

# The Mother Issue

*Yenta, Mame, or Invisible Woman?*  
Reconfiguring the Jewish Mother  
in the Twenty-First Century

WINTER 2023

AJS

PERSPECTIVES

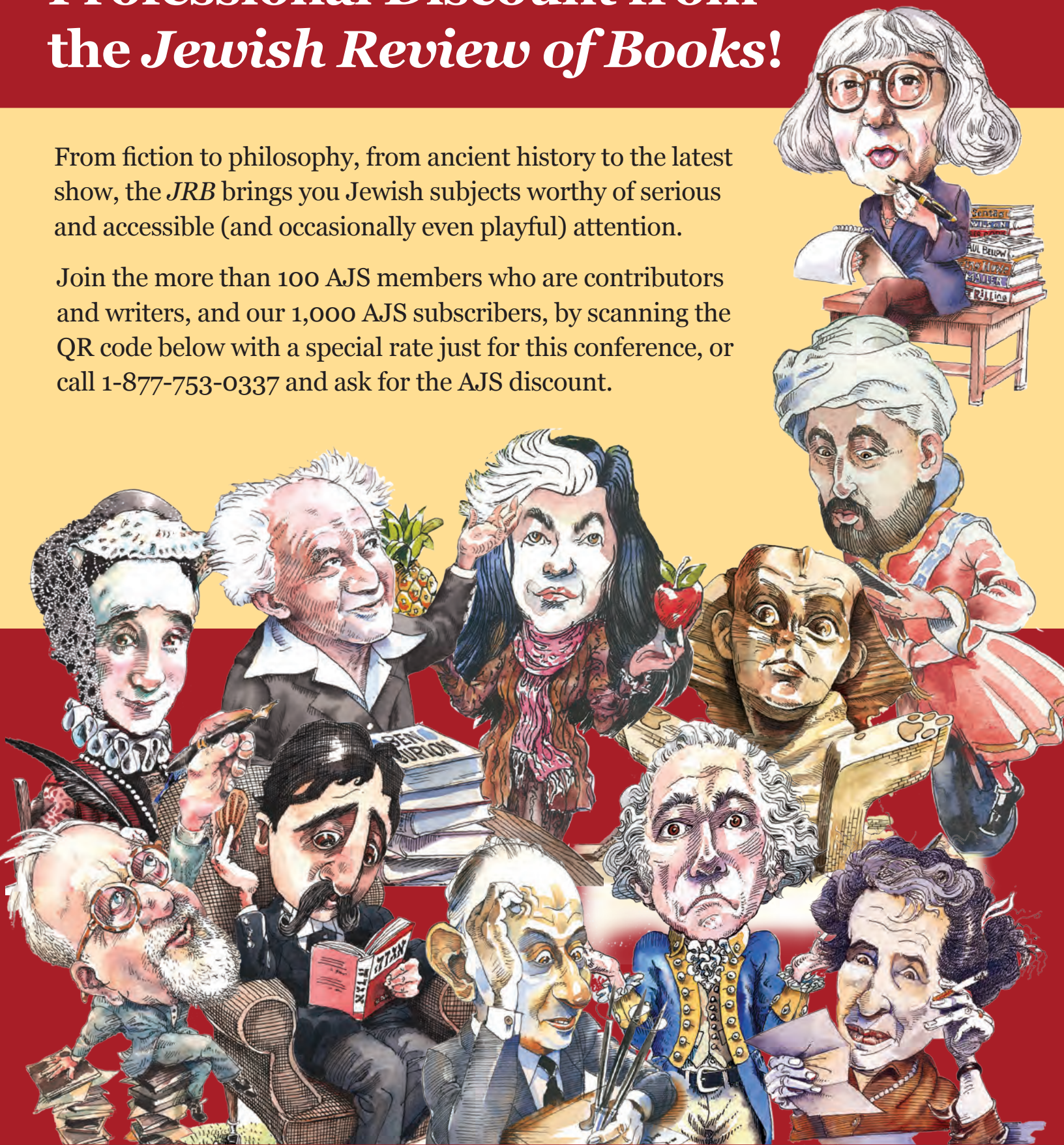
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# The Mother Issue

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WINTER 2023

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Please direct correspondence to:  
Association for Jewish Studies  
15 West 16th Street  
New York, NY 10011

T: 917.606.8249  
ajs@associationforjewishstudies.org

[www.associationforjewishstudies.org](http://www.associationforjewishstudies.org)

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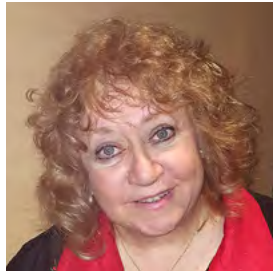
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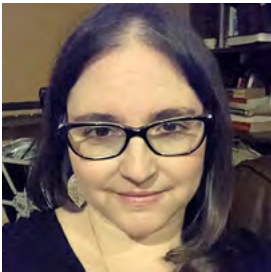
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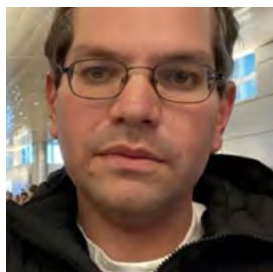
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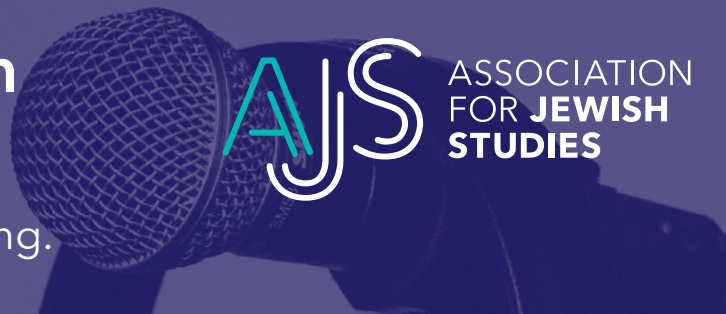
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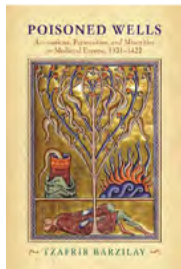
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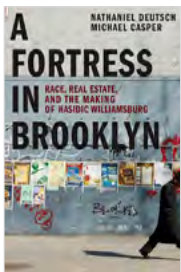
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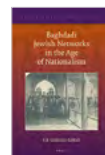
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# From the Editors

The Winter 2023 issue of *AJS Perspectives* revisits the state of an old trope: “The Jewish mother.” “The” Jewish mother is a literary invention, a product of cultural imagination, a fantasy as much as a shibboleth that sometimes works as a safety blanket and other times as a frightful scourge ... but it is never a historical reality. And yet, when we hear “Jewish mother” we all nod (or laugh) in recognition of what is meant by this label because it has been fully assimilated into the American cultural organism: we take it as a self-evident truth of something that we “know” exists. But does it? Does the Jewish mother, the way in which she has been imagined by the Yiddish nineteenth-century authors, the vaudeville comedians, the postwar American screenwriters and literary figures, really exist? Or, more likely, have we simply naturalized an invention? And with what consequences?

When we began thinking about “The Mother Issue” we had many questions we hoped to answer. Does the stereotype of the overbearing, self-sacrificing, meddling Jewish mother still live among us, or has our era of rebellion against patriarchal oppressive typecasts vanquished the fiction once and for all? Has she been replaced with a fair and balanced version of what it means, historically and personally, to be a mother and Jewish?

And the biggest question of all: Why should we care? Because if you agree with us that the figure of the Jewish mother (either as the distasteful,

castrating, insufferable *yenta*, or the holy, self-immolating *Yidishe mame*) is just that—a stereotype—then it follows that like all labels this one also has suspect intentions and pernicious effects.

In some of its iterations, this figure is the product of antisemitism, in others it shows its misogynistic roots, but, no matter whether it comes from within the Jewish fold or the non-Jewish majority’s vision of what Jewish womanhood looks like, it denies generations of mothers, sisters, daughters, and girlfriends a space for self-definition; it pigeonholes us and puts us under the burden of either impossible expectations or its indemonstrable accusations.

The Mother Issue offers a few possible answers to these questions. The essays gathered here explore the ways in which the cliché of the Jewish mother evolved over time and space. From media and genres that span cinema, Yiddish theatre, music, art, literature, feminist poetry, and more, our authors endeavor to classify, analyze, and challenge the representations of the Jewish mother, while offering a twenty-first-century historical and cultural perspective on this theme.

Laura Limonic  
*SUNY Old Westbury*

F. K. Schoeman  
*University of South Carolina*

Laura Limonic &  
F. K. Schoeman



This issue of *AJS Perspectives* was already in production by the time the events of October 7 shook the Jewish world, in Israel and abroad. We are stealing a bit of extra space here to add a small note which can't adequately address something that is so enormous. But, as we print the Mother Issue, how can one not think of the thousands of mothers who will never see their children (male, female, infant, grownup) again? The murdered, raped, kidnapped mothers whose

families are being driven mad with grief and terror? We add our sympathies, compassion, sorrow to yours, our readers, our colleagues, our friends and relatives. There will be time to analyze in depth, discuss, and even quarrel over the historical details of what happened, the why, how, where-from, and what-next. Today, in this issue devoted to mothers, we ("at the edge of speech") will turn to literature to give words to our anguish and anger before a new massacre and a new war:

Our mothers tremble vibrate  
hesitate at the edge of speech  
as at an unmade bed, their mouths work, confused

[...]

they cannot take our hands show us  
how to take comfort in raisins and apples  
break apart laughing spit seed

they cannot say seek me  
they teach us cooking clothing craftiness  
they tell us their own stories of power and shame

and even if it is she who speaks through their mouths  
and has crawled through ten thousands wombs until this day  
we cannot listen

their words fall like spilled face powder

– Alicia Ostriker, "the shekhinah as mute" (abridged), from  
*The Book of Life* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 65.

# From the President

When I wrote my original column, our world was different. Since Hamas's massacre of more than 1,400 civilians on October 7, we have been in a state of mourning and disbelief. Our members in Israel are living in a state of war and they have been sharing their experiences of disruption, trauma, and resilience. Across the globe, our members have discussed the uptick in antisemitism. Some have reflected that they now look at their institutions, colleagues, and students differently; several have expressed being fearful at their places of work.

The cheery optimism of my original column feels anachronistic, but much of the letter's content still holds true. As I come to the end of my term as president, I remain incredibly proud of the AJS. These past two years have witnessed many challenges, and the past month has been an especially contentious one. No moment in my lifetime has felt as polarized as this one. Yet, throughout, the AJS has continued to work to welcome, include, and involve diverse scholars and perspectives within the field of Jewish Studies.

Many of you have shared your perspectives and thoughts about the AJS, Jewish Studies, and your disciplinary home, and I am appreciative. Over the past two years, we have worked to address the needs of members and to embrace multiple viewpoints. There have been moments when we missed the mark, and we have tried to acknowledge and learn from those occasions. We have worked on matters of *transparency*, making ourselves available for discussion, publicizing leadership opportunities, placing our board minutes on the AJS website, elucidating the work of the program committee, and regularly keeping

members abreast of AJS programs, opportunities, and developments. There remains room for improvement. Please continue to reach out when you have a question or feedback about the association and its practices.

The AJS staff and volunteers also have worked on questions of access, paying particular attention to growing financial need among members. The AJS board has authorized a larger budget for individual travel grants and, with other AJS volunteers, expanded our development practices, raising even more money to help offset the costs of conference travel and attendance. It has created new programs and solidified its support of extant programs and, working in tandem with the DEI committee, it has tried to improve access in multiple ways and to consider the challenges and benefits that will be specific to our 2024 online conference.

The AJS board also has improved its *governance structure and practices*. It began meeting regularly every other month and identifying ways to involve all board members in decision making processes. We placed at least one board member on all committees and task forces and worked to clarify the roles of committee and leadership positions, as well as how to obtain those positions. In January 2022, we created a task force to consider how to best review and support our executive director; since then, we have since created a board committee that focuses on the executive director review process. Our Governance Committee is helping us better understand the semi-autonomous bodies within the organization, such as steering committees and caucuses, and the Conference Task Force is deliberating on a wide range of conference related matters.





Robin Judd

Finally, over the last two years we have spent time considering how we can make our *appreciation* of AJS volunteers known in a meaningful way. The AJS rests on the work of dozens of volunteers who spend countless hours working on behalf of the organization while also teaching, researching, curating exhibits, editing, mentoring, writing books, and running centers, not to mention living lives outside of “work.” At the 2023 conference, we will host a reception for those who

contribute to the AJS. This is a small step, and I hope that you will share your suggestions concerning how we can show our appreciation of our volunteers.

Thank you for being a part of the AJS and for sharing your perspectives with us.

Robin Judd  
*The Ohio State University*

# AAJR

AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR JEWISH RESEARCH

## Dissertation Research Funding Opportunities

AAJR provides stipends for up to \$4,000 for dissertation research grants. The funds are not intended for language study or equipment. Funding is available to Ph.D. graduate students, and those up to four years following their graduation, in any field of Jewish studies at a North American university. Applicants must have submitted their Ph.D. Dissertation prospectus and have a demonstrated need for materials from archival, library, or manuscript collections or for ethnographic research. Applications for research-related expenses and/or the purchase of copied or scanned items will be considered. The application should consist of:

1. A *curriculum vitae*, a proposal of no more than five pages double spaced that describes the intended research (e.g., travel, collections to be consulted, sites to be visited) and an itemized budget, approved by the applicant’s advisor, indicating other available or requested sources of summer support. Applicants should notify us if they receive other summer grants. *Submit one PDF with all materials combined.*
2. A letter of recommendation from the applicant’s principal advisor. The advisor should indicate whether the applicant’s university provides support for summer research and on what terms, and the advisor must sign off on the submitted budget.

All materials should be submitted via email to Cheri Thompson at [admin.office@aajr.org](mailto:admin.office@aajr.org) by February 2, 2024. For questions and further information, please contact Professor David Sorkin, Chair of the review committee, at [david.sorkin@yale.edu](mailto:david.sorkin@yale.edu). Awards will be announced in late-April 2024.

# AAJR

AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR JEWISH RESEARCH

## **Workshop for Early Career Scholars in Jewish Studies** to be held at Williams College

**July 7-9, 2024**

The purpose of this workshop is to impart knowledge and skills relevant to a range of career prospects for late-stage Ph.Ds. and recent Ph.Ds. The workshop will draw on the experience of a college president, a veteran university professor, and a number of other professionals who work in the academic and related fields. Participants will include early career scholars across a range of disciplines and areas of specialization in Jewish studies.

Day One of the workshop will focus on key challenges and opportunities that arise within institutions of higher education today including public-facing scholarship, community engagement and controversy, woke-ism and anti-woke-ism. Day Two will feature interaction with experts in academic-adjacent domains including foundations, archives, cultural centers, and development.

### **Workshop Directors:**

**Maud S. Mandel**

**President, Williams College; Professor of History; Program in Jewish Studies**

**David N. Myers, Distinguished Professor and Kahn Chair of Jewish History, UCLA;  
Director, UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy; Director, UCLA Initiative to Study  
Hate**

### **Eligibility:**

The workshop is intended for late-stage Ph.D. students and recent Ph.D. (within 4 years of receipt of degree) who work primarily in a field of Jewish studies. AAJR covers the costs for lodging and meals. Participants with academic positions are expected to turn to their own institutions for travel expenses but accepted applicants with demonstrated need may be eligible for a travel subvention, funding permitting. Enrollment is limited.

### **Applicants must submit:**

- 1) a curriculum vitae
- 2) a syllabus for a Jewish studies course s/he has taught
- 3) a personal statement of research interests and pedagogical goals of not more than 1000 words.
- 4) a brief description of a topic or issue that you would find it helpful to address during the workshop

Please submit all materials electronically by January 12, 2024 to [mms8@williams.edu](mailto:mms8@williams.edu) and [myers@history.ucla.edu](mailto:myers@history.ucla.edu).

# AAJR

AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR JEWISH RESEARCH

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The American Academy for Jewish Research invites submissions for the Salo Wittmayer Baron Book Prize. The Baron Book Prize (\$3,000) is awarded annually to the author of an outstanding first book in Jewish studies.

**Eligibility:** An academic book, in English, in any area of Jewish studies published in calendar year 2023. The work must be the author's first scholarly book. Authors must have received their Ph.D. within the previous ten years, no earlier than 2013.

**Deadline:** Submissions must be received by January 31, 2024. The winner will be notified in late spring 2024.

When submitting a book for consideration, please have four copies sent, along with a statement including the author's email address and when and where the author received their Ph.D. In addition, please send a digital submission of the author's book to the below email address. Hard copy books can be sent to:

Cheri Thompson  
American Academy for Jewish Research  
221 E. Michigan Ave #883  
Grass Lake, Michigan 49240  
Please email [admin.office@aajr.org](mailto:admin.office@aajr.org) when books are  
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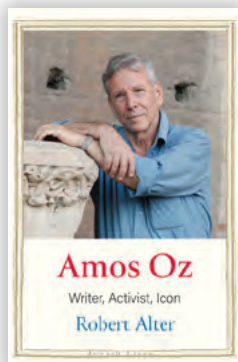
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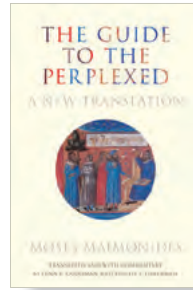
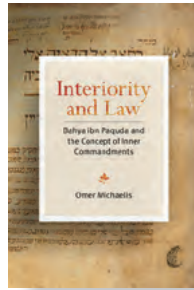


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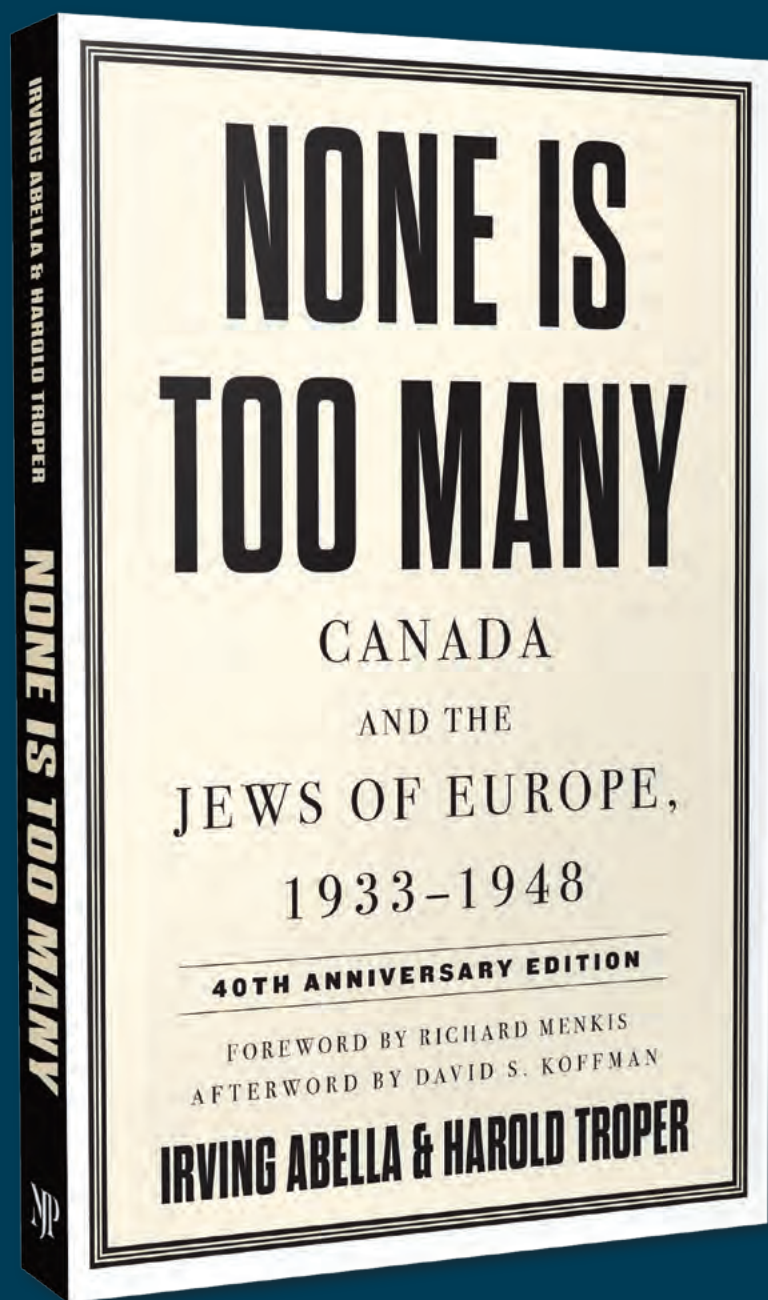
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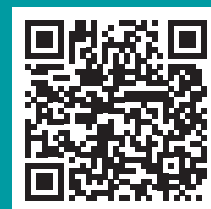
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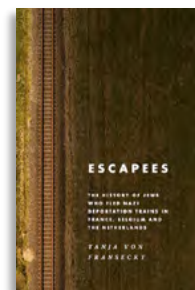
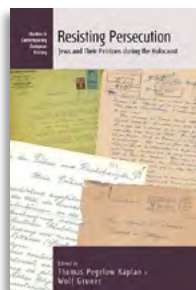
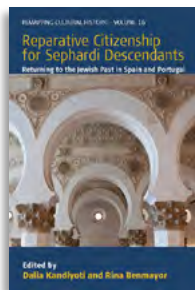
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# The Mother Issue

*Yenta, Mame,  
or Invisible  
Woman?*

Reconfiguring  
the Jewish  
Mother in the  
Twenty-First  
Century

# From the Art Editor

## Art Editor:

Douglas Rosenberg

## Artists:

Douglas Rosenberg, Helène Aylon,  
Kel Mur, Mierle Laderman Ukeles,  
Allen Ginsberg, Sally Gross

## Mameloshen

[Yiddish מאַמע-לשון (*mame-loshn*),  
meaning “mother tongue”]

Judaism defines all work as creative. The *melakhot*, creative activities, form the basis of a practical understanding of what creative work entails, an understanding that is central to the observance of the fourth commandment. Judaism’s definition of work also requires that an action’s effect endure or be part of a process that leads to creating something.

