part for me and I did hope you would do better.

Now, as I have many friends and relatives eager to read the paper I have to send copies to my relations in America, Australia, Switzerland, Holland, Portugal (a result of being a refugee of a very large family).

Wishing you to continue to be successful I remain with best regards,
Yours,
Frances Goldberg,
London.

Letters/Contacts

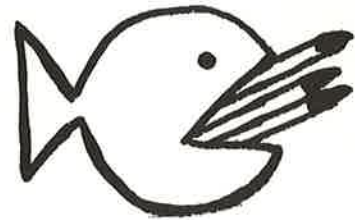
To the Readers of Shifra,
I'm very proud to hear from the women creating this new Jewish magazine. There are many other Jewish women like me, with histories told and not told. We built unions, camps for children, movements for the unemployed, for the Black people, for others of the oppressed – underground in Russia, and here in the streets of the U.S. We helped create a secular Jewish movement that has a lot to teach Jews today. It's a pleasure to be a rebel – you never grow old in your mind. I hope someday we can meet – I guess, through the book, that we have.

Bessie Sayet.

See Francesca Klug's review of "Bessie", by Lawrence Bush, on Page

JONAH (Jews Organised for a Nuclear Arms Halt) was founded in Leeds and London in 1981 as a response to the growing concern over the spiralling nuclear arms race and a realisation that there had to be a responsible Jewish voice contributing to a re-awakened Peace Movement. Through its activities JONAH aims to raise awareness within the Jewish communities and to promote the belief that the historical heritage of Judaism demands action to reduce the nuclear threat.

Leeds JONAH, 14 North Park Grove, Leeds LS8 1JJ.



FEMINIST HISTORY CONFERENCE

FEMINIST HISTORY CONFERENCE

13th, 14th, 15th, July 1985

At the Conway Hall,
Red Lion Square,
London.

Registration fees will be based on a sliding scale:

Claimants, pensioners	£1	per day
Low waged	£2	per day
£5000–10,000	£2–£5	per day
£10,000–15,000	£7	per day

Because it has been very difficult to find funding for the conference, we will unfortunately have to ask everyone, even those who are giving papers, to contribute something. In the unlikely event that we make any sort of profit, it will be used to help fund next year's conference.

There will be a creche, run by women, at the Conway Hall, so if you require this facility, could you please let us know as soon as possible, so that we know the numbers we have to cater for.

Inexpensive, vegetarian food will be provided by a women's catering service during the lunch break, and tea and coffee will be available throughout.

Disabled access to Conway Hall poses some problems, as one of the workshop spaces is upstairs. However, help will be available for any women who wish to be carried upstairs, and all the other rooms are accessible, and the toilets are on the ground floor.

The conference will consist of a mixture of discussions, workshops and short written papers, with several sessions running concurrently. Women from many different backgrounds will be taking part; some are working in women's groups, in local history groups or oral history groups; others do research at colleges or universities.

Our aim in organising the conference is not to present "experts" in new fields, but to provide a forum where we can pool ideas, knowledge and questions. Feminist history has the potential to cut across divisions between "academic" and "non-academic" interest in women's experiences in the past and their relation to the present. The conference is for all women who are interested in our history, wherever their interest comes from.

If women want it, black and lesbian only workshops will be held, and we hope to have some space available throughout for women to arrange their own discussions if they wish.

Where participants agree, discussions will be taped to make them available in the future to the visually disabled. These tapes will form a part of any future publication.

Finally, a disco, with food, is being arranged for the Saturday evening, to which we hope as many of you as possible will come.

The organisers of the conference would like contributions from Jewish women able to give papers or lead discussions. If you are interested, write to Sarah Lambert, 16a Brightwell Crescent, London SE17.

FOUR QUESTIONS FOR JEWISH FEMINISTS

Why is Jewish Feminism different from other feminisms? What is our tradition? Does the Movement have a history? Who are our foremothers? These are fundamental questions for Jewish Feminists and for the Jewish Feminist Movement today. Yet if we ask these questions of traditional Jewish books and history teachers, we receive no answers. The Spiro Institute, which has taught courses in Modern Jewish History to adult classes in London over the last few years, now offers a course which places Jewish women centre stage in Jewish history. "The Jewish Woman from Pre-Emancipation to Modern Times".

We are the people of the Word and the Book. Yet in the vast list of books claiming to be classics in the field of Jewish history, women are scarcely mentioned. For example, one of the most important source-books for teachers of Modern Jewish History is a collection of original documents edited by Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, **The Jew in the Modern World**. Out of over 250 pieces, there are just two women's voices: Rosa Luxemburg and Rachel Levin Varnhagen. And Jewish women's movements (as opposed to well worn themes of Hassidism, Halakah, Zionism) have no place at all.

Over the last decade, Jewish feminist historians have discovered a fascinating array of Jewish women whose biographies are part of our present tradition as Jewish feminists. These include the famous Talmudist Beruriah; merchant, diarist and mother of fourteen children, Gluckel of Hamelin; her descendant and the woman who translated Gluckel's Yiddish into German and so preserved her diary for posterity, Bertha Pappenheim, herself a pioneer of the German Jewish Feminist Movement, an important philanthropist who opened refuges for battered women and homes for unmarried mothers in Galicia; novelist Esther Kreitman who lived in the shadow of her brother Isaac Bashevis Singer; German salon socialiste and friend of Rachel Varnhagen, Dorothea Mendelsohn; English novelist, socialist, feminist and friend of Eleanor Marx, Amy Levy; Russian-American anarchist and feminist, Emma Goldman.