– Ben Schachter, *Image, Action and Idea in Contemporary Jewish Art*

There I was, alone in the apartment where she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under a lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the truth of the face I had loved. And I found it.

– Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

It is historically difficult for artists to portray Jewishness within the context of contemporary art. Jewish mothers, as this issue will no doubt express, have been written, painted, cast, sung about, and described in the broadest possible terms. Simultaneously, in the entertainment world and elsewhere, such portrayals are notoriously narrow-minded; they often propose Jewish mothers as either overwrought to the point of caricature or imagined through one-dimensional biblical narratives. However, between those points are nuanced humans, women with real lives in real worlds that do not conform to such stereotypical portrayal.

I don’t wholly recognize the trope of, for instance, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, as other than a literary construction. The Jewish mother from TV sitcoms seems, at best, an illustration of a number of theories about Jewish resilience, mostly suggesting that humor was a particular kind of weapon or armor for twentieth-century Jews. Maybe... But what narrow bandwidth of life do those portrayals frame? In historical portrayals of Jewish mothers and women in general that flow from biblical sources, we often encounter handmade versions of the same. Paintings or drawings of women such as Marc Chagall’s *The Holy Woman* often depict the fecundity of mothers and/or mothers to be and suffer under a contemporary lens that asks questions about agency and patriarchal storytelling.

At best, Mrs. Maisel is a kind of confection, and I wonder if we will/would ever see the character battling cancer or leaving an abusive marriage? For contemporary Jewish artists, authenticity, agency, materiality, and personal history all form the groundwork for an approach to art-making that aims toward what critic Hal Foster describes as “the real.” In his book *Return of the Real*, Foster suggests that we are now witness to a return to the real—to art and theory “grounded in the materiality of actual bodies and social sites.” For artists, this often means gathering the experiences and images that most closely surround us, those prompts and impulses that push us toward actual representations of the authentic self. The product of such a practice often surfaces grief or trauma and generally poses more questions that it may answer, if art endeavors to ask such questions. The powerful twentieth-century art critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, together the mid-century equivalents of the chief rabbis of modernism, asked Jewish artists to be aware of the things that animated their faith. In his book *Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Their Jewish Issues*, the scholar Mathew Baigell noted that both of the Jewish critics urged artists toward the “self-searching themes” that came to characterize the art of the 1940s. I would propose that art and creativity in general is, for many Jewish artists working at the end of the twentieth century and into the present era, a kind of *mameloshen*. For such artists, the language of creativity provided cultural capital, allowing for one to enter an elevated world of self-expression, while simultaneously translating the spiritual into the language of art. In *Navigating the*



Marc Chagall, *The Holy Woman*. Published in the journal *Der Sturm*, Vol. VIII, No. 2 (Berlin, May 1917). © 2023 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

*Worldly and the Divine: Jewish American Artists on Judaism and Their Art*, scholar Samantha Baskind notes,

“Jewish American art is intricately interlaced with considerations of the secular and cultural while at the same time retaining aspects of the divine.”

By deploying the images of one’s parents or familial histories, artists can surface metaphysical connections to deeply repressed or protected narratives. Similar to many contemporary artists, I have often created work in various media with my own mother as subject. Mothers, Jewish or otherwise, are often the subject of the gaze of artists engaged in the process of self-understanding, of locating a personal sense of belonging through knowing our own origin story, as told in the mother tongue, the *mameloshen*, if you will.

What happens in the part of the life of a Jewish mother that is no longer the ingénue nor the caricature? I’m interested in a version of the Jewish mother that is a

composite: a kind of cubist version that is seen from all sides and that includes both mothering and being mothered, as well as the Jewish mothering that occurs among unrelated people, that performs *tikkun ‘olam* or caregiving generally. I am interested in my mother’s mother and in the relationships between my partner and my mother, in my mother’s experience as a daughter and her mother’s experience in the cycle of both mothering and being mothered. Jewish mothers have a complicated legacy, especially in rendition. The visual culture of Jewish mothers is unstable and seemingly in service to a multitude of agendas.

My father’s mother, grandma Helen, was of Polish descent; she and her husband, my grandfather, who was a tailor from Russia, raised their son in San Francisco. Grandma Helen was a nervous, and in retrospect, seemingly traumatized woman, who baked and always wore an apron and a *shmatta* on her head. She never learned to drive nor did she ever learn to do much else. Like many other Jewish



*Portrait of Joyce Rosenberg with son Steven, c. 1960, photographer unknown. Courtesy of Douglas Rosenberg*

women in my life in the 1960s, she became quite ill with diabetes. She lost a leg, lost a husband, and came to live with my immediate family for a period of time. I don't recall that she was religious in any way.

My mother was a beautician, a feminist, a kibbitzer, a protester, a survivor of domestic violence. She was the daughter of diasporic, German Jews, who ended up in Northern California where my grandmother survived the 1906 earthquake and went on to work as an assistant to the warden in San Quentin Prison. My mother's father was a union organizer, often ill and unable to work himself. She was raised during the Depression. There was no time in her life when she was well-to-do or a society lady, in fact, quite the opposite, though there is a picture of her shortly after my brother was born where she looks as if she could have been a Hollywood actress.

To the community that I grew up in my mother was an activist, engaged with the schools that I attended, who volunteered for everything. She and my only Jewish classmate's mother made their yearly pilgrimage to our

classroom with her electric frying pan and a jar of oil and potatoes to teach our other classmates about Hanukkah and to fry golden crispy latkes in the classroom for everyone to taste, leaving the smell of oil lingering in the classroom for weeks after.

My mother lived in a tumultuous home with my father, who was a union lithographer and worked in San Francisco and who carried a concealed handgun. He dressed in suits and dangled the Star of David and around his neck, which in a way, was more of a taunt than anything religious. He had been bullied in the Navy during World War II and became a boxer to protect both himself and the weaker Jewish sailors he served with. He had great affection for tough Jews of the 1940s like Meyer Lansky and others who stood up to the "anti-semites." My father's tightly wound violent temper (my mother explained he suffered from depression after the war) impacted my mother's well-being to the point that while her two sons were in high school during the nascent days of feminism, she arranged to leave the family home (and seek a divorce) to escape the constant diminishment, emotional abuse, and sometimes physical



*Portrait of Joyce Rosenberg, age 85,  
photo by Douglas Rosenberg*

abuse that she had suffered for years at the hands of my father. So, to save her own life, she rented a small apartment on the other side of town where she lived near the beauty shop where she worked. At the age of fifty she enrolled in community college, and for the next ten years worked her way through an undergraduate degree (she had never attended college before) and earned a master's degree in social work, and at age sixty, she found herself unemployable. Still, she was committed to doing good things for her community and teamed up with another Jewish woman (a psychologist) to form a nonprofit elder-care agency. She finally married again to a Jewish man who was fairly solvent financially, and my mother took her meager savings and gave it to her husband, who invested it with a supposedly brilliant Jewish financial guy who could get them a big return. That came crashing to a halt when Bernie Madoff was arrested, and once again, my mother had nothing. That was about the time that I became her caregiver as her health declined precipitously.

The Jewish mothers in my life, which I remember most from the 1960s and '70s, were not the Mrs. Maisel kind of

Jewish mothers. They embodied a post-World War I and World War II life experience, a life of uncertainty, of unhealthy food, of medical conditions that rarely one hears about anymore. They had lost their gallbladders, a leg, their teeth, they had high blood pressure, yet still dressed up to go to the city or to the B'nai B'rith. My San Francisco grandmother would schlep my brother and me over to Chestnut Street to meet up with her friends at a cafeteria called Fosters, where, as my father used to describe, they could nurse a cup of coffee for hours.

As I think about the Jewish mothers in my life, I am struck by the creativity of many of them and how their struggle offered an opportunity for their daughters (and their sons) to have choices in their own lives.

Such complicated legacies of Jewish mothers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, by extension, produce equally diverse and complex art practices in the next generation of Jewish mothers and daughters. We can also see such complexity in the work of their sons who create work based on their own experiences with Jewish mothers.



*Helène Aylon observes her mother lighting the Shabbos candles, 2000. Dining room of Borough Park, Brooklyn home. Courtesy of David Sperber.*



*Helène Aylon's Earth Ambulance. In 1982, as a kinetic performance, the Earth Ambulance was traveled to twelve military sites across the United States, to "rescue" endangered earth in pillow cases, to be driven to the U.N. Creative Time, Brooklyn, NY, via Jewish Women's Archive, CC BY.*

The artist **HELÈNE AYLON** died in 2020. I met Aylon a few times through my work with the Conney Conference on Jewish Arts and was deeply inspired by her work and the women of her generation, including Mierle Laderman Ukeles and others. The art historian and critic David Sperber wrote about Aylon's work in this publication's Art Issue (Fall 2021). As I began thinking about how to frame the work of artists who are also Jewish mothers, I noticed a photo in David's essay that he himself had taken in Aylon's home. He noted that, with permission, he had "photographed one corner of her home, consisting of her Shabbat candles and a photograph of her and her mother lighting the candles. This corner also included pictures of her family, traditional Jewish ritual objects, and a tzitzit necklace—a ritual object she had invented and used in her performances in the distant past."

The photographs of Aylon with her family and her mother lighting the Shabbat candles sit on a shelf in the left side of David's picture. In a 2017 conversation between Aylon and Ann McCoy in *Brooklyn Rail*, the writer describes seeing the same photo of Aylon and her mother lighting Shabbat candles in Aylon's studio. In both cases, it is the ease with which Aylon intermingles her art life and her life as a mother and daughter and the essence of her Jewishness into an ethic of care and creativity that caught my attention. McCoy and Aylon's conversation was taking place just prior to her traveling exhibition called *Afterword: For the Children*.

In response to a question from McCoy, Aylon notes:

"It's interesting because my whole life I wanted not to be like my mother—when I left the Orthodox community in a



*Helène Aylon. Self-Portrait, 2004. From The Digital Liberation of G-d, San Francisco JCC. © Estate of Helène Aylon*

sense, and became an artist. It all seems to flicker like candlelight somehow, here and there in the work. In general, I suppose my mother's goodness made me in some way want to do good, so I tried to do socially engaged works—my way of being "good."

It is in this gesture toward "the children" that Aylon completes a circle of socially engaged work and offers a model of an engaged Jewish/art life, one in which "mothering" and art are linked together eternally.

Aylon's project *Afterword: For the Children* was included in the 2017 Jerusalem Biennale, curated by David Sperber and Dvora Liss, who state,

Helène Aylon is one of the most prominent American artists in the feminist Jewish religious art

movement. Aylon is best known for her installation "The Liberation of G-d" (1996) that was part of her twenty-year project: "The G-d Project: Nine Houses Without Women." In this pioneering work the artist purged the text from its sexist and misogynic verses, as if to liberate God from the effects of patriarchy.

"Afterword: For the Children," is an appendage (and the finale) to Aylon's twenty-year project that proposed a scathing feminist critique of Jewish texts and rituals. Aylon dedicates her finale in the "G-d Project" to the future generations, challenging the Ten Commandments which emanates in her view, from patriarchy—not from God.

In 2019, the artist and curator **KEL MUR** organized an exhibition called *Why Mom*. The exhibition was centered on mothering, mothers, and motherhood and looked at its subject from both the point of view of mothers and their children. As part of that exhibition, I contributed the portrait of my own aging mother (included earlier in this essay). As I write this, I realize how much my participation in Kel's curation framed how I have been thinking about this project. Kel and I have had an ongoing conversation about mothers and Jewish identity since then. Paula Stolbach Murray (pictured to the right) was Kel's mother. I asked Kel about her mother's complicated relationship with her Jewishness and Kel's own evolving understanding of the subject since her mother's death.



*Paula Stolbach Murray, 1971.  
Courtesy of Kel Mur*

My mother died abruptly from cancer in 2017. She considered herself Jew-ish, as she was only half Jewish on her father's side, and as I understand it, that may make her not Jewish at all. She married an Italian-Irish man and took whatever Jewish culture she inherited from my grandfather to the grave. I wonder if she did not know what was Jewish about her and what wasn't—if something like that can even be defined. The way she described her connections to Jewishness mainly consisted of her not believing in heaven or hell and that her father would bring home fresh bagels and lox from the deli every Sunday morning. I did not know my grandfather; he died when I was barely a toddler, but she took great pride and comfort in those memories and savored any remembrance of her father. Upon her passing, I still had so many questions for my mother. At the beginning of my grieving, I sent my DNA to one of those testing companies to discover that my DNA is about 23% Ashkenazi Jew. I wished, then, that I had known all my life that my Jewishness could be a tangible thing that constantly flows inside of me. After learning that Jewishness is inherited as an ethnicity and has its own DNA markers, I wished I had some structure, maybe a version of the Jewish faith, to guide me in mourning and through the heavy grief I faced in her passing. I felt that if this DNA is so intertwined with a religion, with practices that reach back over 5,000 years, I must have ancestors who could help me, who could comfort me, who were watching over me, and who

would welcome my mother with open arms into the afterlife—knowing that I was Jewish in blood that made me feel tangibly connected to my mother in her absence. There was a brief period when I romanticized the idea that my Jewish ancestors funneled forward and flowed through my mother and into me as she made me.

In the throes of grief, I tried to rationalize my reality. My mother and I seemed to be very different people.... I thought a lot about the bloodline and what passes through it, physically and metaphysically. I still have many questions relating to transgenerational trauma, especially within the context of the unfortunate events that have pummeled my family (on both sides) ... after my mother's death, my life seemed to fall into two new parts, like a peeled citrus being pulled in half. Under a pithy membrane, there was my life while she was alive on one side and my life after she died on the other, and I knew that the latter would likely be longer.

Since her decline came rapidly and traumatically within the first few days after beginning graduate school, I intuitively tried to find comfort in my studio when I returned to campus. As an artist with an assemblage practice, found objects comfort me, and at the time, I came across a solid wooden chair needing repair in a storage





*Kel Mur. Menarche, 2017. Found wooden chair, cardboard, paper, acrylic paint, menstrual blood, gel medium. Courtesy of the artist*

room. It felt like preparing a body for burial. I sanded it smooth, filling in cracks as I went, and painted it white. I then fashioned a crown, perhaps more similar to a king's fairy tale crown than a queen's. It had a simplified design, and I made it the iconic bright yellow that often represents gold in a child's drawing.

They say you are not really an adult until your parent dies.

I had to mark an occasion and, therefore, needed a ritual, a rite of passage. I knew my period was coming. I've been tracking my period in one of

those apps since I got my first smartphone in 2010, and it's so regular that I could almost be my own lunar calendar. I realized this was my first menses without my mother, and therefore a second menarche. I built this coronation as a reaction to being thrust into this new version of adulthood, an ascension perhaps into a matriarchal role. In the early stages of bereavement, not yet understanding what it meant to mourn, it weighed heavily on me that I was a fountainhead for the next generation. I played her favorite Beatles album, *Rubber Soul*, and anointed the chair with my blood. With her blood.

—Kel Mur

## MANIFESTO

FOR MAINTENANCE ART 1969!

Proposal for an exhibition "CARE"

MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES

A. Part One: Personal

I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife.

I am a mother. (Random order).

I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking,  
renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also,

(up to now separately I "do" Art.

Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things,  
and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art.

I will live in the museum and I customarily do at home with  
my husband and my baby, for the duration of the exhibi-  
tion.

(Right? or if you don't want me around at night I would  
come in every day) and do all these things as public Art

activities: I will sweep and wax the floors, dust everything,  
wash the walls (i.e. "floor paintings, dust works, soap-sculp-  
ture, wall-paintings") cook, invite people to eat, make  
agglomerations and dispositions of all functional refuse.

The exhibition area might look "empty" of art, but it will be  
maintained in full public view.

MY WORKING WILL BE THE WORK

– text by Mierle Laderman Ukeles



*Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Pregnant Woman Cleaning a Chicken Foot, 1970-73. From Private Performances of Personal Maintenance as Art, 1970-73. Black and white photograph. 10 in. x 8 in. Photo: Jack Ukeles. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York*



*Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Rinsing a BM Diaper, 1970-73. From Private Performances of Personal Maintenance as Art, 1970-73. Black and white photograph. 10 in. x 8 in. Photo: Jack Ukeles. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York*



*Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Washing / Tracks / Maintenance: Outside, 1973. Part of Maintenance Art performance series, 1973–1974. Performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York*

In 1969, the artist **MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES** wrote a manifesto that addressed the often unseen and uncredited labor of mothers and claimed that labor as art. Within the manifesto (a part of which is included on the previous page) Ukeles enumerated the kinds of labor, the duration and the repetitive nature of the maintenance of caring for a family, and identified herself as a “maintenance artist.” Anticipating the activities of feminist artists such as Judy Chicago and others, Ukeles began documenting her domestic chores and framing them as the work of an artist.

By the early 1970s, she was making public performances in spaces such as the Wadsworth Atheneum, where Ukeles cleaned the steps of the museum’s entrance, as part of an

exhibition curated by the critic and writer Lucy Lippard. These projects are an iconic representation of Ukeles’s idea of “pure maintenance,” and a kind of radical care that amplified the skill set of mothering and homemaking. She has been, since 1977, the unsalaried Artist in Residence at Freshkills Landfill on Staten Island. Her pioneering work in time-based and durational performance fusing social practice with the tenets of Jewish teaching, especially *tikkun ‘olam*, have inspired generations of artists. Her work calls attention to issues of sustainability and ethical treatment of workers and care-givers while practicing what Allen Kaprow calls lifelike art, that is to say, art inseparable from life.

Naomi Ginsberg, mother of the poet **ALLEN GINSBERG**, was a Russian-born Jew who died in a mental institution in 1956. Ginsberg documented his mother's illness and its impact on his life through his epic, incantatory poem "Kaddish" completed in 1959 and published in 1961. The entire title of Ginsberg's lament for his mother is "Kaddish for Naomi Ginsberg (1894-1956)." However, it is better known as simply, "Kaddish."

We know Naomi, the mother, through her son; In "Kaddish," Ginsberg writes his mother into existence, even as she is fading from it. In "Howl," perhaps his best-known poem, he writes about those "of my generation." In "Kaddish," he is writing his own origin story. There is something *umbilical* about "Kaddish," within the visceral sense of both connection and loss between Ginsberg and his mother. Though Ginsberg spends much of the poem on his mother's descent into schizophrenia, it has been noted that prior to her illness manifesting, she was known as an energetic and thoughtful schoolteacher. It was not until Allen was in high school that the recurring episodes of mental illness, for which Naomi was medicated and suffered electroshock, that she began her frequent and ever-longer stays in Greystone, a large facility in Ginsberg's hometown in New Jersey. Most accounts of Ginsberg's relationship with his mother are of a particular closeness and speak of a familial happiness between bouts of his mother's worsening condition.

Writing about "Kaddish" in 1976, the scholar Harold Cantor suggested, "In the taut ambiguity of his love and hatred of Naomi Ginsberg, the mother who died in the madhouse, and all she stood for, lie the sources of the poem's great emotive power and often grotesque beauty."



*Allen Ginsberg and his mother, Naomi Ginsberg.  
Courtesy of the Allen Ginsberg Estate*

There is little published scholarship on Ginsberg's "Kaddish." Most accounts focus equally on the fraught, Freudian nature of his relationship with his mother and the idea that this was at the heart of his queer identity. This includes a recurring theme that, with his mother's death, he felt a kind of freedom that allowed him to find a path forward in life. The other common theme is one that focuses on Ginsberg's embrace of other forms of religious and/or spiritual practices which seems to be problematic for the writers of such texts.



*R. B. Kitaj.  
Lithograph  
portraits of  
Allen Ginsberg  
and Naomi  
Ginsberg.  
© R.B. Kitaj  
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Famously, Ginsberg missed his mother's funeral and learned that because too few Jewish men were present, lacking a minyan, the Kaddish was not recited. Some two years later, while visiting a friend who had a copy of the prayer in his apartment, Ginsberg finally recited Kaddish for his mother. And then he set about writing "Kaddish," the poem. It begins:

Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets  
& eyes, while I walk on the sunny pavement of  
Greenwich Village.

downtown Manhattan, clear winter noon, and I've  
been up all night, talking, talking, reading the  
Kaddish aloud, listening to Ray Charles blues  
shout blind on the phonograph

the rhythm the rhythm—and your memory in my  
head three years after—And read Adonais' last  
triumphant stanzas aloud—wept, realizing how we  
suffer—

And how Death is that remedy all singers dream  
of, sing, remember, prophesy as in the Hebrew  
Anthem, or the Buddhist Book of Answers—and  
my own imagination of a withered leaf—at dawn—

Dreaming back thru life, Your time—and mine  
accelerating toward Apocalypse,

the final moment—the flower burning in the Day—  
and what comes after,

looking back on the mind itself that saw an  
American city

a flash away, and the great dream of Me or China,  
or you and a phantom Russia, or a crumpled bed  
that never existed—

like a poem in the dark—escaped back to  
Oblivion—

No more to say, and nothing to weep for but the  
Beings in the Dream, trapped in its disappear-  
ance,

sighing, screaming with it, buying and selling  
pieces of phantom, worshipping each other,

worshipping the God included in it all—longing or  
inevitability?—while it lasts, a Vision—anything more?

It leaps about me, as I go out and walk the street,  
look back over my shoulder, Seventh Avenue, the  
battlements of window office buildings shouldering  
each other high, under a cloud, tall as the sky an  
instant—and the sky above—an old blue place.

or down the Avenue to the south, to—as I walk  
toward the Lower East Side—where you walked 50  
years ago, little girl—from Russia, eating the first  
poisonous tomatoes of America—frightened on the  
dock—

then struggling in the crowds of Orchard Street  
toward what?—toward Newark—

toward candy store, first home-made sodas of the  
century, hand-churned ice cream in backroom on  
musty brownfloor boards—

Toward education marriage nervous breakdown,  
operation, teaching school, and learning to be mad,  
in a dream—what is this life?

Toward the Key in the window—and the great Key  
lays its head of light on top of Manhattan, and over  
the floor, and lays down on the sidewalk—in a single  
vast beam, moving, as I walk down First toward the  
Yiddish Theater—and the place of poverty

you knew, and I know, but without caring now—  
Strange to have moved

thru Paterson, and the West, and Europe and here  
again,

with the cries of Spaniards now in the doorsteps  
doors and dark boys on the street, fire escapes old  
as you

-Tho you're not old now, that's left here with me—

Myself, anyhow, maybe as old as the universe—and I  
guess that dies with us—enough to cancel all that  
comes—What came is gone forever every time

For entire poem, see: (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49313/kaddish>)



Sally Gross, still from the film *Mameloshen* (1983), directed by Josh Blum.

**SALLY GROSS** (1933–2015) was a New York–based choreographer and performer who had a dynamic presence in the dance world for over forty years. Born and raised in the Lower East Side of New York City during the late 1930s and 1940s, she was the last of eight children born to a Polish Jewish immigrant family with little money and often helped her father sell fruit and vegetables from a horse-drawn wagon. As a native Yiddish speaker, she acted as a translator for her parents, who hardly spoke any English. Gross was an original member of New York’s renowned Judson Dance Theater during its highly influential history between 1962 and 1964. Gross was featured in films such as Robert Frank’s Beat Generation masterpiece, *Pull My Daisy* (1959), and she made a number of experimental films based on her improvisational dance technique. Of note here is her short film *Mameloshen* (directed by Josh Blum, 1983), in which we see Gross improvising a dance on the sidewalks of the Lower East Side in New York City, inserting herself into the quotidian life of the Jewish neighborhood where her father had operated an illegal pushcart. As she moves through the space where both she and her father had inscribed their presence, she speaks in her *mameloshen*—her mother tongue of Yiddish. Gross was clearly weaving together her

modern self with her Jewish self, imprinting both onto the very streets where she minded her father’s pushcart as a child. Scholar Benedict Anderson points out that language is what ultimately creates a sense of shared identity. In the film, Gross speaks simultaneously in two languages, dance and Yiddish, thus bridging two communities and two histories.

In other choreographic works, Gross often performed with one or both of her daughters. As a single mother raising children in New York, Gross, like many women artists of her generation, chose to weave their children into their work either out of necessity or by choice. In the photo on the following page, we see Gross performing with her daughter Sidonia, on a rooftop in New York, c. 1974–75. The title of the dance is *Rope*, originally created in 1972. It takes the form of a kind of child’s game, the main prop being a long coil of unremarkable rope that Sally parses out and re-coils, bringing her daughter Sidonia nearer or farther away throughout the simple choreographic structure. The scholar Leslie Satin has written extensively about Gross and particularly about her work with her daughters. In *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 2000, in her essay titled “Sally Gross, Suddenly,” she notes,



Sally Gross, *Rope Dance*, New York, c. 1974–75, performed with her daughter, Sidonia

Indeed, Gross often dances with her real-life daughter, Sidonia Gross, which adds singular resonance to the dances. In duets such as *Rope* (1972), *Going Someplace Slow* (1983), *Petit Air* (1983), and *Domain* (1986), the familial framework may be the product of convenience or happenstance. But whether or not Gross conceptualizes a dance as simply a piece for two women, it is a dance for a mother and a daughter. Their relationship constitutes a new layer of metacommentary which renarrativizes the piece: accidental autobiography, as it were. This mother/daughter pairing is tricky, though, since its onstage position transforms it into metaphor, representation, and cultural ideal. What is depicted onstage, then, might be at once the “real” story of the choreographer, a consciously created manipulation of the spectator’s response, or merely a cultural artifact. It resists the “autobiographical pact” of “identicalness” binding the teller and the text.

As Satin observes, no matter what, the dance is “about” a mother and daughter. By being privy to the relationship of the two women, we cannot ignore the possibili-

ties of the narratives inherent in the pairing. One can only wonder what it was like for each of the two, the mother and the daughter, to share space in such a poetic way, connected as it were umbilically, via the rope that both separated and drew them together. However, Satin writes,

Gross was bemused by viewers who interpreted *Rope*, a dance for herself, Sidonia Gross, and a rope, as being about their umbilical attachment. In any case, particularly in the context of other duets the two have performed, the dance’s depiction of trust has been understood through the frame of the dancers’ actual relationship.... However clear the game structure and the articulation of spatial dynamics, *Rope* is a story of a mother and daughter, coming together and moving apart.

Roland Barthes has also noted the umbilical connection that binds the photograph to the photographer. In the work of the Jewish artists here, the creative impulse binds the child to the parent, and the parent to the child, even as it creates a visual referent, an archive of that relationship.

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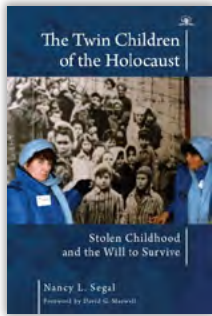
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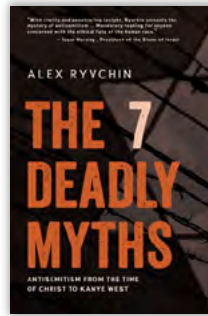
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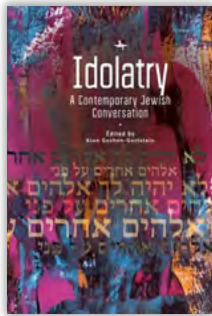
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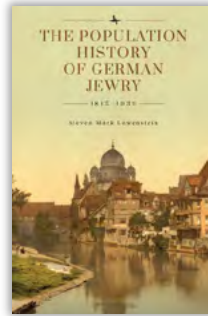
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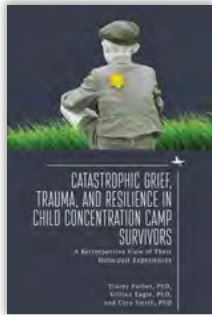
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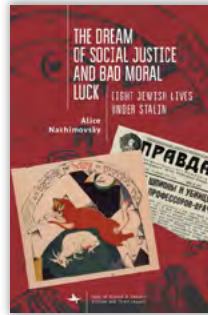
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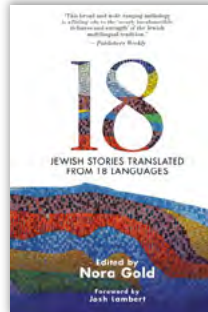
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# “From Where Should I Steal to Give You More?”<sup>i</sup> The Jewish Mother in Anzia Yeziarska’s Fiction

Sally Ann Drucker

In literature, the changing image of the Jewish mother reflects external conditions. European Yiddish writers such as Sholem Aleichem often described mothers as neglectful or as scolds. They had large families, with no time to hover over their children. Yet in early twentieth-century America, we see a difference. Immigrant writers portrayed the Jewish mother as strong, saintly, and self-sacrificing. In *Jews without Money*, first published in 1930, Michael Gold says that his mother “would have let a railroad train run over her body if it could have helped us.”<sup>ii</sup> This saintly image also appeared in films and songs. From 1925 on, Sophie Tucker sang about her “Yiddishe Momme,” who lived in a “humble Eastside tenement,” her only jewels “her baby’s smiles.” Tucker actually grew up in Connecticut, leaving her child in order to pursue a show business career. No matter what the reality, in America, the early image of the Jewish mother was one of endurance and resilience.

But by the mid-twentieth century, a third image developed; an ambivalent generation of writers, straddling the Jewish-American hyphen, portrayed the Jewish mother as demanding and oversolicitous. They criticized her strengths and turned her concerns into jokes. We see it in Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Daniel Greenberg’s *How to Be a Jewish Mother*, and the routines of Jewish comedians. This stereotype is different from portrayals of both the European Jewish mother and the early immigrant Jewish mother. Perhaps in literature she came to represent Jewish culture itself: in Europe, a culture not able to sustain physical needs; in America, the object first of nostalgia, then of derision.<sup>iii</sup>

A fourth image of the Jewish mother, not totally neglectful, saintly, or overbearing, appears in the fiction of Anzia Yeziarska, who was briefly famous in the 1920s. (Her work has been republished since the late 1970s.) As

*Yeziarska’s immigrant Jewish mother needs the “room of her own” eloquently described by Virginia Woolf.*

in Gold’s description, Yeziarska’s figure is overburdened, but this mother is no saint. She both curses and praises her children, sometimes lacking energy or means to care for their basic wants, let alone hover.

Yeziarska’s more realistic image is like the one described in Zborowski and Herzog’s anthropological study, *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl*. A mother might both bless and curse her children within the span of a few minutes. Neither mothers nor children were romanticized figures. In the shtetl, girls often cared for younger children and married early; boys were often sent from home as apprentices or to out-of-town yeshivas, to be fed by other families. Yeziarska’s immigrant Jewish mothers brought their practical characteristics and attitudes from the old world to the new.

In several of Yeziarska’s early stories, the mother’s struggles and emotions are central, rather than seen in relation to those of her children. To represent Yiddish speech patterns in English, Yeziarska followed her mother and older sisters around, pen poised to take notes. Her inventive transcription of Yiddish into English is especially effective when she writes in the voice of the Jewish mother, often called Hanneh Breineh, a sympathetic and sometimes tragic figure. Two of Yeziarska’s first short



*In 1902, NY Jewish housewives organized a kosher meat boycott, protesting significant price raises. In this photo, "Mrs. Perlmutter and others outside store arguing price of meat," Brooklyn, NY, undated, photographer unknown. Bain News Service. Library of Congress, www.loc.gov*

stories, "The Free Vacation House" and "The Fat of the Land," feature this remarkable character.

"The Free Vacation House" was Yeziarska's first published short story; it employed the voice of an anonymous Jewish mother but was based on Yeziarska's sister's experiences during a charity vacation. Trapped by both poverty and her presumed benefactors, the mother defines domestic life, "On the one side was the big wash-tub with clothes, waiting for me to wash. On the table was a pile of breakfast dishes yet. In the sink was the potatoes, waiting to be peeled. The baby was beginning to cry for the bottle.... Which was worse, to land in a crazy house, jump from the window down, or go to the country from the charities?"<sup>iv</sup>

But in the free but regimented vacation house, the narrator feels like a prisoner. After two weeks, she thankfully returns to her narrow rooms. Yeziarska's immigrant Jewish mother needs the "room of her own" eloquently described by Virginia Woolf. Yeziarska herself, swamped by household chores after the birth of her daughter, left her husband soon after the story was published. Through its narrator, Yeziarska displayed her own conflicts around motherhood and domesticity.

"The Fat of the Land" brought Yeziarska literary recognition. In this short story, prosperity instead of poverty drives an immigrant mother out of her tenement kitchen. After years of struggling, Hanneh Breineh lives off "the fat of the land" when her children prosper. "Uptown here, where each person lives in his own house, nobody cares if the person next door is dying or going crazy from loneliness. It ain't anything like we used to have it in Delancey Street, where we could walk into one another's rooms without knocking, and borrow a pinch of salt or a pot to cook in."<sup>v</sup>

Yeziarska uses Hanneh Brieneh's domestic concerns to show the strengths and virtues of the ghetto, the world of our mothers, often through relationships between women—mothers, daughters, and neighbors. Hanneh Breineh pours out her heart to her friend, Mrs. Pelz. Most male writers of the period, even when sympathetic, usually define the heroine in terms of her romantic relationships with men. Yeziarska also captures the emotional verbal style of typical ghetto women. Most Jewish literature of this period, more restrained, makes no attempt to capture ghetto women's vivid speech patterns. The climax of "The Fat of the Land" is Hanneh Breineh's impassioned defense of the Jewish mother.

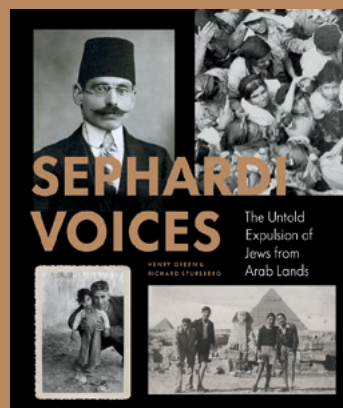
Why should my children shame themselves from me? .... Why don't the children of born American mothers write my Benny's plays? It is I, who never had a chance to be a person, who gave him the fire in his head. If I would have had a chance to go to school and learn the language what couldn't I have been? It is I ... who had such a black life in Poland ... choked thoughts and feelings that are flaming up in my children and making them great in America. And yet they shame themselves from me!<sup>vi</sup>

In other stories, Yeziarska presents an immigrant waif who receives an education, regretfully pawning something of her mother's to achieve her goals. She initially rejects her mother but ultimately needs the identification to create. When Yeziarska writes about the Jewish mother and immigrant waif in the same story, at some point the waif fuses with the Jewish mother. In *Bread Givers*, Yeziarska's best-known novel, the waif adopts some of her mother's traits after her death. In *Arrogant Beggar*, the waif emulates a nurturing Jewish grandmother, an ultimate earth mother, to find creative identity. Yeziarska's last recurring character, an older woman, sees the invisibility and voicelessness of the elderly as similar to that of immigrants. She tries to use her hard-won knowledge to improve her situation.

According to feminist critic Annis Pratt, in women's literature heroines experience rebirth through incorporating the lives of their mothers and grandmothers.<sup>vii</sup> Yeziarska's female characters find the values and strengths of the past embodied in their female ancestors, an important aspect of negotiating the present and creating a future. Hanneh Breineh lives on, not just through her playwright son Benny, but through Yeziarska's writing. She shows us the endurance and resilience of the Jewish mother, and by extension, the immigrant Jewish community of the early twentieth century. We can appreciate the strengths of the ghetto through Yeziarska's portrayal of the embattled Jewish mother.

**SALLY ANN DRUCKER** is professor emerita in the Department of English at SUNY-Nassau.

- i Anzia Yeziarska, "The Fat of the Land," in *The Open Cage: An Anzia Yeziarska Collection* (New York: Persea Books, 1979), 85. From *Hungry Hearts* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1920).
- ii Ruth Adler, "The 'Real' Jewish Mother?," *Midstream* 33.8 (October 1977), 39
- iii Michael Gold, *Jews without Money* (New York: Bard Books, 1978), 112.
- iv Anzia Yeziarska, "The Free Vacation House," in *Hungry Hearts*, 100–101.
- v Anzia Yeziarska, "The Fat of the Land," in *The Open Cage*, 89. From *Hungry Hearts*.
- vi *Ibid.*, 102.
- vii Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 152–53.



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*Sandi Graham and Drake at the 2011 JUNO Awards, Air Canada Centre, Toronto, Canada. Photo by WENN Rights Ltd / Alamy*

# “Momma Is a Saint”: Christianizing the Jewish Mother in Drake’s Black Jewish Rap

Jonathan Branfman

The biracial Jewish rap superstar Drake is a self-declared “momma’s boy” who calls his Jewish mother, Sandi Graham, “the most important person in my life.”<sup>i</sup> In 2016, Drake celebrated his mother’s birthday with an intriguing Instagram post: alongside a clip of Sandi blowing out candles, Drake wrote, “I do this all for you. Happy birthday, my angel.” Although mother veneration is common in rap, “angel” sounds oddly Christianized for a Jewish son addressing his Jewish mother. Further, angelic women in North American media are typically dainty, soft-spoken white gentile ladies like Cinderella, who invert the stereotypically loud and domineering “Jewish mother.” By adoring but taming his (Jewish) mother into a sweet silent “angel,” Drake’s post captures one of his key self-marketing techniques: Drake has consistently praised his mother in ways that *Christianize*, *silence*, and thus *feminize* her image. This technique suppresses not just one Jewish stereotype, but a dyad: the castrating “Jewish mother” and her emasculated “nice Jewish boy” son. These dyadic tropes cast Jewish men as sweet but neurotically effete, supposedly because they are smothered by overbearing Jewish mothers.<sup>ii</sup> Conversely, effacing the Jewish mother trope helps Drake to masculinize himself as a gallant son.

Analyzing this two-step technique newly reveals how tropes of the hypermasculine Black rapper, castrating Jewish mother, and emasculated nice Jewish boy intersect in twenty-first-century media. My analysis neither investigates Sandi Graham’s self-perception nor questions Drake’s love for her. Instead, I clarify how Drake publicly performs that love in ways that masculinize himself by actively erasing the “Jewish mother” and “nice Jewish boy” tropes.

This double erasure underpins Drake’s marketability because the hip-hop industry often equates authenticity with narrow notions of “gangsta” Black American hypermasculinity. As the African American Studies scholar Imani Perry explains, this gangsta image is *double-voiced*:<sup>iii</sup> while it may titillate white suburban audiences with racist fantasies of Black men as hypersexual criminals,<sup>iv</sup> it also offers “fantasies of masculine power” to

“What’s a nice Jewish boy doing in a career like this?”

impoverished Black men “who feel powerless” in a racist society.<sup>v</sup> But whether conveying racism or Black dignity, this hypermasculine gangsta imagery contradicts tropes of Jewish emasculation, and so those Jewish tropes always threaten to cast Drake as an unfit rapper. This threat turned explicit in 2010 when the prominent journalist Katie Couric interviewed Drake, immediately asking, “What’s a nice Jewish boy doing in a career like this?”<sup>vi</sup>

And Jewishness is just one of Drake’s marketing difficulties: every facet of Drake’s image ill fits gangsta hypermasculinity, since he is a Jewish light-skinned biracial Canadian from middle-class roots who starred in a cheesy soap opera (*Degrassi*) before entering rap. For example, although North American colorism romanticizes “lightskin” men like Drake as classy and sweet, it can also stigmatize Drake as “softer” than dark peers like his rap mentor Lil Wayne.<sup>vii</sup> Because Drake so mismatches gangsta tropes, his success coexists with bafflement and disdain about his identity, masculinity, and rap authenticity. For instance, although Drake has won a record-breaking thirty-four Billboard Music Awards (including 2021’s “Artist of the Decade”), countless online “Drake memes” deride him as “not really Black,” “not a real man,” and “not a real rapper.”<sup>viii</sup> Just one exemplar depicts Drake proclaiming that “I’m a massive fa\*\*ot.”<sup>ix</sup>

To overcome such stigmas, Drake labors to reframe his emasculating traits from “soft” to marketably “suave.” While this self-masculinizing labor includes carefully styling his own clothing, hairstyles, choreography, and lyrics, it also includes Drake’s techniques for Christianizing, silencing, and thus feminizing his (Jewish) mother’s image. One performance that exemplifies these latter techniques is Drake’s 2016 music video, “Child’s Play.” This video also illustrates how Drake’s suave image often entails displacing stigma onto other Black people.

Set in a chic restaurant, “Child’s Play” converts a lovers’ quarrel into a confrontation over how Black bodies should occupy public spaces: Drake nervously hushes his girlfriend, played by Black supermodel Tyra Banks, as her speech mounts louder and switches into African American Vernacular English. When tone-policing his girlfriend, Drake invokes a Christianized version of his Jewish mother to valorize his respectability politics as admirable rather than inauthentic and as genteel rather than weak. He raps, “You ... say I’m actin *lightskin*, I can’t take you nowhere / This is a place for families that drive / Camrys ... You wildin’, you super childish.” He adds, “*Momma is a saint*, yeah she raised me real good / All because of her, I don’t do you like I should.” Then, sternly wagging a finger, Drake threatens “*Don’t make me give you back to the hood*” (my emphasis). These lyrics imply that Drake takes pride in “actin lightskin,” as the alternative would be to act “wildin’” and “childish” like his girlfriend from “the hood.” And by threatening to “give” his girlfriend “back to the hood,” Drake conveys that his own allure includes his *distance* from ghettoized Black communities, a distance allegedly instilled by the “saintly” mother who “raised me real good.” Drake thus flips the rap industry’s usual standards for marketable masculinity, but this flip depends on validating racism against others: rather than challenging racist stereotypes that perceive Black people as innately “wild,” these lyrics elevate Drake as better than other Black people at mastering white middle-class norms of speech and gesture.

And the video specifically links Drake’s image as a better-assimilated Black person with genteel masculinity, also credited to his (Jewish) mother. The lyrics “she raised me real good / All because of her, I don’t do you like I should” imply that Drake’s fine upbringing precludes violently controlling his girlfriend (“doing you”) as toxic norms expect men “should.” Because some audiences egregiously equate such abuse with strong masculinity, Drake’s pacifism risks emasculating him—and this risk would grow if Drake attributed his nonviolence to a castrating Jewish mother. By suppressing this Jewish mother trope, the Christian term “saint” feminizes Drake’s mother and elevates Drake with tropes of enlightened Christian self-restraint.

By crediting Drake’s (Jewish) mother for his respectable Black masculinity, “Child’s Play” harmfully echoes racist narratives that attribute racial inequality to Black people’s “bad parenting,” which allegedly causes “bad behavior,” including gangsta masculinity. In June 2020, for instance, during the uprisings that followed George Floyd’s murder

*Drake’s performances demonstrate why tropes about Jewish gender and sexuality must be analyzed in conversation with America’s wider racial landscape.*

by Minneapolis police, Fox Nation contributor Tomi Lahren tweeted that “we don’t have a policing problem, we have a parenting problem.”<sup>8</sup> This tweet implies that unarmed Black people murdered by police are not victims of racism, but poorly parented delinquents whose own misbehavior provokes sticky ends. When “Child’s Play” credits a saintly (Christianized) version of Drake’s mother for his “better” Black masculinity, it feeds the wider accusation that all Black suffering is a self-inflicted “parenting problem.” This racist implication further aids to equate Drake’s own “lightskin” appearance and conduct with classy masculinity rather than emasculation.

When Drake suppresses the Jewish mother trope and nice Jewish boy trope to market himself as a suave (not weak) Black rapper in “Child’s Play” and beyond, he exposes understudied interactions between popular racist and antisemitic imagery. For instance, when “Child’s Play” mutes the Jewish mother trope in order to validate racist narratives about Black parenting, it demonstrates why tropes about Jewish gender and sexuality must be analyzed in conversation with America’s wider racial landscape. Noticing this landscape is not only vital for clarifying Jewish experience and representation, but also for clarifying how Jewish tropes can variously facilitate or undercut broader structures of inequality.

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**JONATHAN BRANFMAN** is the *Eli Reinhard* postdoctoral fellow in Jewish Studies at Stanford University. His research links Jewish studies with film studies, gender studies, and critical race studies.