With time, we can be confident that the list of our foremothers will increase and multiply. But apart from individual women who provide some idea of the range and diversity of our past, it is

also critical that we uncover the history of Jewish women's movements. The course will consider three kinds:

1. A paradoxical spinoff from patriarchal Jewish religious orthodoxy is that Jewish women have a tradition of organising as women in the Jewish community. Jewish women's groups have traditionally provided voluntary labour in the fields of philanthropy, fund raising and synagogue decoration. All of them had to balance their community activities against domestic responsibilities. They may not have regarded themselves as Feminists, yet the right of Jewish women to organise separately from men has never been challenged.

- 2 Jewish Feminism as a movement was born in Germany at the turn of the century. The history of the Jüdischer Frauenbund is important: it emerged at a moment when Jewish feminists found it necessary to organise as Jewish feminists within but also autonomous from the feminist movement. Their reasons and their experiences provide an important context for us almost a century later.

3. Perhaps one of the most dramatic experiments in practical feminism was the Kibbutz movement. Jewish women tried to implement equality on the ground decades before the current feminist movement took off in the 1970s. A generation later, daughters of the Kibbutz challenge the idea that equality achieves a meaningful status for women. They too provide an important case for the English Jewish Feminist Movement.

We started with four questions. The course suggests that there are more than four answers. "The Jewish Woman from Pre-Emancipation to Modern Times" examines the complex and diverse experience of Jewish women through a series of seminars organised by Penina Stone. Penina draws on her own research, and other Jewish women gave sessions on specific topics: Agi Katz, Julia Pascal, Michelene Wandor, Kate Lowenthal, Rickie Burman, Riva Krut.

For further details contact Riva Krut at the Spiro Institute. Phone 286 4805, or write to:
3 St John's Wood Road, London NW8 8RB.

WHY I AM NOT A JEWISH FEMINIST

In the last few years a movement calling itself 'Jewish feminism' has grown up, in no small part owing to the feelings of vulnerability amongst Jews after Israel's appalling actions in Lebanon, but also the result of other pressures which I shall discuss later. My initial contacts with this movement — a meeting and a conference in London, reading an American anthology, a Jewish co-counselling weekend — did not encourage me to go any further. The concerns which other women spoke of, wanting to reclaim their Jewish identity or work out a 'feminist' version of Judaism, were not my concerns, and I felt no great urge to identify with this new grouping. Then after Sabra and Chatila, a spate of anti-semitic writing in the feminist press and a growing sense of isolation, I formed a local Jewish feminist group with a small number of other women and began going to meetings, held fairly infrequently. A national Jewish feminist newsletter appeared, more groups were getting off the ground, Shifra was on the way and suddenly there seemed no more doubt about it — here was a new movement and a possible new identity, a new politics.

But was there and is there a new movement? At the start of my involvement with 'Jewish feminism' I was ambivalent about it and felt dissatisfied by what I heard, read and found happening within Jewish feminist circles. I am still dissatisfied and I know now that I am not a 'Jewish feminist', but a feminist who is also Jewish, and I see no good reason for 'Jewish feminism' as a separate movement or politics.

I want to make it absolutely clear that I believe there are times when without doubt, it is useful for us to organise ourselves as Jewish women, to debate common concerns and offer personal support to each other. I have benefited from the debates and from the support, a fact which I would never wish to deny, but I also think it is very important for us to see that beyond certain limits, this separate organisation stops being useful and turns into a different kind of phenomenon. I have always believed that in the end the point was to work out an understanding and a viewpoint which we could use in our daily lives and in our political struggles. Bernice Reagon in 'Coalition politics: turning the century' writes with wonderful clarity and eloquence about the need for us all — black, white, lesbian, whoever — to leave what she calls the 'barred room' where we are only among women just like ourselves, and try to forge coalitions with other oppressed groups. The 'barred room' works for a time as 'a nurturing space where you sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are'. But, as she puts it, 'There is no chance that you can survive by staying *inside* the barred room'. I take that to mean that we must work out how being Jewish affects our lives from our own standpoint and that of other people, not in order to wrap ourselves ever more tightly in a new-found Jewish identity but so that we can struggle



more effectively for our own futures as women, and for the futures of all other women.

Reasons of safety, support, common interests are good enough reasons for temporary alliances and groupings but they are not the only reasons why women have decided to organise as Jewish feminists. I want to look at how the idea of a distinctive 'Jewish feminism' has grown up, how it is being used and what its possible effects might be.

Let me quote first of all from the editorial in the first issue of Shifra:

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 woman-centred. We want to claim our heritage as Jewish women.

Admittedly this is a very brief summary of Shifra's purpose as a Jewish feminist magazine and should not be taken as a complete statement of its aims. But what strikes me about it are the phrases 'the Jewish tradition' and 'our heritage as Jewish women'. They are entirely vague. What are they supposed to mean? I think they are intended to represent the positive aspects of being Jewish women, as opposed to exploring the experience of oppression. I believe wholeheartedly that it is vital for us to explore the experience of oppression but I can quite see that in a magazine which wants to have a wide appeal something else seems to be needed to give the contents a cheerier and more positive feel. (In the same way I have been asked several times to say what I find positive about being Jewish, in meetings and workshops at conferences, as if we have to find some kind of 'balance'.) One strand of 'Jewish feminism' then, I think it is fair to say, has the aim of creating a positive Jewish identity for Jewish women based on ideas about our heritage and tradition.

Once you begin talking about Jewish identity you are up against the old question: Who is a Jew? As feminists we are likely to accept women's rights to define their own identities as they wish. Women who identify as Jewish may have no religious faith whatsoever, may not have been brought up as Jews, may not have been born to parents who were brought up as Jews. In that case the common ground between us comes down to anti-semitism and possibly, to some similarities in our backgrounds and culture. Assuming that we share the same tradition and heritage is not, after all, going to get us very far.