*This essay excerpts from the author’s forthcoming book, **Millennial Jewish Stardom: Navigating Racial Antisemitism, Masculinity, and White Supremacy** (New York University Press, June 2024).*

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ii See Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mother* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Barbara Gottfried, "What Do Men Want, Dr. Roth?," in *A Mensch among Men: Explorations in Jewish Masculinity*, ed. Harry Brod (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1988), 37–52.

iii Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 90.

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vi Katie Couric, "@katiecouric: Drake," *CBS News*, October 6, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVX-M0AgUio>.

vii See Remi Joseph-Salisbury, *Black Mixed-Race Men: Transatlanticity, Hybridity and "Post-Racial" Resilience* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 53–84; Alyssa Newman, "Desiring the Standard Light Skin: Black Multiracial Boys, Masculinity and Exotification," *Identities* 26, no. 1 (2019): 113.

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# Refusing to Be a Zionist Mother

Naomi Brenner

Imagine walking through the streets of the young city of Tel Aviv in 1937, where Bauhaus buildings have only recently replaced sand dunes. You pause, for a moment, at a small kiosk stocked with cold drinks, newspapers, and a variety of pamphlets. One of the pamphlets catches your eye, with its racy cover: a sketch of a woman with a sultry expression in front of a spider's web. *The Impure One: A Novel about Tel Aviv Life* tries to seduce readers into spending their pocket change on an installment of this serialized novel, one of many popular novels that started appearing on the streets of Tel Aviv in the 1930s. However, few readers would have imagined that this long-forgotten novel, with its young attractive female protagonist, is a tragic story about forced motherhood and a scathing critique of Zionist society in the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine.

In many ways, *The Impure One* is what you might expect from a cheap novel sold on a street corner: set in Tel Aviv, it traces the experiences of Esther, a young unmarried woman who is accused of abandoning her newborn baby. For Hebrew readers at the time, even the hint of women's sexuality in the novel was risqué; local Hebrew culture, dominated by Labor Zionism, encouraged young men to devote their passion to building the homeland and to avoid sexual temptations that might interfere with the nationalist spirit. Men and women who immigrated to Palestine during the early decades of the twentieth century left behind the social conventions of eastern European Jews and many dreamed of an egalitarian society in a Jewish homeland. Women participated in early Zionist communities, but gender equality was rarely realized. Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi, one of the founders of the Labor Movement in Palestine who was active in agricultural settlement, Jewish self-defense, and women's organizations, explained that the first women's *kvuzot*, all-women settlement groups, were formed because "in the thick of that passionate movement toward the land, the women workers suddenly found themselves thrust aside and relegated once more to the ancient tradition of the house and the kitchen."<sup>1</sup> By the 1930s, women's new sexual freedoms had largely been domesticated by a national project dominated by male leaders.



Cover of *The Impure One: A Novel about Tel Aviv Life*, 1937

Even though its cover suggests a story filled with romantic and sexual exploits, *The Impure One* follows Esther as she repeatedly denies having given birth to a child. Her friends, social workers, police officers, and a judge in Tel Aviv try to persuade her to accept responsibility for the baby. But Esther's fierce resolve not to acknowledge the child highlights the degree to which a woman's social standing and social worth were entangled with procreation. Like so many modern nationalist movements, Zionism regarded the family as a microcosm of the nation: the new Hebrew man was defined by his physical health and strength, while the new Hebrew woman would give birth to and educate the next generation of citizens. Childbirth was transformed from a private process to a nationalist endeavor, guided by Zionist institutions, represented in the novel by a domineering social worker, and the collective, epitomized in the novel by gossiping neighbors and passers-by. The Zionist collective assumed that all women wanted to have children and presented motherhood as women's most significant contribution to



## The Impure One *castigates a society for its efforts to control women's sexuality and to enforce nationalist motherhood.*

the national cause. As Liliya Basbich wrote in the General Labor Federation (Histadrut) bulletin for women in 1934, "The longing for a child, valuing the important place of a child in our lives—these are tightly tied to our labor Zionist perspectives ... they complete our labor, our lives in the Land of Israel."<sup>ii</sup>

In *The Impure One*, Esther defies these powerful social norms and rejects both private and public motherhood. She steadfastly maintains that she suffered a miscarriage and has no son, even as she is convicted of abandoning her child and ordered by the court to pay the costs of his care at a local children's home. But the novel never makes clear whether or not Esther gave birth to this child. She may be an innocent victim, as she insists, or she may be a promiscuous woman who refuses to raise her child, as the people around her believe. Despite this ambiguity, Tel Aviv society imposes its construct of motherhood: sexually active women are either mothers or prostitutes. As an unmarried woman, Esther is forcibly assigned the role of mother both by the court and by public opinion in a society that regarded motherhood as a national imperative, a woman's contribution to building the homeland.

While Esther's story is highly sensationalized, the better to sell weekly installments of the novel, it reflects on the costs of Zionist motherhood. As scholar Bat-Sheva Margalit-Stern points out, when a society tasks mothers—and not fathers—with the responsibility not only to birth but also to educate children as future citizens, it also blames women when birthing or raising children does not go according to plan.<sup>iii</sup> Esther is viewed by many in the novel as the paradigmatic "bad" mother, a woman who abandons her own child. But in the interwar period, many other women, particularly Mizrahi women and immigrant women who retained their diasporic languages and cultures, were deemed "bad" mothers for not sufficiently internalizing national consciousness and values or failing to properly instill them in their children. Doctors, social workers, and other public figures argued that their children should be placed in professional children's homes designed to correct improper

education at home. This becomes the fate of the young boy whom Esther rejects, as Zionist society intervenes to raise the child at the expense, both financial and emotional, of the woman.

Ultimately, the culture of gossip depicted in the novel, fueled by the institutional authorities in the narrative, creates the very sexual object that it condemns. Isolated and impoverished, Esther leaves Tel Aviv and becomes a prostitute and, soon after, commits suicide. She earns enough money to pay for the baby's care and to provide him with a generous trust fund, even as she continues to deny that she gave birth. The accusation of motherhood has destroyed Esther's life, but in her suicide note, she writes that she has found both revenge and redemption:

The damned public imposed upon me a stain and a child who was not mine, and to take revenge on the whole world, I decided to show my contempt for everyone....Emmanuel "my son"—that is all that I leave behind in this world; I leave him as living proof of the baseness of our society and the rotting hearts of its people. I deliberately chose the impure path to sanctify myself.<sup>iv</sup>

Esther's angry words criticize a society in which ideals of motherhood are debased by cruelty, sanctimoniousness, and gossip. Ironically, she embraces this child only upon her death, not as a citizen of the future homeland but as a rebuke to the people she leaves behind. Although early twentieth-century mass-market Hebrew novels are typically dismissed by critics as escapist fantasies or pornography, *The Impure One* castigates a society for its efforts to control women's sexuality and to enforce nationalist motherhood.

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**NAOMI BRENNER** is associate professor at The Ohio State University. Her current project focuses on recovering and reading marginal and forgotten early-twentieth-century Hebrew and Yiddish novels that feature women.

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i Rachel Yanait [Ben-Zvi], "Stages," in *The Plough Woman: Records of Pioneer Women of Palestine*, ed. Mark A. Raider and Miriam B. Raider-Roth (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 109.

ii Quoted in Bat-Sheva Margalit-Stern, "Between 'Law of Nature' and 'Rule of the Movement': Motherhood and Refusing Motherhood in Zionist Society in the Land of Israel," in *Gender in Israel*, ed. Margalit Shilo and Gidon Katz (Sde Boker: Makhon Ben-Gurion, 2011), 172.

iii Margalit-Stern, 174–75.

iv H. Shunamit, *Ha-tme'ah* [The impure one] (Tel Aviv: Azriel Press, 1938), 125–26.



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# Portrait of My Mother as Four Sons

Debra Cash

## One Wise.

Your school was named for the woodcutter harrowed by metal combs.

Knowledge beckoned like a pearl of Mishnah surrounded by channel-set commentary.

You were called by the word for blessing but perhaps not a blessing.

You drew, you sang, you laced up your two-tone shoes.

One classmate knew about the australopithecine ape, another grew up to run a harbor.

You mastered the prestate language that sounded to sherut drivers like Shakespeare rendered through a dented kettle.

The leather album bound for your sixteenth birthday endorsed how you slid baked goods from the oven.

## One Wicked.

Or overwhelmed. Or unbalanced. Or forsaken. Or furious.

Trust yourself, said Dr. Spock, your husband, your friends. There was so little self to trust.

You smoked, you cried, you locked yourself in the bathroom.



*Photo from Akiba / Barrack Academy Archives.*

You hit, you blamed, you terrorized. You acted in secret and in public and with impunity.

Later you drove too fast while the children grasped the back seats, pleading.

## One Simple.

Meat in the fridge gone bad.

Crystal goblets mailed unwrapped.

But *thank yous* and *I'm sorrys* sprouting like dandelions sunny in a neglected lawn.

*Who is this woman and what did you do with my mother?*

## One Who Does Not Know How to Ask.

But still knows how to sing.

---

**DEBRA CASH** *Debra Cash's poetry has been awarded prizes by the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, anthologized in Anita Diamant's books on the Jewish life cycle, and appeared in the siddurim of the Reconstructionist and Reform movements and on the Open Siddur Project. She is the author of Who Knows One (Hand Over Hand Press, 2010) and The Bumblebee's Diwan: Poems Along the Path of Spain's Golden Age (forthcoming).*

# Musings of a Jewish Mother

Jennifer Seligman

My hat feels heavy on my head, and I am desperately trying to not sing “too loudly” in the women’s section during *davening*. The women near me turn their heads toward the sound of my voice, and some men look in my direction over the *mehitzah*, or barrier, as well—out of a sense of compliment or rebuke I cannot quite tell. “And this is *Modern Orthodox*?” I keep asking myself, week after week, month after month, year after year, seeing my sons leave my side to join their father on his, never singing as loudly as I can and want to. I feel conspicuous just for trying to be me, and that makes me so self-conscious that I want to hide, to stop attending synagogue. And yet, if I don’t go to synagogue, I lose touch with the community—so I am in synagogue, present, yet trying to diminish my presence at the same time.

During the Torah service, a stream of consciousness winds its way through my mind.... I remember how I loved chanting Torah in high school and wanted to become a cantor. Choosing Orthodoxy, which I did at age nineteen because I wanted to traditionally observe the commandments I read about, meant I couldn’t pursue that dream. I hear the Torah reader make a mistake, but I keep silent as the men standing near the reader correct him.

The Torah portion of the week is about Rebecca deceiving Isaac in order for Jacob, the younger son, to get the blessing instead of Esau, the oldest. It wasn’t until I was married with two sons of my own that I began to realize that Rebecca and Isaac’s marriage, despite the word “love” being used to describe Isaac’s initial feelings for Rebecca, must have had a major break in communication and connection. It occurs to me that Jacob is not the only one in disguise—Rebecca prepares

Isaac’s favorite foods just as he likes them, the biblical equivalent of making his coffee “just so,” a very marital, even tender act—but all for the sake of deception. She chooses God and her favored son, Jacob, over her husband and his favored son, Esau. I wonder if she tried to tell Isaac directly, and he just shut her out, blinded by his favoritism. Isaac was blind to Rebecca, and by extension, God’s will, before he became physically blind.

But I don’t blame Isaac for ignoring God’s will. According to the book of Genesis, God commanded Abraham, Isaac’s father, to sacrifice him, and the only thing that stopped Abraham from going through with it was an angel intervening at the last minute, calling out to Abraham to not lay a hand on Isaac. Not only would that experience have made Isaac’s relationship with Abraham strained (to say the least), but also Isaac’s relationship with God. Would Isaac unquestionably follow the will of a deity who asked his own father to sacrifice him? I begin to think of the prominent place the image of the Binding of Isaac has in the Hebrew chronicles of the First Crusade. Biblical motifs and imagery are woven into a narrative of utter horror and destruction. Mothers described as “righteous” zealously kill, or in their eyes, sacrifice, their children rather than subject them to the impurity of conversion to Christianity by the Crusaders. These “pure and righteous” mothers cry out to God that unlike Abraham, they actually went through with the sacrifice God had asked of him, implying they are more righteous than their justice-loving forefather.

I ponder the martyrdom of motherhood itself, especially Jewish motherhood. This is a common trope—the Jewish mother who guilties her offspring, usually a son, by saying (often in a shrill voice) that she sacrificed her own happiness entirely for him. I think of my own sons, and those aspects of my traditional role that I truly love: I prepare beloved and familiar dishes, their simmering and roasting pervading the house with Sabbath smells on Friday afternoons. I am grateful to witness and guide my sons’ journey to manhood, and how they seem to actually like spending time with me. Hearing other mothers’ infants crying in shul, I remember both the exhaustion and yet the beautiful stillness of nursing in the middle of the night. I also remember the Mishnah in Tractate

*Isaac was blind to Rebecca, and by extension, God’s will, before he became physically blind.*



Ribera, Jusepe de lo Spagnoletto. Isaac and Jacob, 1637. Oil on Canvas. ©Museo Nacional del Prado

*I remember both the exhaustion and yet the beautiful stillness of nursing in the middle of the night.*

Ketubot (4:4), which states that a wife is exempt from nursing her husband's child if she has two or more servants. I bristle at the concept that the child is considered as belonging to its father, rather than belonging to both parents equally, and both of them being equally involved in their child's mental and physical care. Nursing is perceived as labor, a sacrifice, not an intimate bonding experience for a mother and her child. And it can even be perceived as a nuisance or problematic issue to be dealt with, such as halakhic questions as to the modesty of a woman nursing in public, especially in synagogue.

While the reader nears the end of the Torah portion, the story of Isaac and Rebecca "playing" together comes to mind, and I think about the Jewish mother and her sexuality. It dawns on me that rather than her sexuality being an integral aspect of her *self*, her way of deriving pleasure, connection, communication, and expression, the Jewish wife's sexuality is awakened, sanctioned, and legitimized by the institution of marriage, the

observance of the laws of family purity, and her modest deportment in public and private. Beyond this, the Jewish mother's sexuality serves the entire Jewish people, by bearing and raising Jewish children and being responsible for maintaining an atmosphere of sanctity, tranquility, and holiness in the Jewish home.

Marriage, family purity ... I'm struck by the juxtaposition of the theatricality of a Jewish wedding and the furtiveness of mikveh attendance, always under the cover of darkness and anonymity. Resentment bubbles up when I consider how inflexible the rules of immersion are; technically, a woman can immerse during the day on the eighth day after her period ceases, which would be such a boon to young mothers, but it's "just not done"—neither is a woman holding the Torah, a woman being a pallbearer, or a mother making Kiddush for her family Friday night, particularly if the husband is present.

I'm snapped out of my reverie by my good friend, who takes the seat next to me, asking where we are in the Torah reading. I smile at her, show her the place, and start chanting the last *aliyah* under my breath. Correctly.

---

**JENNIFER SELIGMAN** is a PhD candidate in Medieval Jewish History at Yeshiva University. She is also a full-time faculty member for the Upper School in the History Department at the Dwight-Englewood School in Englewood, New Jersey.

# An Improbable Likeness: Olga Lengyel's Auschwitz Tale of Motherhood Lost

Sheila Jelen

In *Five Chimneys*, her 1947 account of surviving Auschwitz (first published in French in 1946 as *Souvenirs de l'au dela*), Olga Lengyel (1908-2001) writes about having assisted pregnant women in terminating their pregnancies so as not to be automatically gassed and killing newborn infants to save the lives of the mothers.<sup>i</sup> Lengyel's story of traumatized maternity, both her own and others', will be the subject of this discussion. This is not a historical exposition on the fate of mothers and their infants at Auschwitz, but a reflection on the vagaries of storytelling in the immediate post-Holocaust period.

Lawrence Langer, a fellow literature scholar with an interest in Holocaust testimonies, takes a surprising swerve away from literary analysis and toward history in an essay titled "Memory and Invention in Olga Lengyel's *Five Chimneys*." There he claims that "many of the details of her account, though vivid and painful, range between the improbable and the impossible." He proceeds to nitpick Lengyel's testimonies, both written and audiovisual, identifying therein historical impossibilities and lambasting the many readers and scholars who have failed to challenge Lengyel's narrative. Langer himself says, at times, that his queries seem "unseemly and even offensive," but he points out that all the small details contribute to the "reign of the improbable."<sup>ii</sup> The majority of Lengyel's counterfactual episodes, he says, are designed not to explore the abysses of Auschwitz but to enhance her own stature.

Let me pause here for a moment to say that my goal is not to argue whether or not Lengyel's testimonies are true or false. Even Langer admits that "Lengyel was certainly a survivor of Auschwitz and is not constructing a fake memoir."<sup>iii</sup> Rather, I will reflect, briefly, on whose story she is trying to tell and why she is telling it the way she does.

Petra Schweitzer discusses Lengyel's *Five Chimneys* alongside Dr. Gisella Perl's (1907-1988) testimony, first



Olga Lengyel, undated. Photo from the Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights

published in 1948, two years after Lengyel's, under the title *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*.<sup>iv</sup> Schweitzer explores the two books within the context of a discussion of the Holocaust and the maternal body, invoking Derrida's notion of "writing as the unconditional affirmation of life" and Levinas's concept of maternity and its ethical relationship to the Other.<sup>v</sup> Schweitzer's stated goal in her reading of Lengyel and Perl is to shed light on two texts that were among the first to be published by women immediately after the war but had not garnered much critical attention. Schweitzer says, "At a time when little attention was given to gender studies, both women concentrate primarily upon female victims. Committed to giving testimony to the Nazi atrocities, both authors narrate personal, individual, and collective experiences, thereby documenting the systematic torture imposed upon the female body, in particular pregnant women and their unborn babies. In the years following the war, these important first-person stories remained on the margins of a vast Holocaust research."<sup>vi</sup>

Schweitzer points out at different moments in her essay that Lengyel's number at Auschwitz was 25403 and that Perl's was 25404, not remarking on the obvious and uncannily close proximity of the two.<sup>vii</sup> When coming across these nearly identical numbers for the two women in Schweitzer's essay, I decided to pull Perl's book off my





*Gisela Perl as a young medical student.  
Photo from Giora Itzhak Yardeni*

*It was as if they were the same person telling the same experience in different voices, like the double creation stories in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis.*

bookshelf and reread it. Over, and over again, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was as if they were the same person telling the same experience in different voices, like the double creation stories in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis.

To what extent are the stories Lengyel tells about herself true? Olga Lengyel was at Auschwitz. And so was Gisella Perl. Gisella, however, was an obstetrician/gynecologist assigned to work in the women's infirmary, and she never mentions Olga as one of her staff. I would like to propose that in *Five Chimneys*, Lengyel may be telling a story about traumatized maternity in the camp by becoming, for large segments of it, the closest possible witness to the physical embodiment of that trauma. I contend that she takes on the persona, in her writing, of Dr. Gisella Perl.

As we know from the opening pages of Lengyel's memoir, she feels that she had a hand in "killing" her older child, Tomas. Upon arrival at Auschwitz, though he could have passed as old enough to enter the camp, she told him to go with his younger brother and their grandmother, Lengyel's mother, to the gas chambers, without realizing where they were headed. What she thought she was doing was sparing Tomas hard labor and sending him off to a camp for the elderly and for children where they would rest and receive adequate nutrition.<sup>viii</sup> She relives this experience throughout her book by closely

identifying with the decision of the camp gynecologist, Gisella Perl, to terminate pregnancies and to kill infants, when necessary, in order to save the mothers' life. This allows her to come to terms with herself as one of those mothers whose lives could only be saved by the death of their children.

Lengyel's own story, the story of her parting from her sons, the story, in a sense, of her "killing" her own son, is a story that she keeps replaying again and again in her own very individual experience of Auschwitz. And her peer, Gisella Perl, the Birkenau obstetrician/gynecologist, had the perfect means of articulating this experience at her own disposal—the experience, over and over again, of killing the living children of the mothers at Auschwitz, children whose warm, heavy bodies came issuing out of their mothers and were subsequently strangled, according to Perl, and disposed of, so that their mothers might survive in the kingdom of death.<sup>ix</sup>

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**SHEILA JELEN** is Zantker Professor of Jewish Literature, Culture and History and director of the Jewish Studies Program at the University of Kentucky, Lexington. Her most recent book is *Israeli Salvage Poetics* (Wayne State University Press, 2023).

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i Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: The Story of Auschwitz* (Chicago: Ziff Davis Publishing, 1947), 99–103.

ii Lawrence L. Langer, "Memory and Invention in Olga Lengyel's *Five Chimneys*," in *The Afterdeath of the Holocaust* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 175.

iii Langer, "Memory and Invention," 177.

iv Petra M. Schweitzer, "Embodied Existence of Mothers: Gisella Perl and Olga Lengyel," in *Gendered Testimonies of the Holocaust: Writing Life* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 69–83. Gisella Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (New York: International Universities Press, 1948).

v Schweitzer, *Gendered Testimonies*, 21.

vi *Ibid.*, 69.

vii *Ibid.*, 70, 76.

viii Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 1, 15–16.

Ilana Szobel, Brandeis University, *The Un-Chosen Body: Disability Culture in Israel*

Allegra Goodman, writer, *The Family Rubinstein*

Melissa Klapper, Rowan University, *At Home in the World: American Jewish Women Abroad, 1865-1940*

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# What Bacon Can Tell Us about Jewish Mothers

Nancy Phillips

To raise and nurture healthy children in the first half of the twentieth century, some North American Ashkenazic Jewish mothers used love, kitchens, and, in some cases, the advice of bacon-prescribing doctors. An unknown number of doctors—Jewish and non-Jewish—prescribed bacon to young children to help them gain weight or treat a surprisingly diverse set of diseases and ailments, including anemia, celiac disease, tuberculosis, colitis, pneumonia, and whooping cough. Over the past few years, I have collected almost a hundred stories about North American Ashkenazic mothers who, between 1909 and 1955, administered this supposedly medicinal *treif* to their children on their pediatricians' advice, even as they kept kosher kitchens. These women figured out how to maintain their Jewish identities and raise Jewish children while following doctors' orders and feeding their children pork.

When I first started researching these curious stories at the intersection of motherhood, medicine, and religion, I assumed that these doctors must have been applying at least some modicum of medically effective science. I have now abandoned my search for scientific evidence of the medical utility of bacon. I am not a doctor nor a nutritionist, but as far as I can tell, none exists. I am left with fascinating stories and questions about what they tell us about Jewish mothering in mid-century North America.

It is easy to think that these mothers agreed to feed their children bacon because, in their quest to have healthy children, they abandoned reason and acted emotionally, exemplifying the stereotype of the Jewish mother as "excessive, overprotective [and] neurotically anxious."<sup>i</sup> However, the stories show that in listening to their doctors, finding ways to feed their children bacon while maintaining kosher kitchens and keeping the story a secret, they creatively defied religious law and maintained their Judaism. These mothers were thoughtful, resourceful, and independent.



*Hot plate the author's grandmother used to cook bacon for the author's mother. Courtesy of the author.*

My interview subjects were all descendants of women who had been told to feed bacon to their ailing children during the first half of the last century. All but two of these mothers used this medicinal food, even if they found bacon repulsive. They decided to act against their feelings for the good of their children. Rachel said bacon was "repugnant" to her grandmother, who fed it to her too-skinny father in Brooklyn.<sup>ii</sup> Barbara's grandmother, who lived in the Bronx, found bacon "disgusting," but she used it anyway.<sup>iii</sup> From Windsor, Ontario, Robyn explained, "The family was kosher, but the doctor's advice had to be followed."<sup>iv</sup> Jill, from Minnesota, noted that "my great-grandmother Martha was absolutely clear that as the doctor recommended it, he [my father] would have it."<sup>v</sup> Irving, from Toronto, said, "My parents were very careful about *treif*.... They fervently believed that if you mixed meat with milk, you would die.... [However,] if the doctor said it's ok, then it's ok.... My mother would have made up her own mind."<sup>vi</sup> While it appears that these women were docile followers of medical authority, they were, in fact, acting thoughtfully and independently. In listening to their doctors, they pushed against religious authority and made what they believed was an informed decision.

These mothers were also creative in how they balanced their fidelities with physicians and religious law. Karen from Toronto told me that in the mid-1940s, her mother

*The Jewish women who believed in the medicinal power of bacon balanced tradition and modernity and used logic and treif to help their children thrive.*

cooked her bacon in the basement on a hot plate in a dedicated pan.<sup>vii</sup> Rosalind, from Manchester, New Hampshire, said, “My family lived in a tenement house, and we had upstairs neighbours who were not Jewish, and my mother bought a little frying pan and spatula and would go upstairs to cook it.”<sup>viii</sup> Robin’s grandmother’s Christian neighbour cooked the bacon in her house and brought it to her family. Rachel’s father’s pediatrician in Brooklyn told her grandmother “to give my dad bacon to help him gain weight as a child.”<sup>ix</sup> A rabbi gave Rachel’s grandmother permission to use bacon, “but to buy a separate pan. So, she had three frying pans in her kitchen, each with a letter scratched onto the bottom: M for *milchig*, F for *fleishig* and T for *traif!*”<sup>x</sup> Mothers used many different techniques to use bacon and maintain kashrut.

In most cases, while the story was passed down within families, it was not shared with others. This secrecy preserved the family’s standing in the Jewish community. Beth, from Chelsea, Massachusetts, said her grandmother “closed the windows so the neighbours wouldn’t smell it.”<sup>xi</sup> Pam could not obtain the story’s details because her elderly cousin from Toronto refused to be interviewed. Pam said that her cousin “does not feel comfortable talking about it and ‘outing’ my grandmother as it was very private. I told her she would not have to provide any personal details, but she maintained she would not want to discuss it. Sorry. She said that she doesn’t remember other Jewish people who were advised to serve bacon to their child, but it could be because it was not discussed for fear of being ostracized.”<sup>xii</sup>

Shaiya said that when he was prescribed bacon as a child in Pittsburgh, his mother took him with her shopping. They ate at a nonkosher diner, where she would order bacon for him, but “she would always lie and say it was something else.”<sup>xiii</sup> As the diner was not kosher, there was no danger of being seen by other Jews from their community.

The bacon story is not an insignificant anecdote that proves that Jewish mothers were emotional, “excessive, overprotective [and] neurotically anxious.”<sup>xiv</sup> Instead, these mothers were independent thinkers, rarely consulting their husbands or rabbis. They rebelled against tradition and used what they believed was a modern scientific way to help their children. The bacon stories show how the lives of Jewish women were changing in twentieth-century North America. They illustrate the tensions between Jewish practice and secular ideas, the power women were gaining to make decisions independently, and the embrace of scientific medicine. The Jewish women who believed in the medicinal power of bacon balanced tradition and modernity and used logic and *treif* to help their children thrive.

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**NANCY PHILLIPS** is a PhD Candidate in History at York University. She is interested in modern Jewish immigration history, Jewish women’s history, and the history of Jewish food and medicine. In the early 1950s, her Jewish mother’s non-Jewish doctor prescribed bacon to her to treat anemia.

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i Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mother* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

ii Rachel, Facebook Messenger interview, December 13, 2019.

iii Barbara, phone interview, April 22, 2022.

iv Robyn, email interview, July 16, 2021.

v Jill, Facebook interview, December 13, 2019.

vi Irving, phone interview, May 13, 2021.

vii Karen, phone interview, October 6, 2021.

viii Rosalind, Zoom interview, June 23, 2022.

ix Robin, email interview, July 16, 2021.

x Robin, email interview.

xi Beth, Facebook interview, December 13, 2021.

xii Pam, phone interview, May 13, 2021.

xiii Shaiya, Facebook Messenger interview, March 19, 2021.

xiv Antler, *You Never Call!*, 2.

# The Original *Yente*: *Yente Telebende* and the *Yidishe Mame's* Long Shadow of Misogyny

Gil Ribak

In one of the earlier appearances (1914) of *Yente Telebende* in the *Forverts* (*Jewish Daily Forward*), *Yente* screams at her husband, Mendel, who is reading the paper: “Mendel you moron! Mendel you fool! What are you sitting—you should sit already in the grave!” *Yente* wants Mendel to take their teenaged, mischievous son, Pine, to see the Simchat Torah *hakofes* (circular processions) at shul. As they arrive in the synagogue, Pine vanishes, and soon after he sticks out his leg and deliberately trips the cantor. During the ensuing commotion, as Pine is being thrown out, *Yente* shouts down to Mendel from the women’s gallery: “Mendel! Mendel! A pain should kill you! Save Pine, they’ll kill him!”<sup>i</sup>

*Yente Telebende* was one of the most successful characters in early twentieth-century American Yiddish culture. From 1913 through the mid-1930s, she appeared in comical sketches by Yiddish humorist B. Kovner (pen name of Yankev Adler) in the *Forverts*. The skits focused on the overbearing and nosy *Yente*, her subdued husband Mendel, and their son Pine. Several highly successful theater productions were based on *Yente* and her family on the Yiddish stage, mostly between 1917–1922. Whereas Kovner used an existing Yiddish term, *yente*, for an old-fashioned woman, he cleverly played with the verb *telebenden zikh*, which literally means to dangle/wobble, yet figuratively, *telebenden zikh in kop* suggests someone who is clueless. With her opinionated tongue-lashing and crude behavior, the name *Yente* soon became an everyday term in American Yiddish, denoting a busybody, old-fashioned, loudmouthed, and vulgar woman, and superseded the similar term *yakhne*.<sup>ii</sup> While scholars pointed to Sophie Tucker’s song “My Yiddishe Momme” (1925) and Gertrude Berg’s *Molly Goldberg* (debuted in 1929) as the origins of the *Yidishe mame*, years before them, *Yente* served as an archetype for subsequent Jewish mothers. Whether in Yiddish or English, whether in literature, theater, or film,

*Yente was the prototype and an adverse pioneer: bossy, meddlesome, manipulative, and pushy.*

*Yente* was the prototype and an adverse pioneer: bossy, meddlesome, manipulative, and pushy.<sup>iii</sup>

Constantly cursing and often brandishing a rolling pin, *Yente's* sketches were read by hundreds of thousands of *Forverts's* readers over the years, and crowds flocked to Yiddish theater productions based on her character in New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Toledo (Ohio), among others. Yiddish audiences adored *Yente*, her family members, and a host of eccentric neighbors, who became household characters in many Jewish homes. Still, critics attacked Kovner as a literary hack who creates *shund* (trash/pulp/schlock) and bastardizes Yiddish, as the Yiddish used by *Yente* and her family was heavily laced with English words; hence the term “yentish Yiddish” came to depict a vulgar type of anglicized Yiddish. Moreover, detractors of the *Forverts* and its longtime editor, Abraham Cahan, used *Yente* as a symbol for all that is wrong with that daily: a 1925 cartoon in the left-leaning satirical Yiddish weekly *Der groyser kundes* (The big stick) showed a caricature by Saul Raskin, where *Yente*, who looks like a female Abraham Cahan, is holding a “yentish spelling” rolling pin, and threatens the Yiddish language (a young woman) with it. The communist newspaper *Morgn frayhayt* (Morning freedom) featured cartoons by William Gropper, which also superimposed Cahan’s face on a Yentish body to convey the *Forverts's* supposedly coarse content and opportunistic politics.



**Vulgarity** (brandishing 'vulgar spelling' rolling pin and speaking highly anglicized Yiddish): 'If he (Ab Kan) tells me to fix you, I'll fix you, all right! You'll really look swell, damn you!' (The *Forward* appointed a committee of its 'own boys' to 'fix Yiddish spelling.' (*Der groyser kundes*, June 19, 1925)

Reprinted from Joshua A. Fishman (ed.). *Never say die!: A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters* (The Hague and New York: Mouton Publishers, 1981), 670.

The critique by Yiddishists and political radicals hardly affected Yente's immense popularity. In many respects, her character laid the foundation for the representation of Jewish mothers for decades to come. To be sure, Kovner devised Yente and other characters that are not just truly hilarious, but also deal with themes of Americanization, gender roles, and intergenerational gaps. At the same time, Kovner introduced a woman whose verbal and physical abuse of her submissive husband, overprotection of her unruly son, nastiness, vulgarity, and ignorance serve

as a prototype to what historian Joyce Antler termed "monster mothers" created by Jewish male writers in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*); and in the 1990s, personified by women such as Sylvia Ray Fine, the mother of *The Nanny's* protagonist, and *Seinfeld's* Estelle, George Constanza's non-Jewish-by-name-only mother.

In this context, it is noteworthy that Yente's creator was a man, and many of the sketches are told by male narrators:

usually by the suffering Mendel, but also other men who had the misfortune of meeting Yente. In one sketch (1915), Yente shows up at the *Forverts's* office and demands to see Kovner so she can beat him up, since he badmouths her. Not realizing that she is talking to Kovner (who narrates the encounter), she still calls him a “monkey face” before proceeding to punch the editor (whom she thinks is Kovner). The fact that Yente is not only the creation of a male author, but that many of the sketches are told/written from a male perspective echoes anthropologist Riv-Ellen Prell’s conclusion about a later period: in literature, mass media, and humor, Jewish male writers, performers, and producers often assigned negative stereotypes to Jewish women, whether mothers, wives, or daughters. While they invented Jewish women—such as Yente Telebende—as the bearers of negative Jewish traits, Jewish men could escape such labeling.

Though beloved by women and men alike, Yente Telebende cast a misogynistic shadow on the representation of Jewish mothers in American culture for years to come. Reflecting anxieties about assimilation and gender roles, many of Yente’s attributes can be seen in subsequent representations of Jewish mothers. Yente’s shadow was cast also in other aspects, such as race. The minor character of Pine’s friend, the “Little Negro”—the only nameless character in Kovner’s sketches—demonstrates the profound effect of contemporaneous American racial vocabulary on popular Yiddish culture.<sup>iv</sup> Behind the smiles and joviality that Kovner intended, Yente Telebende carries a legacy and imagery that present-day society may find difficult to stomach.

**GIL RIBAK** is associate professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Arizona. He is currently working on a book-length study of the representations of Black people in Yiddish culture.

i *Forverts*, October 13, 1914, 4.  
 ii On the meaning of Yente’s name, see Aleksander Harkavy, *Yidish-english-hebreyisher verterbukh* (1928; repr. Amherst, MA: Yiddish Book Center, 1999), 106, 255, 528. Henry Sapoznik, *Klezmer! Jewish Music from Old World to Our World* (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 1999), 84–85.  
 iii Scholars who dealt with the negative sides of the Jewish mother include Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the*

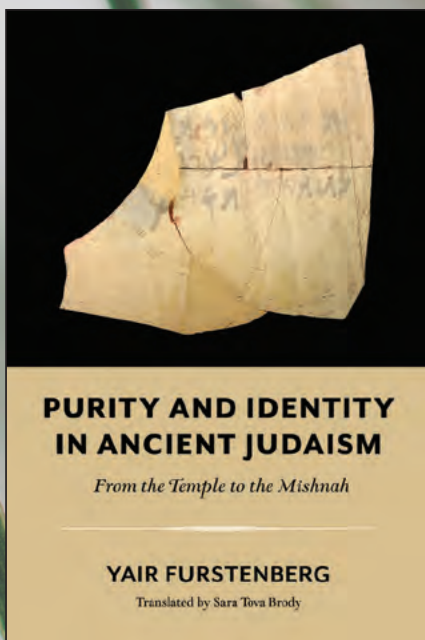
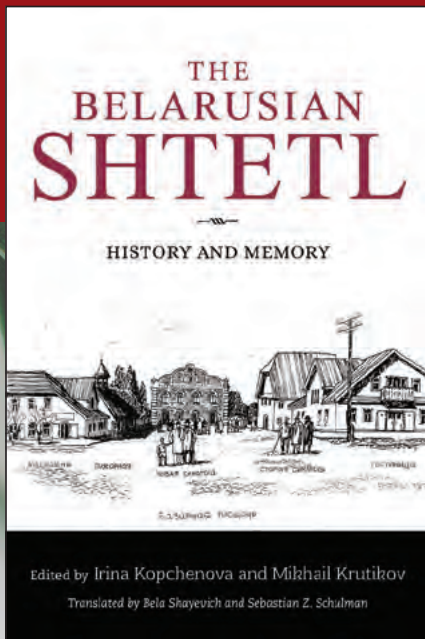


An advertisement to a theater production of Yente Telebende at Harlem’s Lenox Theater, *Yidishes tageblat*, December 1921.

*Jewish Mother* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).  
 iv See Gil Ribak, “My Mom Drank Ink: The ‘Little Negro’ and the Performance of Race in Yente Telebende’s Stage Productions,” *In Geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies* (April 2023), <https://ingeveb.org/articles/race-in-yente-telebende>.



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# Berta R. Golahny's Portraits of Her Mother

Emily Kopley

My mother's cousin Dvorah once wrote a play in which she performed as her grandmother Fannie, who had died when the cousins were under two years old.

Fannie's daughter Berta, the sister of Dvorah's mother, attended a performance. After the show, she said to her niece, "You know, Bubbie Fannie had *excellent* posture. She wasn't stooped at all. And she worked very hard to get rid of her Yiddish accent. And she didn't wear a babushka." Her comments were not only negative; they were *in* the negative. How Fannie really was, she did not put into words. She had already conveyed Fannie in another medium: visual art.

Berta Rosenbaum Golahny (1925–2005)—Birdie, as we all called her—was my maternal grandmother. She was a painter, printmaker, and, occasionally, sculptor, who blended abstraction and realism, often in a single work. In her art, now in private and institutional collections, she expressed a humanistic, utopian impulse instilled by her parents.

Fannie Hencken Rosenbaum (ca. 1891–1953), born in a shtetl outside Vitebsk, arrived in New York as an orphan in 1907 and worked for years in the garment district before marrying a fellow immigrant from eastern Europe and raising three children. In the broad contours of her life she resembled thousands of other Jewish women. But, of course, in the specifics of her life and character she resembled no one. Her many roles included member of the Bund and of the Arbeter Ring, strike organizer, leader of women's *leyenkreyn* in Detroit, and, for her younger daughter Berta, artist's model. Because of this

last role we can discern the individual behind all of her roles—or rather, we can discern how her daughter saw her.

Fannie showed off her excellent posture throughout my childhood. Her reddish-brown head, a painted plaster cast, was a constant in an otherwise temporary living-room exhibition. Birdie would display her recent work on two large easels and a row of S hooks, but this erect head forever challenged me: Could I attain such physical and metaphysical strength? There is nothing like a bust to make someone seem venerated and remote. The hooded holes of eyes added to the effect.

Birdie made the work from life in the summer of 1944. She had returned home after a year at the Art Students League, where she had studied sculpture with Ossip Zadkine. From 1941 until the end of the war, Zadkine was in New York to avoid being the son of a Jewish father in Paris. Still in Europe were many relatives of Birdie's father. After the war, he would learn that two brothers and one sister, along with extended family, had been murdered in the Holocaust. His other sister, with her husband and two daughters, had been in hiding in France and had survived.

The sculpture of Fannie is proud and a little sad. Fannie's neck muscles deny the disappointments of history, but her slightly furrowed brow and stoic mouth betray them. Along with the surety of carriage, the larger-than-life scale gives an impression of a woman firm in her values and herself. Fannie was fifty-three but



Figure 1: Photo of Fannie Rosenbaum with plaster bust of her by Berta R. Golahny, 1944. Photo by Berta R. Golahny (?), from the Golahny/Kopley family archive, Newton, MA. The sculpture is 13.5 in. x 12 in. x 13 in. A single bronze cast was made; both plaster and bronze are in a private collection.



Figure 2: Berta R. Golahny. Conversation: My Mother and Mrs. Kost, 1947. Oil on canvas. 17.5 in. x 24 in. Estate of Berta R. Golahny, Newton, MA. Photo by Amy Golahny

looked older. (Figure 1 shows her posing beside the plaster cast.) The bust's rough texture conveys her weathered skin, especially on the large slabs of cheeks. Three thick ridges frame the head, making of Fannie's short, coarse hair a tipped-back wreath.

Fannie's cultivated American accent cannot be guessed from *Conversation: My Mother and Mrs. Kost* (Figure 2), the only work of Birdie's that depicts her mother speaking. Birdie painted this in late 1947, some months after receiving her BFA from the School of the Art



Figure 3: Berta R. Golahny, *The Human Abstract*, 1990s. Oil on canvas, 30 in. x 30 in. Estate of Berta R. Golahny, Newton, MA. Photo by Aaron Bourque

Institute of Chicago. Birdie's older sister Ida had married David Kost in 1942, before he enlisted. Mrs. Zlote "Lottie" Kost was David's mother. Fannie and Lottie would have spoken in Yiddish; Lottie, too, was from present-day Belarus. Fannie in profile seems to be speaking with conviction, her eyes lost in middle distance, while Lottie listens with boredom mixed with skepticism. Whatever Fannie is saying, her upraised palm offers something that Lottie, with her closed fist pushed into her cheek and her eyebrow raised, is not accepting. It is painfully comic, the gap between earnest telling and reluctant reception. If I were Lottie, I might raise an eyebrow at Fannie's idealism. Decades earlier, Fannie and her husband had formed with friends a group called Land and Freedom and

collectively bought a large piece of land in Florida on which to establish a utopian community. The land turned out to be swampland; they never moved there. The experiment was doomed anyway by incipient infighting. I admire Fannie's plans for a perfectly equitable society, but I lack her trust in the possibility.

Fannie's hair flies free in every photograph and depiction I've seen. I think Birdie saw this choice as consistent with her mother's Americanized accent. In *The Human Abstract* (Figure 3), painted in the 1990s, Birdie contrasts her mother as she knew her with someone like her mother at Ellis Island. The young woman wears a babushka.

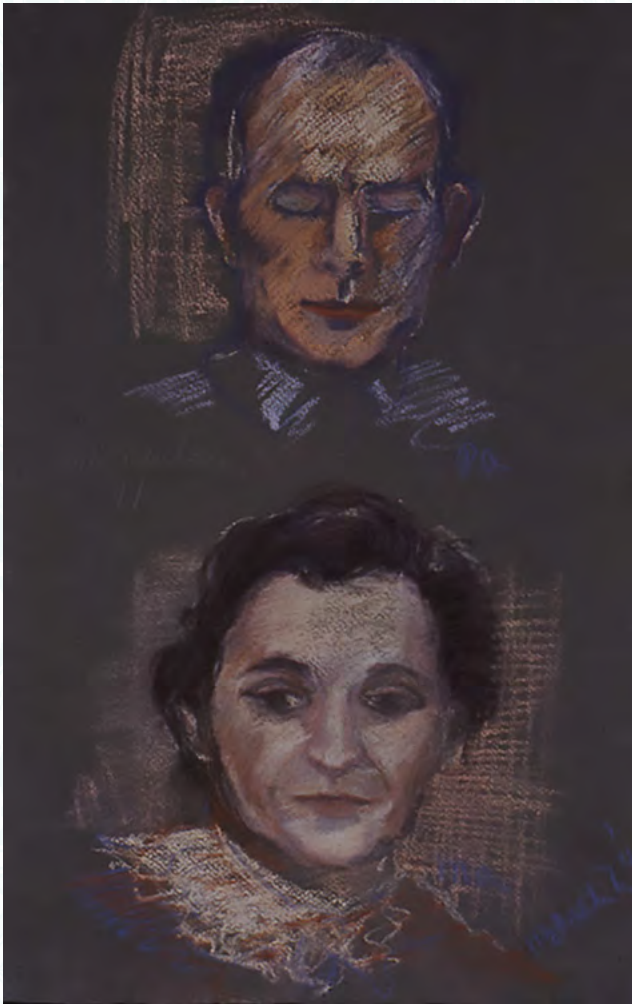


Figure 4: Berta R. Golahny, *My Parents*, 1944. Charcoal. 40 in. x 20 in. Estate of Berta R. Golahny, Newton, MA. Photo by Yuda Golahny



Figure 5: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "Young Russian Jewess at Ellis Island, 1905." The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1905. [digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e85-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99](https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e85-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99).

Birdie wrote about the genesis of this piece. "While organizing some of my early work I found a long forgotten charcoal of my mother (1944). I responded to the emotional impact of the soft, fully modeled features in the drawing by starting a new canvas with a painted version of the drawing in the center." Probably Birdie refers to the charcoal *My Parents* (Figure 4), but she trades the bright, focused eyes of the charcoal for the holes of the bust.