The Jews are not a 'race' and although the Nazis tried to categorise us as genetically different from other groups of people we know that that is an entirely false idea. Judaism is a religion, and if we are Jewish but not religious we are so either because we are from families who were at one time Jewish in the religious sense, or because we live in societies which label us according to the facts of our birth and without regard to what we believe. It is absurd to pretend that what we share in common is not ultimately due to religion, or that we have necessarily got all sorts of characteristics in common. We may talk loud — so do other people, and anyway that cannot possibly be true for all of us. We ought to challenge any statements about 'all Jews' whether good or bad, because they all make the same mistake — a mistake with consequences we should not underestimate — of pretending that Jews are in some mystical way all alike.

We are not all alike. Among the members of my own extended family are Jews from India, Iraq, Sweden, looking Indian, Arab and Swedish in appearance and with completely different sets of customs. Even among Ashkenazi Jews in Britain you can find wide differences between separate religious communities, between Jews whose families were of different national origins before settling in Britain, and of course differences in economic class and in attitudes towards being Jewish. When you reflect on the fact that there are Jewish communities all over the world, some established many hundreds of years ago, it is obviously impossible to go on maintaining that we are somehow, in some special sense, all one people. The idea that we are comes from two sources: religion, and Zionism. For anyone who is not a Zionist and not religious, the question of identity may come down to the question of the best way of responding to anti-semitism. I do not think there is only one answer at all times to that question, or that our defiant need, after Hitler's attempt at a 'final solution', to go on surviving as Jews forces us to cling to rituals and beliefs which we would otherwise reject. I understand the reasons why some women are trying to create, or recreate, a sense of 'being Jewish' outside of religion even though they do it in a way which I often find self-conscious and artificial. It connects with the anti-racist strategy taken up by other oppressed minorities of resisting being absorbed into a dominant culture which we do not believe is better than our own and is hostile to us. But there is a difference between asserting who we are and trying to recreate who we no longer are. On the theme of 'moral necessity' Maxime Rodinson writes (in *Cult, Ghetto and State*. 1983):

Judaism is explained by history, not outside it. It merits no special scientific or moral privilege. There was no divine or extra-rational necessity for the survival of the Jewish people or the Jewish religion as such. The only moral necessity is to demand respect for the legitimate collective rights of a religious or secular community when it exists, but not to maintain it, recreate it, or reinforce it when impersonal social factors (and not brutal constraint, force and perse-

cution) cause it to wither. If Judaism or the Jewish people have been the bearers of some particular values that are laudable, beautiful, and still useful, then these must be defended because of their intrinsic validity, without regard to the people or ideology that has adopted them.



Rodinson writes about the pressures put on us to identify ourselves with the concept of a special Jewish people, what he calls Jewish nationalism, and of the problems Jews face when they want to oppose nationalism (he himself is a left-wing Jew whose own parents were murdered by the Nazis, non-religious and non-Zionist):

Nationalism and religion proclaim our duty to rally to their banners, and accuse us of treason and cowardice if we fail to do so. For various reasons, often good ones, many who find themselves in this position put up with it, gritting their teeth and holding their tongue.

Studying the question of Jewish identity for some Jewish feminists seems to produce a self-consciousness about being Jewish which I have noticed that others, who take their identities for granted, find puzzling. It may be that this is a temporary result of paying so much attention to our habits of speech and so on, but it may be linked with another side of the Jewish identity theme. Feminists wanting to examine what a Jewish identity might mean for them, like other women seeing themselves as distinctive groups, turn to our history and try to understand as much as possible about the lives of other Jewish women, past and present. I think there are very good reasons to learn as much as we can of history and of other people's lives in the present, but with one caution. Historians are rarely neutral observers, and as feminists we know how slanted the work of male historians can be. But history can be slanted in other ways too, and is too often written not with the aim of finding out as much truth as possible whatever it might be, but selectively, in favour of particular ideas or groups. If Jewish feminists are tempted to construct a selective history of a kind we might like to have but which does not reflect the varied reality of Jewish women's experience, I am not sure that they will be doing us a service.

Jewish identity is one thing, Judaism of course is another. Some women understand 'Jewish feminism' as meaning some kind of combination of feminism and Judaism. For many of us the combination is utterly unworkable — religion is after all a system of thought and practice involving hierarchies and dogma. Feminists generally oppose hierarchical systems and dogma — where you are expected to believe and accept what you are told with only limited freedom of judgement. Judaism is not more dogmatic and hierarchical than other religions but it certainly is not free-

thinking and non-hierarchical. From the opposite angle, Orthodox Judaism is hardly going to reconcile itself to feminism and has definitely anti-feminist laws about women's sexuality, women's status and religious roles. You may manage to put Judaism and feminist together if you are a Western woman belonging to the reform/progressive synagogue, but if you are Orthodox or live anywhere where the Orthodox version of Judaism is all there is, you haven't much of a hope. People are attached to religious rituals for all sorts of non-rational reasons, some spiritual, some sentimental, and it does not often happen that members of religious faiths move from strictly observant forms of worship and daily living to laxer forms of a very different kind, if they start to have doubts. Looking at the rise of fundamentalist, evangelical religions around the world the opposite seems more often true. Progressive versions of Judaism may strike feminists as more acceptable than the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox ones, but that may have no relevance for Orthodox Jewish women who cannot simply switch to another kind of religion which may have little or no meaning or emotional appeal for them. As far as 'Jewish feminism' as a reconstruction of Judaism goes, both feminists who are sceptical about religion or opposed to it, and Jewish women who see no prospect of incorporating feminism into traditional Judaism are likely to see it as a dead end.