She goes on, "As the painting progressed I recalled a photograph that I had loved since I first saw it in *America & Lewis Hine, Photographs 1904-1940*, published by the

Brooklyn Museum with Aperture, 1977. It is *Young Russian Jewess at Ellis Island, 1905* [Figure 5]. (My mother emigrated to the US at this time.) I painted the head in the lower left of the canvas. Many smaller heads in various colors and stages of abstraction surround the central head and are symbolic of my mother's all-embracing love for people."<sup>i</sup>

Though she faulted Dvorah for portraying Fannie as a stereotypical Russian grandmother, here Birdie, too, portrays Fannie as a type, though one truer to life. Freydl Hencken was a young Russian Jewess at Ellis Island, 1907.

*Like the word “mother,” all portraits, too, exceed their subject, even as our highest praise of such a work is to say that it “captures the person.”*

Birdie was twenty-eight when Fannie died. Most of her depictions of her mother are by a young woman going out into the world, honoring what she leaves behind.<sup>ii</sup> But in this late painting, she considers what her mother saw when she left her own home behind.

The bright color, thin application of paint, and fine lines are characteristic of Birdie’s mature painting style. The title, too, *The Human Abstract*, is characteristic: Birdie repeatedly borrowed the name of Blake’s poem for her own works.<sup>iii</sup> The phrase unites the representational with the not so, and the individual with the universal. It is a good phrase for a painting of one’s mother. The tension between the singular and the general is inherent in our vocabulary: my “Ma,” my “Mom,” my “Mama.” Some of Birdie’s work on Fannie is titled *Mother*. This is what Birdie called her, but it also renders her another type. Without the possessive “my,” the artist’s mother becomes all Jewish mothers, all unstooped mothers, all idealistic mothers, all immigrant mothers, all mothers.

Like the word “mother,” all portraits, too, exceed their subject, even as our highest praise of such a work is to

say that it “captures the person.” The portraits of Fannie by her daughter capture the person even as they imply a larger pattern of which the person is a part.

**EMILY KOPLEY** is course lecturer in Jewish Studies at McGill University. She is the author of *Berta Golahny: The Human Abstract (2018)*, and *Virginia Woolf and Poetry (Oxford University Press, 2021)*.

i “Notes on Paintings,” WordPerfect document. Last modified January 27, 2003.

ii Exemplifying this perspective is *Self Portrait with Parents* (1949), discussed in Abigail MacGibeny’s “States of Being: Berta R. Golahny’s *Landscape of Man*,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 39, no.2 (Fall/Winter 2018): 22–33.

iii *Berta Golahny: The Human Abstract* is the title my mother, Amy Golahny, and I gave to a 2018 retrospective at Lycoming College, in Williamsport, PA. A PDF of the exhibition catalogue is available online at <https://www.golahny.org/resources/bertha-golahny-the-human-abstract>.

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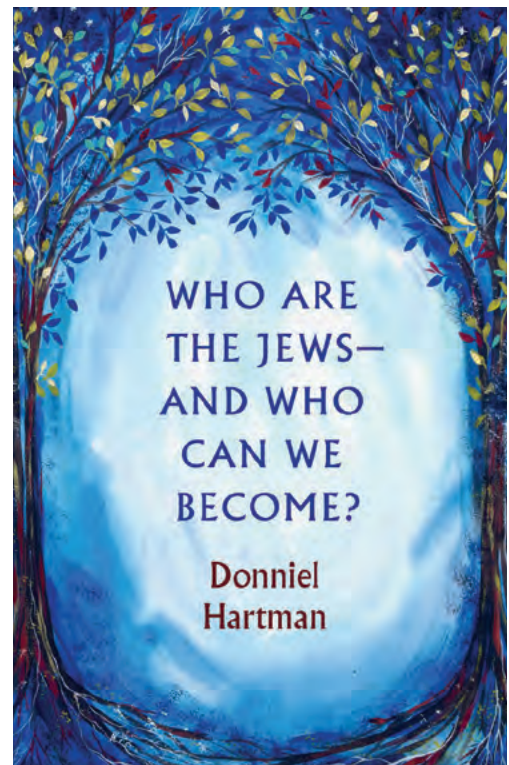
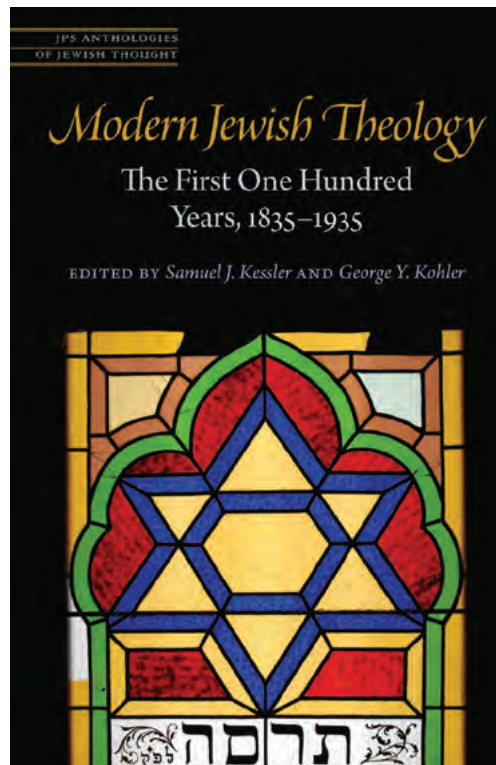
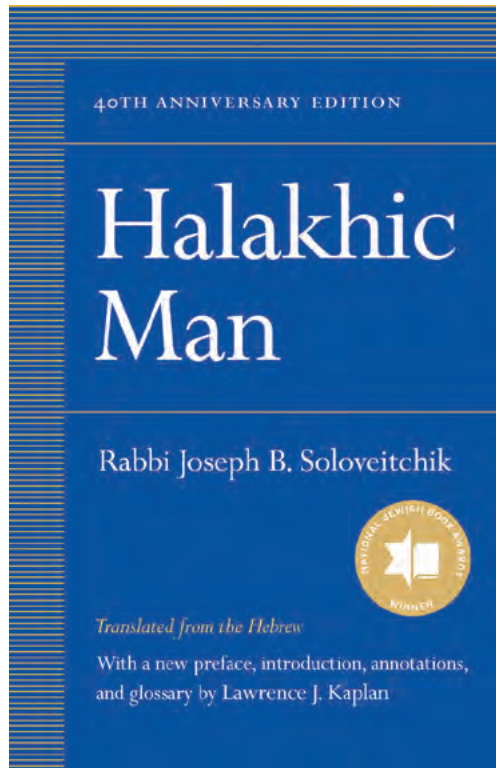
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*Antisemitic cartoon from Kurt Plischke's Jew as Race Defiler, collection of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

## My Fat Jewish Mother Problem (and Yours)

Jennifer Glaser

My grandmother Sylvia churned on the living room sofa, her brain a spaghetti of misfiring neurons as the amphetamines leached from her system. She would never have applied the word “addict” to herself, but her attempt to get off the diet pills the doctor had so readily prescribed to her was not unlike what any drug addict in withdrawal might experience. My mother and her brother played with the antennae of the television set, trying to drown out the alternating currents of confusion and worry they felt as their mother went through her then-unnamed sickness. As I was growing up, my mother would tell me these stories about her beloved mother as a warning against the perils of diet culture, but her admonitions were often undermined by the fears about fatness that were so central to my mother’s and grandmother’s lives.

Grandma Sylvia wasn’t the only person to get hooked on amphetamine-based diet pills during the 1960s. Doctors handed them out in fistfuls. Andy Warhol was purportedly a big fan of Obetrol, a popular diet pill brand sold during

the era. Jacqueline Susann immortalized weight-loss medication in *Valley of the Dolls* (1967). The actresses at the center of the Jewish writer’s novel were dependent on their two types of “dolls”—the diet pill “uppers” they used to stay trim and the sedatives they needed to come down from the high caused by the diet pills. If nothing else, my grandmother was on trend.

However, I have long wondered about my grandmother’s addiction to diet pills as a young mother, her deep ambivalence about her body, and its connection to her Jewishness. By the time I met her, she was postmenopausal, our beloved family matriarch, seemingly unafraid of anything. In our smallish upstate New York town, she was known (in no particular order) for: dying her thick pelt of Russian hair a color somewhere between magenta and fuchsia; filling her omnipresent handbag with contraband Sweet-N-Lows from the local diner; cursing at her sisters and extended family in Yiddish; offering vocal support to her many gay male friends during the height of the AIDS



*To truly acculturate—perhaps to be truly white—a Jewish woman must tame not only herself and her own unruly body, but that of her daughter and her daughter’s daughter.*

epidemic; and loving her children and grandchildren with unrestrained fervor. She was sex-positive before that was a thing. She loved to lower her haunches onto a mall bench next to a stranger and ask about their personal life. In a word, she was fabulous, far cooler and more unabashed in her daily existence than I will ever be.

She was also—as she often reminded us—fat. Her belly swelled under her colorful patterned blouses and pleated polyester pants. She would often fumble her hands over her body in frustration before we went out to a restaurant, tugging at her clothing to fit better. She hid chocolate throughout her apartment so as to avoid being admonished by her sisters or my mother for overeating. Her cheeks reddened with delight whenever she was complimented on having lost a little bit of weight. Despite my grandmother’s charisma and love for life, her fatness—or, perhaps, her desire not to be fat—seemed to trump all for her.

As Abby Gondek makes clear in her writing about Jewish identity, gender, and fatness, this desire is deeply connected to Jewishness. The fat Jewish woman’s body is often associated with racial and class-marked Otherness. To truly acculturate—perhaps to be truly white—a Jewish woman must tame not only herself and her own unruly body, but that of her daughter and her daughter’s daughter. If she is unsuccessful at this disciplining of the self, she feels disgust—and that disgust, like the diseases that many antisemitic critics perceived as characteristically Jewish, was contagious, carried from mother to daughter across generations.

My grandmother’s sister, Ruthie, was considered the family beauty—the sister to beat, the true American. She had honey-colored ringlets and a small, curvy body. My grandmother and her sister adored one another, but it was obvious that Sylvia compared herself unfavorably to her sister. For Ruthie, as for many Jewish women, being thin and conventionally attractive opened up a portal into

the middle class. It meant you could marry the son of a successful local business owner, as Ruthie did, and buy a sprawling ranch house with a plastic-cloaked, formal living room and a den, as Ruthie did. It meant your own children might move even further up the food chain and away from their familial origins in the place you still called “Russia-Poland,” emerging from your womb with straight, blonde hair, a small waist, and an ironclad grip on the libidos of every boy in their class, as Ruthie’s daughter did.

My mother, in contrast, was, like her mother before her, fat. My mom and her brother were preoccupied with their childhood photographs—how terrible and overweight they thought they looked in their postwar kids’ leisure pursuits.

“Ugh. Look at my cheeks in this picture,” my Uncle Joey would say, pointing at his little-boy face under the cowboy hat he was wearing in one shot.

“That’s nothing. Why did Mommy let my hair get frizzy like that? It only made me look chubbier,” my mom would say, while pointing out her hairdo under a Girl Scouts’ beret.

It was confusing. My mother, like my grandmother, was irreverent, brilliant, beautiful—a creature of bright lipstick and overflowing empathy. Why did she not see herself like I saw her? And, what did it mean about me if I not only loved my mother, but also looked like her? My body, as it grew, was fat, too—filled with too much love and french fries. I was a mama’s girl, predestined to cling to my mother-host like a vestigial tail.

How do depictions of the wild and unruly body of the Jewish mother reinforce ideas about overbearing Jewish mamas and castrating Jewish wives—like those Joyce Antler identifies in the fiction of mid-century Jewish American writers? How do issues of class, race, gender, and failed acculturation adhere to the fat Jewish mother like so much adipose flesh? Is there a particular genealogy of fatness and weight-loss culture for Jewish women and



*"Kosher Bather," Antisemitic postcard from the collection of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

*I never entirely wanted to leave home and the bodies of my maternal forebears behind.*

As Antler points out, so many representations of the Jewish mother are from the perspective of the prodigal son. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, Alexander Portnoy struggles with the omnipresence of his mother, whom he sees in every one of his teachers. She is overlarge and contains multitudes. She is in love with her son, whom she castrates. When we see Jewish mothers and daughters in fiction—like Melissa Broder's recent, brilliant *Milk Fed*, the Jewish mother's job is to police her daughter's body—make it smaller, less racialized, less Jewish, less Other. What else should a good mother do when she sees her daughter's body expand beyond what is considered desirable? After all, her job is to ensure that her child is safe—and what could be more dangerous than rejecting one's place in the economy of desire? A mother's job is to teach her daughter to shrink.

But, I never shrunk. I am the antithesis of a Rothian antihero, shrugging off the mantle of Jewish familial love for the rugged individualism of the artist's life. I am drowning in love for my daughter and my now-dead mother and grandmother. Love pours out of my nose and mouth and seeps into the carpet. I was lucky—or, perhaps, unlucky. My grandmother and mother loved my body more than they loved their own—they sang feminist anthems as they washed my hair and wrapped me in towels as they doled out compliments about my beauty and brains. Their love for me made me expand like a balloon. Even though I knew I was supposed to hate my fat Jewish body, they made it hard for me to feel disgust for an object they so loved. They have left an ambivalent inheritance, but it is one I'll gladly grapple with in order to continue to feel the embrace of their untamable bodies.

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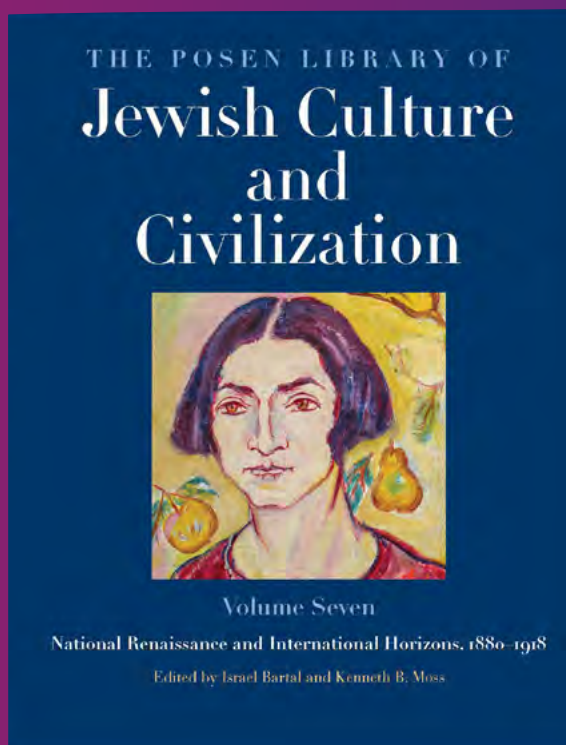
**JENNIFER GLASER** is associate professor of English and affiliate faculty in Judaic Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Cincinnati. She is the author of *Borrowed Voices: Writing and Racial Ventriloquism in the Jewish American Literary Imagination* (Rutgers University Press, 2016).

their mothers? Like my mother and grandmother before me, I am a fat Jewish woman (and mother to a daughter). The ambivalent figure of the fat Jewish mother continues to haunt Jewish media, as well as the daily lives of Jewish American women.

Certainly, they haunt me—my mother and grandmother, that is. What was/am I supposed to do with these fat women—my fat grandmother, my fat mother, (and now) my fat me? I have always understood what I was meant to do: "kill" them by way of denying my love for them and their loose upper arms and warm, distended bellies. I was supposed to trade my chubby childhood form—part of what linked me to them like paper dolls in a long chain—for a slender, sexualized body. I needed to emerge as if from a Jewish chrysalis of fat into American teenagerdom. But, I never had it in me, so to speak. I never entirely wanted to leave home and the bodies of my maternal forebears behind.

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# Ritual and Childcare, Time and Place: A Feminist Abuts the *Mitzvot 'Aseh She-Ha- Zman Grama*

Ilana Webster-Kogen

“Women, slaves, and minors are exempt from the recitation of Shema and from phylacteries, but are obligated in prayer, mezuzah and grace after meals.” (Mishnah Berakhot 3:3)

I resented this passage from the Mishnah as a young feminist. It was a key text used to exclude me from the rituals I wished to describe in detail as an ethnographer since, in an Orthodox service at least, I couldn't be counted in a minyan (prayer quorum) or chant from the Torah scroll. The *mitzvot 'aseh she-ha-zman grama* (positive time-bound commandments) are enumerated by the rabbis as required of men but not of women, meaning that women traditionally cannot fulfill a man's obligation and therefore cannot participate in synagogue life in a substantive ritual way. Over several decades of adulthood, any religious feminist's relationship with this conceptual framing of halakhah (Jewish law) might evolve, and new interpretations might be tied to the domestic responsibilities that inspired their framing. This essay explores one particular way that becoming a mother affects one's relationship to halakhah.

## Phase 1: Denial

As a college student majoring in Talmud and focusing on feminist readings of ancient texts, I was periodically invited to speak to religious campus groups about what the Mishnah had to say about the debates over egalitarianism that animated campus religious life in the 1990s and early 2000s. Having worked with some prominent second-wave feminists, I was prepared to answer that the exclusion of women from being counted in a minyan was obsolete in the case of women who took on the responsibility (*hiyuv*) of prayer and its accouterments. Feminist Talmud scholars interpreted the framework of ritual

responsibility being exclusively male as an anachronism, made obsolete by the entry of women into the workforce as equal economic partners to their husbands who themselves now engage in child-rearing activities. These feminist scholars argued that exemption is not the same as prohibition, and remind us of progressive scholars through the ages (most notably Rashi, whose daughters were ritually active in eleventh-century France). These talks were usually well received, in part because they were full of Talmudic references, and pushback usually came from individuals who argued that halakhah is non-negotiable. As I remember the audiences from those talks, I recall a lot of young people, and certainly not any parents of small children, who I only now know do not have time to attend talks as a leisure activity. My education in text and halakhah was part of a professional development that was untethered to any domestic responsibilities, and that shaped my interpretation of those texts.

## Phase 2: Bargaining

In 2019, I was launching a new project after my first book was published, and I was interviewing all the rabbis I could about Sephardic Torah chanting. On one occasion, it was impossible to secure childcare, and I brought my ten-month-old baby Leah with me. “I'm a professional. I can still do my work during school breaks,” was my internal reasoning when I went ahead with the interview. Who knew if a rescheduled meeting would ever happen; it had to go forward. Leah behaved absolutely as well as a baby can be expected to behave under these conditions, and the interview had so much good material that it made it into an article within months. About a year later, I was finalizing the article and I listened to the recording with great attention. About forty minutes in, my interviewee conveyed a piece of information that I had not heard the first time because I was silencing a wriggling baby. But what he was describing was a ritual that I described in detail in the article and had gone to some length to lament wasn't brought up in my interviews. Equal parts crushed and exhilarated, I wondered how much more was out there—extremely valuable information that I missed because I hadn't heard it the first time, or because I was otherwise engaged in childcare. “I can still do good research if I juggle well enough” might have been a workable mantra prepandemic, but such a mantra demands that the tasks of motherhood be delayed (*lo' ha-zman grama*, as the rabbis put it).

## Phase 3: Despair (Acceptance)

Summer 2023. I am very busy at work, and I struggle to manage exams, conferences, and writing alongside school pick-up. My (male) PhD student approaches me with the proposal that he spend Yom Tov at my field site, but he is met with an auto-reply along the lines of "As a general guideline, I can take on any additional responsibilities that do not require my being at a certain place at a certain time." I am happy to offer advice because he has a great attitude, and I send him a list of the best synagogues to go to. He sets his expectations low; after all, he hasn't studied any of the three research languages that facilitated my work there. Yet he returns from his two-week trip with more interviews secured than I had accumulated in the project's four years, in part because sitting behind the *mehitzah* (ritual barrier) gave me less access to interviewees (also partly because I often had to leave early to relieve a babysitter). In moments of professional despair, when I wonder if I will ever again be able to complete a task to my own satisfaction, I try to reassure myself that the rabbis ordered us not to take on too many additional responsibilities while our children were small.

Jewish millennial mothers and scholars come of age with the concept of the "second shift" already well theorized—work is followed by domestic duties ... and more work—but the concept of the *mitzvot 'aseh she-ha-zman grama* (positive time-bound commandments) problematizes these responsibilities ritually. Ordered ritually to rest, the Jewish mother spends Shabbat washing dishes; asked not to take on too many extra responsibilities, the Jewish mother is banned from spaces of spiritual fulfillment. This category of *mitzvot* (commandments) establishes for Jewish mothers a hierarchy of labor and access that my younger self interpreted as disadvantaging women, but it also offers a more forgiving view of the second shift to mothers with small children. For a Jewish feminist who becomes a mother, reading the intentions of the rabbis into twenty-first-century challenges can offer a less alienating view of halakhah.

**ILANA WEBSTER-KOGEN** is the Joe Loss Reader in Jewish Music at SOAS University of London, and visiting associate professor of Music at Yale University's Institute for Sacred Music. She is mother of two.