I have written some of this in quite abstract terms but the realities are concrete enough, and serious enough. How can we deny that women suffer under the yoke of Judaism, just as they suffer under Catholicism and Islam? In the name of religion Jewish women too are forced to bear more children than they want, are confined to the roles of wives and mothers, denied abortions, contraception and equality under divorce laws. I am less concerned about the fact that we are not allowed to participate equally in religious ceremonies than I am about the effect of Judaic law on the lives of all Israeli women and of Orthodox Jewish women in other countries, and the fastest way of lifting its burden is for women to refuse to bow to it, not for us to work to change the authoritarian, anti-feminist structures from within. The same goes for women everywhere — I do not want to support a feminist Catholicism, Methodism or Islam. My support is for feminists and women, not for religions, and the rise of religious movements around the world at the moment is ominous for women and for feminism. Now when so many women are already being forced back into traditional roles we need to support those who are trying to resist and defend their freedoms, sometimes only just won. I can already see signs unfortunately that instead of speaking out against the harm religion does to our interests as women 'Jewish feminism' is prepared to grit its teeth and hold its tongue.

As a feminist who is Jewish, I have some reasons to want to work alongside other Jewish women at times, but I have no desire or need to work on inventing a feminist Judaism, or to reclaim a Jewish identity. I have never denied being Jewish, and it has sometimes been of great significance for me, while at other times it has not been so important. For the first half of my life I practised Orthodox Judaism with complete conviction as I had been brought up to do, going to Hebrew classes three times a week, observing *kashrut* and keeping shabat strictly, walking the two-hour journey on Yom Kippur, fasting, to the beautiful Sephardi synagogue of Bevis Marks with my father in order to sit up in the ladies gallery, following the service with a mixture of pride, sincere piety, terror and sheer boredom. I do not wish to be sentimental about my past, I do not need to reclaim it and I also do not need to renounce it. My past gives me something in common with other Jewish women, but from experience I know I have less in common with Jewish women of Ashkenazi and non-Orthodox backgrounds than they tend to imagine; it also gives me something in common with other women living under religious domination. I cannot exaggerate the importance Judaism had for me when I was younger, but although Judaism is an inseparable part of my past and present it would be easy enough to exaggerate the importance being Jewish has for me now. Unhappily the existence of 'Jewish feminism' strikes me as having two undesirable effects: minimising the impact of Judaism upon women in religious communities, or at least ignoring its more inconvenient aspects, and exaggerating the importance of being Jewish and our differences with other women.

In conclusion, I would ask feminists who want to call themselves Jewish feminists to think about the following point (also from Rodinson: *Cult, Ghetto and State*) about declaring an allegiance:

I have tried to remain faithful to my original commitment: as far as is humanly possible, not to allow my origins and situation to influence my analyses and judgments, to ask myself not 'is it good or bad for the Jews?' but 'is it good or bad for people?'. Anyone who thinks this stance is wrong should say so frankly, should proclaim openly before the world that it is a good thing to sacrifice other human groups — and the freedom of one's own mind — for the good of the Jews, which in any case will always mean the good of some Jews.

Dena Attar.

Outside Looking In:

An American Jew In Britain

This article describes my first impressions, as an American, regarding the experience of living as a Jew in Britain. I have only been in Britain for a few months, so it would be true chutzpah for me to claim to understand British culture. As an outsider, however, I suspect I can see clearly aspects of British life whose sheer ordinariness make them invisible to British persons. What follows, therefore may not be an accurate assessment of British culture, but it is an honest, gut-level, first reaction.

My first hint that things were going to be different in Britain came before I had left America. The hardest task facing me in making plans to spend a year in Britain was finding a place to live in London — a daunting task for anyone, but particularly so for someone living six thousand miles away with no knowledge of the country nor personal contacts. I finally learned of a residence for overseas scholars which was highly recommended. When I received their application form, however, I was shocked to discover that one of the questions asked for my religion. In the United States, this would be considered evidence of illegal intent to discriminate. Despite my initial surprise and a slight sense of trepidation, I hesitated only momentarily before writing in "Jewish". The next day, however, I started worrying whether I had been foolhardy, and wondering just how different British norms and laws would prove to be.

That same form, and every other form I have filled in since arriving here, requested my surname and "Christian" name. I had actually never heard that expression used before, although I had read it in old novels. Americans use the term "forename" or "first name". My response was to cross out the word "Christian" and then write in my name. Despite my minor act of rebellion, this still reinforced the feeling that Britain is, officially, a Christian country.

As in the above example, the most common problems experienced by Jews, in Britain as in America, are invisibility and ignorance. Overt aggression, although more serious, is relatively rare. Christians generally operate on the assumption that everyone around them is also Christian. When they learn they are mistaken, they typically don't know how to respond; Christians have little conception of what it means to be Jewish, or to belong to any other minority religion.

The depth of this ignorance and invisibility always becomes clearest around Christmas. Compared to Britain, Christmas in the United States is overwhelming, but not quite so monolithic. In the cities in which I have lived (New York and New Haven, with sizeable Jewish populations, and Phoenix, with only 2% Jewish population), all of the newspapers have at least a token article on Chanukah, and similar articles at Rosh Hashana and Pesach; minor Jewish holidays are generally mentioned in small filler articles. The articles are generally presented as human interest stories, about the quaintly interesting customs of our Jewish neighbours. Still, at least they exist. In Britain, I realised that if I did not have an American desk calendar (from the Sierra Club — an environmental organisation!) I would not have known the dates for the Jewish holidays.

Even in Phoenix, most stationery stores sell at least a few Chanukah cards; all have a sizeable selection of generic "seasons greetings" cards. Here, it is difficult to find anything but Christmas cards.