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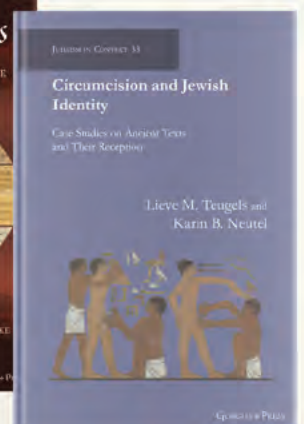
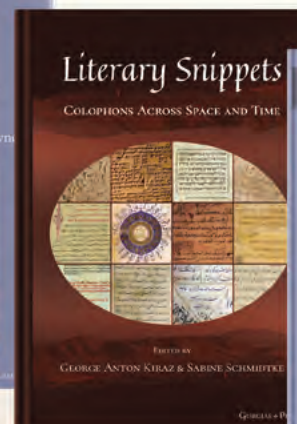
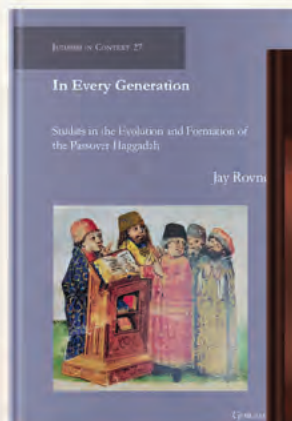
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# Motherhood as Metaphor: The Jewish Mother as Stand-Up Comedian

Grace Kessler Overbeke

After several years as an academic studying the comedic figure of the “Jewish Mother,” I took a more embodied approach: I became one. In March of 2020, I gave birth to my first child. And that is when I truly learned that Jewish motherhood is not just a popular *subject* of comedy, it is also a major obstacle to pursuing it. Of course, I had been aware that the task of juggling parenthood with any career was a challenge. But what I had not fully understood was how the lifestyle of a stand-up comic in particular was incompatible with the demands of motherhood. Before the birth of my son, I had enjoyed performing amateur stand-up comedy. Whether in Brooklyn coffee houses, downtown dives in Cleveland, bars in Portland, or queer clubs in Durham, I loved the thrill of connection that came from making a stranger laugh. While taking stand-up classes at Second City in Chicago, I went to open mics, arriving early to get a place on the sign-up sheet, then waiting until wee hours of the morning for five minutes to try out material on an audience composed mainly of the unfortunate comics whose time slot was after my own. I even did stand-up when seven months pregnant. However, as a mother, it became abundantly clear to me that the nomadic life of a stand-up—without job security, stable wages, or paid time off—was too dire a prospect.

My shift in positionality sparked a curiosity to revisit the subject of Jewish motherhood in stand-up comedy, to better understand how some of the most successful Jewish female stand-up comedians have tackled, avoided, or otherwise engaged in motherhood. My historiography and performance analysis have shown motherhood figuring in stand-up comedy in three main ways: as an obstacle (to a career in comedy), an object of comedy (i.e., joke fodder), and finally, as a metaphor to rethink the way that a stand-up comedian must care for her audience.<sup>i</sup> It is this final paradigm—the metaphor of the Jewish mother as stand-up comedian—that this essay considers.

*Newborns—like stand-up audiences—are mercurial and demanding entities, whose needs shift as they move from hunger to pain to drowsiness in a matter of minutes.*

In *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, John Limon analyzes the work of Lenny Bruce to theorize the stand-up comedian as “the resurrection of your father as your child.” Like the father, “the comedian works from above his audience, in the sense that he’s standing, and they are seated. He looks down upon them as upon children, and lectures them.”<sup>ii</sup> However, like the son to his father, the comedian desperately craves—even requires—the approval of the audience. In this Freudian mode, Limon also conceptualizes the microphone as an erect phallus, a view supported by several other scholars examining stand-up comedy.<sup>iii</sup> These oft-quoted metaphors of fathers and phalluses reinforce the pervasive, pernicious myth that stand-up is an essentially masculine form. They also beckon exploration of an alternative metaphor: the stand-up comedian as a mother figure.

The use of motherhood as a metaphor for stand-up comedy is nothing new to Jewish women stand-up comics, as they have made clear in interviews. For instance, when discussing her work as a stand-up, Jewish comic and mother Cory Kahaney emphasizes the task of anticipating and attending to the audience’s needs, asserting, “The whole thing still comes down to caretaking—the woman has to take care of her



*The author performing stand-up comedy. Courtesy of the author*

audience.”<sup>iv</sup> Likewise, in *Expecting Amy*—Amy Schumer’s documentary charting the complications of doing stand-up while being a pregnant woman preparing for motherhood—Schumer likens her prioritization of her audience over herself to a parent’s prioritization of their children, “I can always perform ... I can compartmentalize what’s going on with me, physically and emotionally. I would imagine that it’s a lot like what having kids is like. Whatever you’re going through, you’ve got to be strong for your kids. Let those emotions in after, but this is *their* time. This is the audience’s time. And I’m here. And I’m doing it. And I’m doing the best I can.”<sup>v</sup> Schumer’s reflection reads like a more grounded, realistic version of the stereotypical Jewish mother’s self-denying devotion to her children. A stand-up comedian, like the stereotypical Jewish mother, cedes her time and proffers her labor, doing the best she can.

Returning to my own experience navigating Jewish motherhood, I was immediately struck by the parallels between performing stand-up and caring for my son. Newborns—like stand-up audiences—are mercurial and

demanding entities, whose needs shift as they move from hunger to pain to drowsiness in a matter of minutes. Caring for my son required a moment-to-moment attentiveness that was not unlike “reading a room,” scanning an audience for signs of grins or glazing eyes. The stand-up audience is unparalleled in its demand for constant stimulation. Unlike most genres of performance, stand-up requires audible displays of engagement from its audience on a second-to-second basis. “Laughs per minute” has been a common metric since the days when vaudeville bookers paid by the joke.<sup>vi</sup> Today it is the keystone of popular software programs like “Comedy Evaluator Pro,” which measures the ratio of a comic’s stage time to the audience’s laughter.<sup>vii</sup> In order to be satisfied, the stand-up audience must be, if not laughing out loud, at least engaged, roughly every seven seconds.<sup>viii</sup> It is an extraordinary and perhaps unreasonable request.

And yet the Jewish mother stereotype is founded on her willingness to accommodate even her child’s most unreasonable entreaty. Take, for example, the following

## The larger-than-life caricature of the Jewish mother ... is the bizarre but bashert metaphor for the stand-up comedian.

eastern European joke, “A Jewish young man asks his mother for her heart which his fiancée has demanded as a pre-requisite for marriage. The mother gladly accedes to this unusual request so that her son will be happy. Having torn his mother’s heart out, the boy is rushing back to show it to his bride-to-be. On the way, he stumbles and both he and the heart fall to the ground, whereupon the heart asks, ‘Did you hurt yourself, my son?’”<sup>ix</sup> The stereotype of the Jewish mother devotes her considerable energy and ferocious dedication to her children with the same zealotry that the comedian devotes herself to her audience. She is their caretaker, determined to anticipate and meet their demands, no matter how capricious they may be. Even—perhaps especially—when those demands require self-sacrifice. Paradoxically, at the same time, the stereotype of the Jewish mother is domineering; a *balabusta*<sup>x</sup> and force to be reckoned with. The stand-up comedian embodies that same paradox—dependent on her audience, and yet still in a position of power. She holds the stage. Hers is the amplified voice, hers is the elevated body. The same signifiers of power and authority that Limon read as “fatherly” could just as easily be read as “motherly.”

Perhaps the ongoing obstacles that face a woman attempting to balance the itinerant, unstable career of a stand-up with the all-encompassing demands of motherhood require a devotion of cartoonish proportions. The silver lining is that someone facing the incongruity between the expectation of total devotion to one’s children and the reality of motherhood will never be at a loss for comedy material. It may be that the larger-than-life caricature of the Jewish mother, with her endless well of self-sacrifice and never-ending caretaking, is the bizarre but bashert metaphor for the stand-up comedian.

**GRACE KESSLER OVERBEKE** is assistant professor of Theatre at Columbia College Chicago. She is writing a monograph about Jean Carroll, the first Jewish woman stand-up comedian with New York University Press entitled, *The First Lady of Laughs*.

- i This mode of thinking is indebted to a collaboration with Eleanor Russell and Krista Pozsonyi on our panel *Rethinking Motherhood: Stand-Up Comedy In/As the Performance of Care* for the annual conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education in 2021.
- ii John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 27.
- iii Philip Auslander, “Brought to You by Fem-Rage: Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender,” in *Acting Out: Feminist Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Ian Brodie, *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014).
- iv Corey Kahaney, personal interview, 2018.
- v *Expecting Amy*, documentary (It’s So Easy Productions, 2020).
- vi Allison McCracken, “Study of a Mad Housewife: Psychiatric Discourse, the Suburban Home, and the Case of Gracie Allen,” in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumim (London: Tauris, 2002).
- vii “Comedy Evaluator Pro – The Ultimate Evaluation Software For Comedians,” accessed January 24, 2019, <https://www.comedyevaluatorpro.com/>.
- viii *I Am Comic* (Monterey Video, 2010).
- ix Alan Dundes, “The J. A. P. and the J. A. M. in American Jokelore,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 98, no. 390 (1985): 459.
- x Yiddish for “homemaker,” with connotations of “boss.”

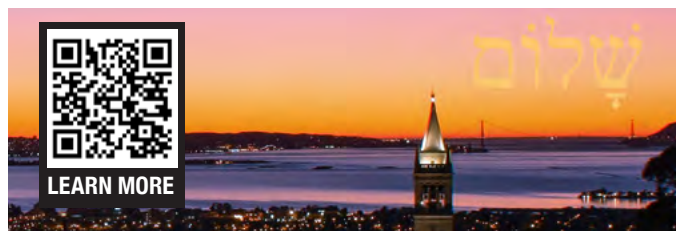
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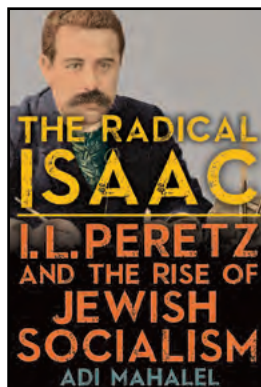
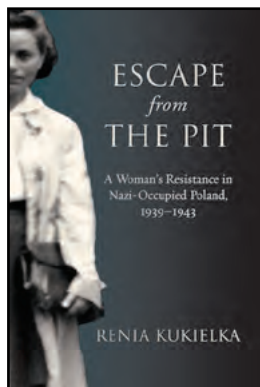
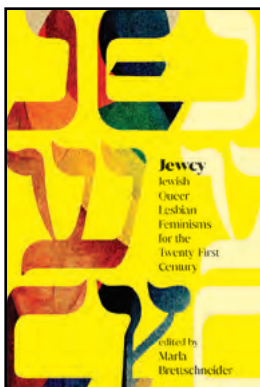


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# Mothers and Motherhood in Jewish History and Culture: A Teaching Reflection

Jessica Kirzane and Elena Hoffenberg

“Mothers and Motherhood in Modern Jewish Culture(s)” was a course pioneered in Spring 2022 at the University of Chicago, designed and taught by Jessica Kirzane, assistant instructional professor in Yiddish, with Elena Hoffenberg serving as a graduate teaching intern. The aim was to teach about experiences of mothers and mothering together with, alongside, and against, the stereotype of the Jewish mother, as well as to open up conversations about the concept of motherhood itself. A year later, Elena and Jessica sat down together to reflect on the course, in preparation for teaching it again in coming years. We asked ourselves: What does it mean to teach about motherhood as a mother and as not-a-mother? What do students—undergraduates at a private university, themselves not so far away from the experience of being mothered—bring to the conversation? What possibilities were opened up by incorporating stereotypical representations of Jewish mothers, but not centering only those representations?

## **Elena: How did you conceive of this class?**

**Jessica:** In the winter of 2020, while I was in COVID lockdown with two young children, I was asked to plan a course in our Jewish Civilizations sequence. The third quarter of this sequence is an “instructor’s choice” meant to teach a broad topic within the rubric of modern Jewish culture, relying on primary source texts. At the time I was so deeply overwhelmed with the realities of COVID mothering, with the way that my personal and professional life were happening constantly and in the same place, in a kind of surplus of anxiety and work. Motherhood was all I could think about, so motherhood was the class I decided to plan. It was really my own desperation that initially led me to ask the question, “What if I just taught about what is most immediate to me right now? What if I just taught about mothers?”

By the time Spring 2022 arrived and we were back to in-person teaching, with my kids back in school, I was in a very different place. I was able to think beyond my own experience to consider varieties of conceptions of mothers and motherhood across time and circumstance.

At that point I began to understand that teaching about motherhood wasn’t solipsism—that motherhood was a central experience of modern Jewish culture(s) and an access point for a variety of issues central to Jewish life.

## **Jessica: What excited you about the class? Why did you want to be part of teaching it?**

**Elena:** I was at a different point as you were developing the course (I started a PhD program in Fall 2020 and I am not a parent) but I saw how the pandemic intensified focus on home, work, and their relationship. I was thrilled to have a chance to gain teaching experience in a class so close to my own research interests in family-making in times of crisis and, as a PhD student whose other training was largely in history, to learn about teaching by working with a scholar of literature like yourself. I saw this in the discussion in the classroom itself, as well as the selection of material on the syllabus.

## **Elena: How did you decide what to include? How did the course’s structure frame motherhood?**

**Jessica:** I began by making a list of texts and topics I wanted to cover, and by reading Joyce Antler’s pivotal book on the subject, *You Never Call! You Never Write!* but I very soon took to crowdsourcing. I did this in a number of places; one of the most productive was the Jewish Academic Moms group on Facebook.

The most obvious place to start in such a course might be to think about Jewish mother jokes and stereotypes. However, I felt strongly about not starting or ending there. I couldn’t ignore that aspect of Jewish motherhood, but I didn’t want to give these stereotypes pride of place. I wanted to first present other questions: we explored experiences of pregnancy in Haredi contexts, using Michal Raucher’s *Conceiving Agency*; we talked about debates about Progressive-Era “scientific motherhood” and about various points of medical authority in colonial contexts using the work of Richard Parks; we had conversations about who has power over women’s bodies and reproductive lives. We used literature and oral histories to talk about the pressures on

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Flyer for the Brownsville Birth Control Clinic, with translation in Yiddish by Fania Mindell, c. 1916. From the Margaret Sanger Papers, Smith College Special Collections. The authors would like to acknowledge Cassandra Euphrat Weston for directing them to this image.

mothers in various workplaces—mothers on the bimah, mothers who are writers, mothers who are factory workers, mothers who work as mothers in the home with varying feelings of success or satisfaction. Only later did we talk about stereotypes and when we did it was through a more critical lens, having already been introduced to a variety of Jewish mothers who did not align with those stereotypes. When it came time to explore the stereotypes, we looked at them in a historical context: How did we get from the sentimental Jewish mother of Gertrude Berg to the grotesque Jewish mother

of Bruce Jay Friedman? And where do these mothers fit into our conceptions today?

Then I felt it was important to open up the conversation back out, rather than ending with these stereotypes. We went through a unit on motherhood and trauma, looking at Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* alongside Chava Rosenfarb's "Little Red Bird" and the Israeli film *Summer of Aviya*, and we talked about the traumatized mother as another figure that has been subject to generalizations, alongside the nurturing *Yidische mame* and the

*The class provided students with new ways to approach the meaning of motherhood, starting with their own mothers.*

overbearing Jewish mother. We also looked at Margarita Khemlin's novel *Klotsvog*, with the help of guest speaker Sasha Senderovich, taking our conversations about trauma to a postwar Soviet context that was less familiar to students. We then shifted, with the help of Sheila Heti's *Motherhood*, to a conversation about the decision to become a mother, or not to become a mother, and the way it's embedded in social pressures such as the "continuity crisis." We ended with Mara Benjamin's *The Obligated Self*, asking about how the practical experiences and concerns of Jewish motherhood we had explored might be grounds for thinking about not just mothers themselves, but how we conceive of the world and humans' place in it.

**Jessica: From your perspective, what was successful about the course?**

**Elena:** As you've already underscored, the class took an expansive approach to motherhood—it was not just about stereotypical Jewish mothers—which was an important part of the course's success in theory and in practice. The class session on abortion, in particular, demonstrated the payoff of the varied approaches to motherhood and its meanings, in addition to emphasizing just how relevant these matters are. When, in the middle of the term, the Dobbs decision was leaked and reproductive rights in the United States shifted, I was glad that we could respond in a way that built on other texts in the course. Discussions of reproductive health and decision-making had already come up in the context of surrogacy, colonialism, and reforms of motherhood, but this class discussion demonstrated how studying motherhood in different times and places could also help to understand its meaning in contemporary America. Indeed, some of the discussion was quite close to home, since we watched a film about the Jane Collective, some of whose founding members were University of Chicago students at the time they started providing access to abortions.

**Elena: What was surprising about the class?**

**Jessica:** One thing that really surprised me was how many students showed up for the class! It was fully enrolled, and half of the students were male-identifying. I found this very gratifying and I was personally very moved to be thinking, with compassion and intellectual seriousness, about the topic of Jewish motherhood with a room full of people who are not mothers.

**Jessica: What do you think students took away from the course?**

**Elena:** The final projects gave us some insight into what students felt was most important or interesting from the course. While students had the option to write a traditional research paper, the "Un-Essay" final assignment meant that students could engage with the concepts and questions of the course in any format they chose accompanied by a brief introduction. We received a recording of a choreographed dance performance thematizing the relationship between child and mother; a children's book about interfaith family responding to a book chapter we had read about mothers in Jewish children's literature; an epistolary map imagining a discussion between Emma Goldman, Rosa Luxemburg, and Puhah Rakovsky about the choice to become a mother, to give just a few examples. Although there was no instruction to interview one's own mother, many students decided to engage with their own mother as a part of this final project: a student baked a family recipe, another watched the Nichols and May sketch from the syllabus together with their own mother. This suggests that the class provided students with new ways to approach the meaning of motherhood, starting with their own mothers.

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**JESSICA KIRZANE** is assistant instructional professor in *Yiddish at the University of Chicago* and editor-in-chief of *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*. She is the translator of three works by Miriam Karpilove: *Diary of a Lonely Girl*, or *the Battle against Free Love*; *Judith*; and *A Provincial Newspaper and Other Stories*.

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**ELENA HOFFENBERG** is a PhD candidate in *Modern Jewish History at the University of Chicago*. Her dissertation traces the interrelationship of markets and marriage and of careers and childbearing against a backdrop of cultural, social, and economic change for the Jews of Poland between the First and Second World Wars.

# Teaching Motherhood: A Reflection

Sari Fein

In approximately the fifth through seventh centuries CE, a distinctive phenomenon emerged in late antique Babylonia: the creation of Jewish “magic bowls” made of clay, inscribed on their interior with an incantation and sometimes an illustration, most often beseeching the divine for favors relating to health or sexuality.<sup>1</sup> These bowls offer a surprising wealth of information on women’s lives, who frequently commissioned bowls from ritual practitioners in the hopes that burying the bowls under the threshold of their homes would help them conceive, give birth successfully, and protect their babies and children from danger.

A millennium and a half later, and half a world away in the sculpture studio at Smith College in Northampton, MA, another ritual practitioner slowly reaches into a still-warm oven. Carefully, she removes the baked clay bowl. As she tilts the bowl in the dim light, you can begin to discern the words inscribed on its rim, an incantation of protection against a *lilith* demon:

May [female client] and her children all live safely and in harmony.

Be shamefully struck down, preferably by being hit in the head with a comically pointy stick. Be released like a divorce, never to come back to hide under children’s beds to frighten them. For extra caution, I order you to not even think about trying to steal their bones to turn into stew and eat.

With the power of all the non-child-eating supernatural beings, AMEN.

The ritual practitioner now in question is a fourth-year student (one with quite the sense of humor) enrolled in my course “Motherhood in Early Judaism.” All of the students in the course are engaged in a semester-long



*Incantation bowl made by Tallulah Costa, Smith College student. Courtesy of the author*

project in which they design and create their own “magic bowl,” inscribed with an original incantation on behalf of an imagined late antique Babylonian Jewish woman who might have experienced maternity-related desire or anxiety. This project served to answer some of the major guiding questions of the course, which was based on my recent dissertation, “Conceiving Motherhood: The Reception of Biblical Mothers in the Early Jewish Imagination”: How much agency did mothers have in Jewish antiquity? How was their image constructed (typically, by men) in art and literature? Who, exactly, decided what a mother should be? And how did these images of motherhood challenge or overturn what we expected of mothers in a twenty-first-century context?

At my dissertation defense just a couple of months earlier, I had argued that early Jewish communities rhetorically deployed mother figures in retellings of biblical narratives for the purpose of political community formation. These figures, such as Hannah, Rachel, the Widow of Zarephath, and the Mother of Seven Sons, responded to conditions of imperial and cultural oppression in the Second Temple Period and late antiquity in ways that protected communal boundaries and ensured the survival of the Jewish people. Demonstrating the truism that all research is really



*Incantation bowl by Grayson Hawthorn  
Smith College student. Courtesy of the author*

"me-search," during my PhD program I had become a mother myself, giving birth to two daughters who were five and almost two when I graduated. Embedded in my academic curiosity was a personal curiosity about my own agency as a Jewish mother in the context of the late 2010s and early 2020s.

My dissertation had asked how images of motherhood were constructed in art and literature. My students appreciated this question, but were not satisfied merely to learn how *men* had imagined mothers in antiquity. They wanted to know, as young, progressive "Zoomers," what women's lives had *actually* been like.<sup>ii</sup> This, of course, is the historian's million-dollar question, and it is notoriously difficult to answer for Jewish antiquity. The vast majority of our textual evidence was almost certainly written by men, who operated within a patriarchal and sometimes downright misogynistic social system. But, as I told my students, we might be able to find clues to women's lives within material evidence.

Which is how we ended up spending so many weeks of the semester creating Babylonian magic bowls. This project was inspired by my colleagues Krista Dalton (Kenyon College) and Cate Bonesho (UCLA) who had created incantation bowls with their students before.<sup>iii</sup> We began our exploration of the topic with a guest lecture from Shira Eliassian, a PhD student at Yale University, who was researching how the bowls functioned as an "archive of motherhood."<sup>iv</sup> My students found the bowls deeply compelling, in large part because they are one of the only pieces of evidence for women's inner worlds in antiquity: their fears, their desires, perhaps even their own voices. One such bowl reads: "May there be healing from heaven for Mihranahid ... that you will place the wine of life in the bowels of Mihranahid daughter of Aḥat ... that she will have living and abiding children."<sup>v</sup> One can easily imagine Mihranahid's fertility struggles, her feelings of despair and desperate hope, that prompted her to commission a bowl, take it home, bury it under her threshold, and let it work its magic.

*We must not stop asking questions about women's lives and looking for answers in nontraditional places.*

Of course, the bowls are not perfectly pure records of women's experience. These women's voices reach us through the lens of patriarchy, like a light filtered through a scrim. Most scholars assume that the ritual practitioners would have been men, and so it is more accurately *their* words that are transmitted through the inscriptions on the bowls.<sup>vi</sup> And, of course, women's desires were not created in a vacuum. What these women appeared to want for themselves was cultivated by the norms and values of the patriarchal society in which they lived, which held up motherhood as both the expectation and the ideal fulfillment of a woman's life. My students wrestled with this tension throughout the semester. One student thoughtfully reflected: "Although I believe that the patriarchal structures of the past sought to control women, I am struck by ancient Jewish women's ability to reclaim power and autonomy. Whether through the commissioning of fertility bowls [or other acts] ... these opportunities of power disrupt the narrative of ancient women as helpless victims and demonstrate their strength."