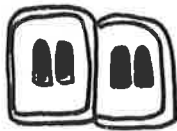
Mailing my Chanukah cards has also been difficult since every time I go to the post office I am given Christmas stamps. The last time, I was handed these stamps with the comment "of course you'll want Christmas stamps." When I responded that, actually, I wanted anything but, the poor clerk looked stunned. In fact, the only 31p stamps available (the basic rate needed for posting to the United States) were Christmas stamps; I had to buy 26p and 5p stamps instead. I am sure the clerk thought I was some sort of kook, just trying to make his life harder.

In the past month, it seems as if everyone has very solicitously asked me about my Christmas plans. The question obviously reflects concern that I, as a foreigner, not be left alone over the holidays. Yet even persons who know I am Jewish ask. The question is always phrased in terms of Christmas, not "the holidays", "over the semester break", or "while classes are out". I am taken aback each time, as I can't understand why they are asking. I am still wondering if maybe they know something about British Christmas's which I don't know — do the grocery stores close for a week, perhaps, so one needs to make plans?



As my awareness has grown of the differences between America and Britain, I have felt increasingly conscious of being a Jew. Britain seems like a more dangerous place than America, particularly for someone who has never had to learn to hid her Jewishness. It's not that the United States is a bed of roses. I live in Phoenix, Arizona, an extremely conservative city in an even more conservative state. The state was initially settled by Mormons, and is still largely controlled by Mormons and fundamentalist Christians. Most of my neighbours and many of my students are born-again Christians. Many have never met a Jew before, and if they're not prejudiced against Jews, they certainly are opposed to left-wing feminists from New York.

So why do I feel more imperilled here? Part of it is just that I am in a foreign country (and one should never under-estimate the cultural differences between the United States and Britain). I am constantly afraid that I will get into trouble through not understanding the subtleties of interactions or social rules, whether the subject is religion or table manners. But this is definitely not the only reason I feel vulnerable here as a Jew.



A major factor is my decreased sense of entitlement in Britain. In the United States, I feel that my country's law and ideology, if not always its practice, are on my side, as a member of a minority group. Here, I feel as if the onus is on me, rather than on the others, to accommodate. Christianity is the state religion, and that's a pretty powerful thing.

In the United States, the Bill of Rights promises individuals religious freedom, while forbidding the government from promoting religion. Later Civil Rights Acts provided additional protection for individuals by making it illegal to practise religious discrimination. British Jews lack comparable protection and are clearly disadvantaged through the establishment of the Church of England as the state religion. Thus, by contrast to the British system, the American legal system emphasizes accommodation to minority groups rather than accommodation by minority groups.

The other significant difference between Britain and America (and, again, the difference is greater in theory than in practice) stems from the concept of the "melting pot". The United States has admittedly been more of a stew than a melting pot. Still, our ideology stresses the diversity of the American population, and the benefits derived from that diversity. As a result, I feel perfectly comfortable identifying myself as a Jew, and as an American, even though all four of my grandparents were born in eastern Europe. In this I am not at all unusual; until I left New York at age 23, I never met anyone whose great-grandparents were born in the United States.

In the midst of my confusion at this question, the only answer that seems reasonable is to say that I am Jewish. Unfortunately, this brings the conversation to a dead halt, leaving the other person as confused as I am. So far, everyone has responded as if my remark was a non-sequitur; no one has understood that being Jewish means that my relationship to Christmas is different from theirs. After all, as one woman said, she "never thinks of Christmas as Christian" — an attitude that only a Christian can afford to take.

In the academic, feminist, and vaguely left-wing circles in which I work and play, there is in America a significantly greater acknowledgement and understanding of non-Christians. In recent years, for example, many university departments as well as individuals and organisations have started hosting "end of semester" or "winter solstice" parties, rather than "Christmas" parties. I have yet to see such a thing here, although I am participating in similar social circles.

My American friends and acquaintances do tend to slip occasionally, and forget about the existence of non-Christians. When this is brought to their attention, however, they generally understand that they have made a slip; the concept of non-Christians is just not as foreign to them as to the British.

The greater awareness of Jews and Judaism in the states cannot be explained away by the relative sizes of the Jewish populations. Jews are only slightly more numerous in the United States than in Great Britain, 2% instead of 1/2% of the population. However, Jews have been able to make their presence felt due to their concentration in so few cities (most notably New York, where state schools close on the High Holidays). By contrast, even in London Jews account for only 3% of the population.



If invisibility and ignorance are the problems common to Jews in Britain and America, the major difference is the existence in Britain of a state religion. From an American perspective, this is utterly mind-boggling, and seems positively medieval. In America, by contrast, major court cases are now questioning whether having a moment of silence at the beginning of the school day is an attempt to insert religion into the schools. I was horrified to learn that British schools must set aside time for "an act of worship" and religious education each day. Of course some schools honour this more in the breach than in the observance, or use this time to teach about ethnic diversity. Nonetheless, teachers have a right to stick to strict Christian practices, and some simply leave non-Christians to deal with the situation as best they can.

By contrast, British Jews may consider themselves British (with its connotations of citizenship or nationality), but can never English. Not only is England far more homogeneous than the United States, but ethnically English people still use the word "race" in a way which became outmoded in the United States about fifty years ago. This was forcefully brought home to me shortly after my arrival here. Asking a group of white English and Scottish people if they thought there were any significant differences between the two groups, I was told, in deadly serious tones, that the English and the Scots are two separate races, with totally separate histories, cultures, languages, and personalities. I have since read and heard similar things from other sources. From an American perspective,

this usage of the word "race" is inaccurate, implying as it does extreme genetic differences between peoples. Given this conception of the ethnically English as a pure and separate race, there is no way for British Jews ever to belong, no matter how long their families live here.

In sum, the position of British Jews seems considerably more tenuous than that of American Jews, at least from my fairly naive perspective. If I am correct in tracing this difference to the basis of the British legal system and the most basic concept of the English nation, then British Jews have a long hard struggle ahead of them.

Rose Weitz

SNOW WHITE

Sitting in twilit anticipation
I watch the animated children
Wriggle, like maggots, in the russet.

The scene darkens: my daughter stares
Caught in the glare of the snake-eye screen
At a tale my mother told to me.

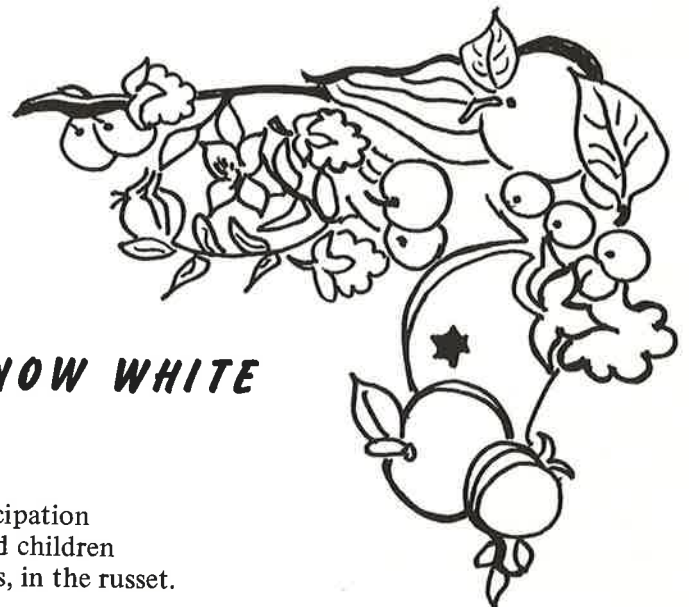
Must every mother, step or no,
Offer her daughter a perfect apple
Grown from the seed that poisoned her?

Moving deeper through the forest,
Fear fades into drudgery:
She will serve the men who mine for wealth.

She may remain immured in a dream,
For the prince, a dwarf in disguise, rides by
And it's hard to regurgitate apples alone.

Daughter, I do not offer fruit,
Only the pips eschewed by Eve
And an old woodchopper's warning.

Margaret Guery.



Where Do We Go From Here And Now?

This was the theme of the second one-day conference on Women and Judaism held at Leo Baeck College, 20 January 1985. The conference was organised by a group of Jewish feminists, committed to working out the complex relationship between feminist perceptions and religious commitment.

The previous one-day conference in the Autumn, followed on from a lecture series on Women and Judaism that was part of the college extra-mural programme and explored the theme of 'The Experience of Being a Jewish Woman'. As at most Women's Liberation Movement conferences, women worked in small groups choosing from among a number of workshops:

- The Jewish family — past and present; relationships.
- Sexuality; menstruation; body image.
- Perceptions of ourselves in the world — education and work.
- Our religious legacy.
- Our language of prayer.
- Our situation vis a vis organised Judaism.

The spoken and written response of women to the October meeting was enthusiastic. The planning group had already set aside a day for another conference and even thought of what to call it — the response of women provided us with a clear indication of the sorts of areas women wished to explore. The programme we evolved combined consciousness-raising, study and practical skill-learning.

In the morning, women chose between two parallel workshops: either, 'Women's personal quest/images of Jewish spirituality', which drew on selected texts and the personal experience of women in the group; or 'Centuries of Responsa on Women in Judaism', which examined the decisions and pronouncement of rabbis past and present about the 'place' of women in Judaism, with the understanding that not long from now women will be writing our own Responsa.

In the afternoon, women chose between a practical workshop on synagogue ritual and participation: holding a scroll, wearing a tallit — the practicalities of active involvement in the synagogue service; or, a study group which explored the Book of Ruth from a feminist perspective.

At the end of the afternoon, everyone came together for an informal joint workshop on resources, the kinds of women's groups there are and how to form new ones.

Like the first conference, the January meeting ended with a short afternoon service (Mincha), which experimented with a combination of anti-sexist and reform liturgy within a traditional Mincha framework. We prayed together as we had worked and talked together — in a spirit of hope for the future and what we might make of it as Jewish women.

Over fifty women participated in the conference from varying backgrounds and of all ages — active feminists, women from congregations, women without any previous affiliations — all interested in exploring further our complex relationship as women to Judaism and Jewish life in all its forms. The day was exciting, exhilarating, and clearly revealed that many Jewish women from many different places are committed to re-examining their lives and their Judaism. The call for a further conference was unanimous. But even more important, women exchanged names, addresses and telephone numbers in the expectation of forming new groups for consciousness-raising, study and mutual support . . .

Conference Planning Group:
Barbara Borts, Dee Eimer, Karen Goldman,
Dorothea Magonet, Elizabeth Sarah, Sheila
Shulman.



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EXCUSE ME,

IS THERE A CHRISTIAN IN THE HOUSE?

In Jewish feminist circles recently there has been a great deal of discussion about how we should or shouldn't relate to white christian feminists. Many Jewish feminists have felt crushed by the negative and often antisemitic reactions that being positive about our Jewishness has brought forth from women whom we thought were our friends. For those of us who live with christian feminists our struggle is close to home. I use the term 'christian' not to describe a religious belief but to highlight the fact that christianity is not merely a religion but a culture which permeates the very core of our existence. I believe that it is harder to recognise that you oppress unless you understand where that oppression originates. As a radical feminist I want to see the struggle proceed in a way which cuts through malestream prejudice and exploitation of difference. Feminism must learn to cope with diversity personally, practically, politically and theoretically. We cannot allow male defined cultural superiority to split our movement.

It is useful to think about giant problems in personal terms and the recent discussions about relationships with white christian feminists makes me recall my own rise in my Jewish consciousness. Some years ago this radical assimilated Jewish feminist lived in ignorant bliss.

Sharing my life with a non Jewish feminist seemed no cause for concern, irrelevant even. Suddenly through external pressure and internal combustion my Jewishness escaped. A Jewish political consciousness flowed within me making me aware in a way that I had not been before. My stable relationship was unexpectedly threatened. All at once I was Jewish and she was not. Finding some space to carry on living together, has been a difficult and often debilitating process. In response to my reclaiming Jewish culture we have had to look more closely at her culture, white, christian, atheist.

The point at which the realisation of my Jewishness and her apparent nothingness came when a friend of mine died. I wanted to go to the shivah house and J decided to accompany me. We drove from Leeds to Manchester discussing the difficulties of bereavement and our personal feelings about the death of people whom we loved. Our journey and our discussion was as always amicable, supportive, loving. When we arrived at the house we walked straight in, in customary fashion the door was open. Hesitatingly I introduced her to Henry. "This is J, we work and live together." He smiled and nodded, he was confused, perhaps he assumed that they had met before? Perhaps he noticed how loud I said 'work' and almost whispered 'live' together? Perhaps he noticed that I had come to be with him on that night and nothing else? We entered the small sitting room, I held my breath in case she had forgotten my instructions about not

sitting on the shivah chair. Of course she remembered.

Four men were already in the room, it suddenly became overcrowded. Henry began talking about the funeral, "It was dignified" this mattered a great deal to him, dignity in death had no place in his memories of Dachau. More and more people started to arrive, mainly men. I was introduced as my father's daughter to a man I did not know. In Manchester, my old home town, I have only ever been my father's daughter.

Henry lit the candles, the man of the house became to woman of the house with one affirmative action. It seemed morbidly ironic that he was lighting the candles for her, her candles. The women began to withdraw from the room and J followed. I told her that she did not have to, that it was only misogynist custom, woman denying practice. I told her that nothing prohibited women from praying with men. She said nothing and silently followed the women, taking with her feelings of alienation as a christian atheist surrounded by the Jewish religion. I, a confused Jewish atheist, riddled with contradictions, stood amongst the men and their prejudices, defying them to dare to cut me out of a tribute to a woman I loved.

I stood beside a large man and responded to his withering gaze by informing him that segregation at a shivah was merely custom not law. There was I the all time liberated expert on the Jewish way of death. The thirteen principles of Jewish male chauvinism challenged. Radical shivah a speciality. When you have buried as many parents as I have an intimate understanding of the sexism surrounding death and it's ritual prevails.

I tried desperately to follow the service but to no avail, the language had been dead to me for years. The death of the once familiar, although always incomprehensible, language made me acutely conscious of the woman, Miriam, my friend for whom we were reciting these chants. I watched the men swaying, mumbling, doing their duty as Jewish men. It is the duty of Jewish men to guide the Jewish soul into heaven, through kaddish, through prayer, through male exclusivity. Henry stood alone, no children, family murdered in Germany, he recited kaddish for his most trusted friend who was also his wife.

The prayers ended and I pushed my way towards Henry to wish him 'long life' he looked bewildered and cried. I looked for J across the sea of suits and hats. We left silently together, each bearing her own grief. We drove home in an atmosphere of shock horror. During that forty mile journey we both behaved strangely. J commented on the proceedings, I answered with aggressive defensiveness. I could not understand how she could

be so cool and analytical when I was so obviously hysterical. I realised that this was the first time that she had witnessed me in a traditional Jewish setting. We analysed the event, clipped, controlled, terse. She was speaking firmly as a feminist academic trying to discern the difference between religion and culture, discussing the oppressive nature of religious dogma and practice. She was verbose, I was tongue tied. I felt that I was the subject of her research.

This situation had never existed between us before. Until this time I had always 'passed', assimilated myself into the radical grouping of a so called international feminism, a united sisterhood divided only by men. I felt as though my number had been called and I was exposed for what I really was — a ghetto Jew. There was no turning back, I understood that this was my Amagedon in the Women's Movement. It was time to come out as a Jew. It was time to challenge the white christian culture which dominated my life, even as a feminist.

Presenting a challenge to Christian culture, inside or outside the Women's Movement, means developing a personal and therefore political understanding of our oppression as Jewish women, and our fight as Jewish feminists. It is no secret that christianity has played a prominent role in determining the ideology of the western world. Therefore the impact of christian culture, stemming directly from religious belief, should not be underestimated. A model of the white christian heterosexual family is held up to all western 'civilisation'. State power consistently uses religion to shore up reactionary policies. A masculinist, misogynist and racist code of morality is orchestrated in such a way that the majority of people conflate their interests with those of God and the government. White gentile feminists are the product of a christian religious culture as Jewish feminists are the products of a Jewish religious culture. Whilst I acknowledge my cultural background, indeed it is often acknowledged for me, my christian sisters do not. They do not believe in the ethnic majority, only the minority. They do not acknowledge a christian culture. I eat bagels and they say 'Oh! how ethnic'. They eat bacon and eggs and I say 'Oh! how ethnic'. I think they are antisemitic, they think I am crazy.

The inherent antisemitism fundamental to all christian belief cannot be erased by pleasant exchange and tidy debate. How often do women exclaim, 'I'm an atheist not a christian' implying that some kind of radical or socialist exorcism has taken place, cleansing the 'gentile' of all religious prejudice and social conditioning. It is my personal opinion that the majority of religions, be they christian, moslem or Jewish, conform to an oppressive social order asserting male superiority and gross mystification. Religious culture and religious belief however, are not necessarily synonymous. Religious culture transmits its own cultural dynamic transcending religious belief and contributing to a dominant ideology for reactionary political gain.

Culture is of course a wide and relatively undefined term, it is about almost every part of our life but culture becomes power when it is part of the state machinery. In Britain, a christian state, the dominant culture christianity legitimates state power, reflecting in a structural sense a superordinate ideology making anything else deviant. As women's position in society is subordinate to men, women's relationship to dominant culture is one of marginality. That is to say women have no real power in the construction of ideology and therefore of culture. Women consume, reproduce and transmit a culture which is not their own. Of course all women have a culture which is not male but this does not represent a dominant theory by which society is run. Women like all subordinate groups have a culture which is often created out of strategy for survival and resistance. As feminists we must unlearn the prejudices of 'their' cultures and reinstate our own. The first step in unlearning prejudice is to recognise that it exists.

The heightened sensitivity that I have gained regarding all things Jewish and anti-Jewish, has enabled me to recognise the subtle as well as the blatant way in which antisemitism operates within the Women's Movement. The effects are never subtle; usually they are painful and destructive. I felt it when I was involved in the editorial collective of a radical feminist magazine. I've felt it in my own home. I've watched it divide Jewish women from each other, from Arab women, from Palestinian women, from Black women. I watch white christian women bend over backwards to be politically correct not realising that their antisemitism is so deeply ingrained that it will need more than words to fight this part of their social conditioning. As feminists we have a commitment, a vested interest and the capacity to deal with and recognise difference, acknowledge oppression and support resistance, therefore the struggle will continue and we will move forward together. As feminists we must understand that the many headed patriarchy reaches into our movement under many disguises from male defined socialism to cultural superiority. Remember sisters that MEN are the main enemy and together we can seize their power.

Sharing space, whether it is personal and, or, political space, is never easy. Relationships between women can be painful as well as supportive, hateful as well as loving. The areas surrounding love, trust and friendship are difficult to negotiate. Adding cultural diversity to the already complicated situation creates an explosive atmosphere. As Jewish women we know that the essence of Jewish experience is cultural antagonism. As feminists we also know that the essence of feminist experience is cultural antagonism. The differences can be shared but not measured. A league table of oppression can only serve the interests of the male ruling class. We have to struggle towards ways of working and living together which do not deny or exploit our diversities.

Sheila Saunders.

Jewish or Not Jewish –



Dear Elli

Having read **Shifra** from cover to cover (literally) I thought I'd again tackle the question of what it's like to be a Jew who's not 'officially' Jewish.

I should point out for the benefit of others that an 'unofficial' Jew is someone like me who was born of a gentile mother and a Jewish father.

What it's like is another story!!

You see, from the day I was born I have lived a life which has been (and is) motivated, fuelled and enhanced by things Jewish.

Things? I'm only talking about my family which appears to be the largest in the world and all mine! Oh and then there's the history, religion and the cultures which comprise my family. But these are all things which are of the utmost importance to me because without them I am nothing. Well, almost nothing.

Sweeping statements aside, my feelings and thoughts on my Jewishness are difficult to discern let alone express.

One thing is for sure, I am and do feel Jewish. But somehow it's never been that simple, primarily because of other (non-Jewish) people who have insisted I'm not.

Their bloody-minded insistence has, over the years, made me feel angry, hurt, uncertain, confused, inadequate, and at times, totally bewildered.

Do you know what it's like, Elli, to feel such things? It's like being riddled with poisoned darts. But I'm sure I don't have to tell you what it's like.

Anyway, on the one hand there's me who considers herself Jewish, and on the other there are these people who don't. An interesting predicament, isn't it?

You know what, Elli? Interesting predicaments such as mine do tend to become tedious after a while because I have to do all the thinking, talking and explaining whereas for the other people they just have to say 'you're not' and that's their sum total contribution.

Mind you, I have accumulated several thought provoking, mind taxing questions which I would ask them if I could. For example, will you pig headed insitors ever allow me to exercise my freedom of choice (let alone my 'right' to be who I am)? Will you ever allow me peace of mind for opting to be Jewish? Or will your arrogant insistence on defining 'others' like me eventually succeed in making my life not worth living as a Jew?

Another Story

I guess I'm still angry, huh? But Elli, such questions shouldn't even exist let alone be asked.

Of course, if people do allow me to live as a Jew, they have to accommodate me in their minds (and homes) by heaping stereotypical image upon stereotypical image.

So, I gather I come from a 'race' which is 'deeply materialistic' and who are constantly shrugging their shoulders, slapping their foreheads, gesticulating their arms and saying 'already'.

Elli, how come this doesn't correspond with my experience? How come the only places I've seen this is on the television networks, film circuits and theatre stages?

Don't get me wrong, I have the ability to laugh at myself just as much as the next 'foreigner'. But when I know the characters portrayed only serve to perpetuate popular mythologies, and therefore, confirm small-minded people in their prejudiced and anti-semitic misapprehensions, I become angry. Very angry indeed.

But I digress.

The denial of my Jewishness is not restricted to gentile people only. There are certain sections of the Jewish community who would also repudiate me and my claim. Admittedly, the latter are the Orthodox.

Where does this leave me? Well, nowhere in particular. You see, I'm only just accepted by the Liberal and Reform movements and even that would vary according to the Rabbi and/or the (location of) the shul.

And what if I converted? Even if I underwent the most strenuous conversion process, I suspect that as a friend said of another friend who has converted, people would say to me, 'oh, you're not really Jewish then.'

And what if my mother converted? Ditto the above.

So, there you have it, Elli. This is what it's like to be a Jew who's not 'officially' Jewish.

Tanya Wesker