We are limited in what we can know about the maternal experience in Jewish antiquity. And yet, like my students, we must not stop asking questions about women's lives and looking for answers in nontraditional places. I am inspired by other scholars, including Bernadette Brooten, Wil Gafney, and Sara Parks, who encourage a "hermeneutic of imagination" when studying women's history.<sup>vii</sup> Imagining the lives of mothers in Jewish antiquity allows us a glimpse of their inner worlds, their agency, and their power. It disrupts simple narratives about motherhood that are fed to us from patriarchal texts and systems. And if we can look backward to find women's power, perhaps we can also look into the future and imagine new ways of engaging with the power of motherhood for our students, our daughters, and ourselves.

**SARI FEIN** is visiting assistant professor in the Jewish Studies Program at Smith College. She recently defended her dissertation "Conceiving Motherhood: The Reception of Biblical Mothers in the Early Jewish Imagination," Brandeis University.

i See Shaul Shaked, James Nathan Ford, and Siam Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1–28.

ii In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich distinguishes "between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children, and the institution—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control." Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 7.

iii See Krista Dalton, "Incantation Bowls and Embodied Knowledge," *Ancient Jew Review*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.ancientjewreview.com/read/2020/8/19/incantation-bowls-and-embodied-knowledge>.

iv You can read an interview with Shira by one of my students here: Miranda Hellmond Stone, "Got Enemies? Try a Jewish Incantation Bowl," *New Voices*, November 11, 2022, <https://newvoices.org/2022/11/11/got-enemies-try-a-jewish-incantation-bowl/>.

v For the *editio princeps* and translation of this bowl, see Siam Bhayro, "An Aramaic Magic Bowl for Fertility and Success in Childbirth: Lisboa, Museu de Farmácia (Lisbon, Pharmacy Museum) Inv. No. 10895," *Aramaic Studies* 15 (2017): 106–11.

vi Significantly, Ilan and Kedar argue that women could have served as professional scribes and authored at least some of the bowls' incantations. Tal Ilan and Dorit Kedar, "The Female Authorship of Babylonian Jewish Incantation Bowls," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 73, no. 2 (Autumn 2022): 288–304.

vii Bernadette Brooten writes that scholars of women's history are faced with a "radical lack of ... knowledge about women in antiquity ... [therefore,] the work of women's history must be based on historical imagination." Brooten, "Early Christian Women and Their Cultural Context: Issues of Method in Historical Reconstruction," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), 67. Gafney calls this exercise of the "sanctified imagination": "The sanctified imagination is the fertile creative space where the preacher-interpreter enters the text, particularly the spaces in the text, and fills them out with missing details: names, back stories, detailed descriptions of the scene and characters, and so on." Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 3. Park summarizes: "According to Brooten and others, the reconstruction of women's history is a necessarily creative task. It is therefore only with caution, humility, and imagination that one can approach ancient literature in search of women's marginalized voices." Parks, "Women and Gender in the Apocrypha," in *Jewish and Christian Women in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Sara Parks, Shayna Sheinfeld, and Meredith J. C. Warren (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2021), 480.

# Yale

## Postdoctoral Associate in Jewish Thought

2024-2026

The Program in Judaic Studies at Yale University is offering a two-year Postdoctoral fellowship that will begin on July 1, 2024. Candidates for the fellowship must have a Ph.D. in hand by July 1, 2024 and must have received the degree no earlier than 2021. The Program seeks a specialist in Jewish Thought / Philosophy who will work closely with appropriate members of Yale's faculty.

The Judaic Studies Postdoctoral Associate will be expected to be in residence, to conduct research in Yale's library and archival collections, to participate actively in the intellectual life of the university, teach two courses, one per year with the expectation to teach two courses in Jewish Studies; with the option of substituting the organization of a conference, seminar, or colloquium for the second year's course. The annual stipend will be \$66,000 plus health benefits. Candidates send a cover letter, CV, project proposal, three letters of recommendation, and a list of proposed courses to:

Judaic Studies Program  
P.O. Box 208282  
New Haven, CT 06520-8282

[renee.reed@yale.edu](mailto:renee.reed@yale.edu)

The deadline for receipt of application materials is January 15, 2024

Yale University is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer.  
Applications from women and minorities are strongly encouraged.



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# Roundtable

## Ethnography and the Jewish Mother

Roundtable Editor:

Jason Schulman

Contributors:

Jennifer Creese, Mercédesz Czimbalmos,  
Rebecca Slavin-Phillips

### Introduction

Jason Schulman

What does it mean to be a “Jewish mother” in the twenty-first century? One way to find out is through ethnography (the branch of Anthropology that utilizes “participant observation”). For this roundtable, we asked three scholars who have conducted ethnographic studies related to Jewish motherhood to try to answer that question. Their studies take us across the globe to Australia, Finland, and Philadelphia. Jennifer Creese describes her experiences as an anthropologist studying Jewish identity in modern Australian multicultural society while balancing her role as a “modern Jewish feminist mother.” Mercédesz Czimbalmos takes us into the small but vibrant Jewish community of Helsinki, where intermarriage and conversion intersect in expected and unexpected ways with Jewish motherhood. Rebecca Slavin-Phillips, a synagogue leader in Philadelphia, brings her research and personal experience to bear in exploring how COVID-19 has altered the work-life balance for many Jewish mothers. While the three researchers approach the topic of the “Jewish mother” in different ways, they all come at the question in a reflexive way, not shying away from their own positions in their observations and interactions with their subjects.

### Jewish Motherhood, Ethnographic Fieldwork, and the Search for “Anthropological Knowledge”

Jennifer Creese

On a warm December night a few years ago, I attended the local “Chanukah in the City” event, one of the few times of the year that the small Modern Orthodox Jewish community in the city of Brisbane, Australia, is publicly “on show” for the rest of the city to see what Jewishness “means” in the context of modern Australian life. Working at that time on a dissertation on the negotiation of Jewish identity in modern Australian multicultural society, this was a must-see event for me. I also brought my four-year-old son and one-year-old daughter to share in this family event, thinking I’d help them embrace their own Jewish heritage while gathering my field data. I watched the head of the local Jewish community authority take the stage, thanking the state leaders for their attendance.

He told the crowd, “Here’s a great demonstration of what Chanukah is all about here in Australia. This is what it means to be a Jew in this fabulous multicultural country ...”

I waited, pen poised ... then I felt the tug of a small hand on my skirt: “Mommy, I need the bathroom ...”

Part embarrassed, part exasperated, I asked “Is it urgent? Can you wait just a minute for Mommy to listen to this man?”

“No, I can’t. I need to go now. And the baby’s been sick all down herself.”



*Courtesy of Jennifer Creese*

In dread I looked down: my son was madly doing a little desperate-for-the-bathroom hop, and my daughter had indeed thrown up her sufganiyah all over the front of her dress. Red-faced, I grabbed both children and fled to the bathroom. And while the Jewish community president was (in my mind) telling all those assembled exactly what Jewish identity means in this multicultural Australian city, I cleaned up a sticky baby, held a stall door closed with my foot, and wondered how I was ever going to be a real anthropologist as a mother of two.

Ethnographic fieldwork calls for the practitioner to immerse in the field fully, “hanging out” with open eyes, engaging in practical activities to create anthropological knowledge. In “Fieldwork and the Perception of Everyday Life,” Timothy Jenkins states that “to understand” is “to participate ... take up, and explore,” and anthropological understanding only exists through the anthropologist’s

engagement; where the anthropologist is not interacting, knowledge does not exist independently.<sup>i</sup> As a budding anthropologist, I took this to mean that if I wanted to know about the community, I needed to see everything—if I missed something, I would never really know what the community was all about. In that bathroom, away from the action, I felt a fraud as an anthropologist, who could never authoritatively say what Jewish life in multicultural Australia means.

But what I didn’t realize, had I read Jenkins a little closer, is that if anthropological knowledge is inherently constructed by the anthropologist, then the purpose of fieldwork is to build knowledge, not by seeing everything you can, but by engaging reflexively and deeply with who and what you can engage with, as yourself—as Jenkins says, “every person makes sense as he or she can.”<sup>ii</sup> I could not understand everything about the

## Roundtable

community. Indeed, nobody, no matter who they might be and what life situation they might be in, can understand everything about any setting. I can merely create knowledge with what I can see, and enrich that knowledge by virtue of who I am. And motherhood, particularly Jewish motherhood, is part of that “I”: less the anxious, smothering, and guilt-inducing Jewish mother of anthropologist Margaret Mead’s work of the 1940s, more the modern Jewish feminist mother who works with a philosophy of comfort, care, and nurturance toward my children, my community, the world around me, and even myself.<sup>iii</sup>

Anthropological knowledge is also never generated by the anthropologist alone—ethnographic encounters are inherently relational, made up by shared interpretation and reflection on what is seen, done, and shown: as Jenkins says, “all practices are mutual ... ‘the social’ is made up of the interpenetration of interpretations.”<sup>iv</sup> So my life as a mother, which I originally thought was a barrier to effective fieldwork, was part of a more engaged way of ethnographic thinking and a more egalitarian and reciprocal relationship with knowing “the social” of my community. When Jewish parents and grandparents opened their doors and homes to me, they did so not as “research subjects” but in a relationship of equals exploring and making sense of modern Australian Jewishness together, for ourselves, our community, and for the children in our lives. The resulting ethnographic work brings, I think, not only a more reflexive insight about how a Jewish community works in multicultural Australia, but perhaps a stronger sense of shared meaning made, a shared story told of Jewish life—one which may help all our children to celebrate who they are.

## Intermarriage, Conversion, and Jewish Motherhood: The Case of Finland

Mercédesz Czibalmos

Rabbinic authorities and Jewish commentators often come to strikingly different conclusions on whether intermarriage threatens Jewish continuity or not. Some see intermarriage as a driver of assimilation, while others see it as a demographic opportunity. In both cases, though, Jewish motherhood in intermarriage is usually viewed simply through the prism of halakhah.

How can scholars explore not just the topic of intermarriage, as they have done, but in a more nuanced way, the topic of Jewish motherhood in the context of intermarriage? Especially in a diversifying Jewish world, scholars can look for examples from around the globe to understand the complexities not only of intermarriage, but of Jewish motherhood. Based on my ethnographic research in Finland, my goal here is not to draw overarching conclusions on these issues, but rather to provide readers with a glimpse into motherhood in the Jewish community of Helsinki, a small community often considered distant from most Jewish life that in fact has a rich Jewish past and present.

The small Finnish Jewish population—depending on how we define who is Jewish, of course—is approximately 2,000–3,000 people: about 1,100 belong to the Jewish community of Helsinki, fewer than one hundred to the Jewish community of Turku, and fewer than fifty to the Or Hatzafon Reform Jewish Community. The rest are unaffiliated with any of these congregations. When we talk about Finnish Jewish communities, we see a diverse group of people: Ashkenazic Jews, Sephardic/Mizrachi Jews, and Jews-by-choice. Finnish Jewry is not a monolithic and unified group, but a composite of diverse and rich congregations, full of debates and differences in traditions, attitudes, levels of observance, and ideas about Judaism and Jewishness.

Conversion in Finland has contributed to the community's growth and diversification. An important early step in this process was in 1977, when the first large group of adult women (and their children) converted to Judaism. This wave of conversions, organized in the Jewish community of Helsinki, was sparked by a group of non-Jewish women who had been romantically involved with their Jewish partners and often had children together. Since then, adult and child conversions have been a part of everyday Finnish Jewish life. It is noteworthy to mention, however, that a significantly higher number of women decide to convert to Judaism than men. With their conversions, these women strive to consciously become the figure of the *Yidishe mame* in their families, whose goal is to ensure Jewish family unity.

My ethnographic research primarily focused on the topic of intermarriage in Finnish Jewish communities—inevitably bringing some insights to what Jewish motherhood means in Finland today. I looked at two groups of women: first, Jewish women who married non-Jewish men, but still wanted to raise Jewish children; and second, non-Jewish women who married (and had children with) Jewish men, and then converted to Judaism. In the first cases, women were secure about their Jewish identity, and confidently mixed tradition and innovation in their daily practices; in the second, they were perhaps less innovative, and relied more on the traditions of their husbands' families.

These two groups of mothers (those born Jewish who married non-Jewish men, and those born not Jewish who married Jewish men and then converted) were, to varying extents, responsible for setting the religious identity of their children. But there were differences. Those who were born Jewish were aware that their children would be considered Jewish according to halakhah, which often allowed them to be more creative, experimental, and even bold in the ways they live and “do” Judaism. After marrying out, they did not

perceive the traditional Orthodox Jewish halakhah as authoritative, but instead decided to “do Judaism” by creatively constructing practices that empower them and their children, and that strengthen their own Jewish identity. These women operated within a male-dominated institutional context: many of them had not received traditional Jewish education and lacked the knowledge one would assume of women in Orthodox Jewish communities. But they had agency in their own houses and within their family and immediate circles. They were often flexible, and they often incorporated meaningful but non-Jewish traditions in their households. (Of course, they at times changed their attitudes about such things.)

On the other side were those mothers who converted to Judaism. Their personal stories varied, but all had one common attribute: they not only converted for personal reasons but also to secure the “religious unity” of their families and to be able to provide a Jewish upbringing to their children. In their homes, they are often the ones who strove for a stricter level of observance of Jewish traditions, with perhaps less creativity than those who did not choose Judaism. They opted for being what we would consider more traditional Jewish mothers who actively take part in perpetuating the customs of their husbands' families and ensuring that their children will have strong Jewish identities.

In both cases, these mothers may have been united in their aim of raising a Jewish household, but they differed in the approaches they chose to adopt and, consequently, in their perceptions of what “being Jewish” means. They might now follow an Orthodox perception of traditions, and they might apply fluidity in their approaches. Nevertheless, when it comes to ensuring Jewish continuity, the Finnish Jewish community demonstrates that there is an effective model of cultural transmission, and Jewish motherhood in intermarriage has a crucial role in this.

## Roundtable

### How COVID Reshaped Work for Jewish Mothers

Rebecca Slavin-Phillips

COVID-19 has completely reshaped the landscape of American Judaism for non-Orthodox Jewish mothers. As the workforce largely shifted from in-person to online during COVID-19 and then back again with many jobs going remote or hybrid, non-Orthodox Jewish mothers have begun to adopt what seem like more traditional values. There has been a marked shift in the value system of more secularized Jews that, in many ways, mirrors the mentality of their Orthodox Jewish counterparts pre-pandemic. Having studied Orthodox Jewish women, and then subsequently worked in Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist synagogues as a director and executive director, my vantage point of Jewish women across the various denominations stems from my experience working within Jewish organizations.

My 2016 ethnographic dissertation focused on fifty suburban Orthodox Jewish women aged between 18 and 45. These women defined themselves as “Torah-true”: committed to following the faith’s precepts articulated in the written and oral tradition. The women in the study lived in a community with nine Orthodox synagogues located within a distinct geographic area in the Northeast. They self-defined as Modern Orthodox, Haredi, or ultra-Orthodox. Thirty-one of the women studied were married, and sixteen of those had children. The mothers had between one and six children, with the majority with four and five. They attempted to balance children, employment, home management, caring for their husbands, and being a part of their religious community. All the women I interviewed had obtained a bachelor’s degree or were in various stages of undergraduate school, and twenty-four had graduate degrees. The women valued education as a means to support a career, a religious lifestyle, and ultimately a family. Out of the married women, eleven cooked, cleaned, and did household chores; sixteen did all household chores; and six had husbands who also helped with some tasks such as grilling, garbage, and

laundry. In addition, all mothers worked full-time except for three stay-at-home moms.

These Orthodox women balanced homes, children, and careers. They found innovative ways to accomplish their goals yet remain within the bounds of their religion. Many said their Orthodox upbringing and the value system learned from day schools and seminaries (all but one attended) formed the foundation for learned responsibilities. Their religious beliefs informed their lifestyle choice, translating to their actions and feelings toward their children, household, husbands, and employment. They continue to find support in the culture of their community, religious beliefs, family, and friends.

Pre-COVID, there were vast differences in Jewish motherhood between Orthodoxy and the other denominations (though none of the denominations, either pre- or post-COVID, fit into the stereotypical trope of the “Jewish mother”). However, a mere five years later, as the workforce has transformed, connection and engagement are no longer bound to physical presence—and so have the ideals and priorities for more secular Jewish mothers. In the post-COVID work world, non-Orthodox mothers, in my estimation and as an ongoing discussion point by Jewish professionals, reconceptualized themselves, their roles, their being, how they see themselves in their households, as more traditional Jewish placeholders. Let us not suggest that non-Orthodox women have become more religious or intentionally taken on this world view. However, the circumstances of how they work have dramatically changed the dynamics of their home life—now physically in their home space more often, the lives they lead somewhat reflect those of their Orthodox counterparts.

Hybrid and remote work has meant non-Orthodox women now have employment that allows them to remain (at least partially) inside their homes. Working at home during the day opens up their availability for chores, increased childcare, after-school care and activities, home maintenance, appointments, and the potential for a work-life balance that did not exist

previously. These activities have become integrated throughout the day, offering mothers additional time to accomplish more varied tasks. Post-COVID, it is far more common to see executive-level moms in car pick-up lines, at soccer practice on a weekday night, or buying groceries with a child or two in tow right after school. A 2022 Pew research study found that, among employed adults, “64% say working from home has made it easier to balance work and their personal life. Two-in-ten of these adults say balancing work and their personal life is about the same, and 16% say it is harder.”<sup>iv</sup> Women now have more opportunities to engage with their children than when a five-day-a-week in-person work week was the norm. In addition, the absence of commuting time offers a significant time-saving bonus.

With remote options, women in increasing numbers still maintain many of their same career opportunities yet gain the ability to schedule meetings around family time, meals, attendance at events, appointments, and reap the benefit of increased daily connection within the home. They can juggle more without losing out. Asynchronous work hours and a nontraditional work week are often in sync, expanding the possibilities for women to take on more traditional motherly roles that are customary for Orthodox mothers. The pandemic may have forever altered these women’s career patterns with the influx of hybrid options. (For Orthodox women, their post-pandemic life, still based on the Torah, may not have been altered as much as their non-Orthodox counterparts; and, of course, for many women, some work patterns will remain the same due to career choice, as many professions do not lend themselves to hybrid work.)

Through changes in the culture of the work structure, the pandemic has helped bridge the gap between norms for Orthodox mothers and the non-Orthodox. In suburbia, Jewish women’s lives are now more similar due to extraordinary changes around them. It will be intriguing to observe if this is a momentary reaction by the non-Orthodox population to a historical circumstance or whether a permanent value shift has occurred. Nonetheless, the sharing of normative behavior will likely continue long-term.

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**JENNIFER CREESE** is a social anthropologist at the University of Leicester. Her most recent book is *Jewish Identity in Multicultural Australia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Jewish community of South East Queensland.

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**MERCÉDESZ CZIMBALMOS** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Inez and Julius Polin Institute for Theological Research at Åbo Akademi University (Turku, Finland), leading the Antisemitism Undermining Democracy research project. She is also senior researcher at the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. Her main research interests consist of contemporary Jewish vernacular religion, antisemitism, discrimination, and health and gender studies.

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**REBECCA SLAVIN-PHILLIPS** has a PhD in Religious Studies from the University of Pittsburgh. She has spent the last fifteen years as a synagogue professional and is an executive director in the Philadelphia area.

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i Timothy Jenkins, “Fieldwork and the Perception of Everyday Life,” *Man* 29, no. 2 (June 1994): 443.

ii *Ibid.*, 452.

iii Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mother* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

iv Jenkins, “Fieldwork,” 445.

v <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/02/16/covid-19-pandemic-continues-to-reshape-work-in-america/>.



*Maja (Josephine Park) and Chana (Sofie Gråbøl).*  
Courtesy of Gabriel Bier Gislason

## Teaching with Film and Media

# The Mother Issue

Curated by Olga Gershenson

### **Attachment**

(2022, dir. Gabriel Bier Gislason, Denmark, 1 h 45 min)

Olga Gershenson

*Attachment* is in many ways an unusual film. It is a possession story, paying tribute to the folkloric figure of the dybbuk, popularized by Anski's famous play and its many adaptations. Unlike the play, *Attachment* is a story of an interfaith lesbian romance. And it's a horror rom-com, both funny and scary. It's directed by a young Danish Jewish filmmaker, intent on converting the Christian-dominated horror genre to Judaism. All this makes *Attachment* a great film for teaching.

The film opens when Leah, a scholar of Jewish folklore, meets Maja, a Danish actress. They fall for each other, and Maja follows Leah home to an ultra-Orthodox enclave in London. Leah herself is not particularly religious, but she shares a house with her observant mother, Chana. Oddly, Chana is not concerned with her daughter's blond non-Jewish girlfriend moving in. Instead, she is overprotective of her daughter's health, insisting on feeding her a special chicken soup and giving her a particular

massage. Maja tries to understand Chana and the mysterious customs of the community but to no avail. Inevitably, tensions arise, and when Chana's behavior becomes more and more unhinged, Maja convinces Leah to escape. Instead of feeling liberated, Leah falls apart. She transforms physically until she looks and acts like a monster. As we learn, she's been possessed by a dybbuk for years, and only her mother's efforts kept the malevolent spirit at bay. Her odd rituals were the only thing that protected Leah. She wasn't a crazy, controlling mother after all, but a hero, who in the climactic scene of exorcism, made the ultimate sacrifice to liberate her daughter from the dybbuk.

I teach *Attachment* in the context of my course on literary and cultural adaptations, reading it as both an adaptation of *The Dybbuk* and of the Christian horror trope of possession. But the film can be also a great choice for teaching about gender and sexuality, Jewish symbolism and ritual, as well as interfaith relations.

*Attachment* is streaming on Amazon Prime Video, YouTube, Google Play, Apple TV, and other platforms.





*Fran (Fran Drescher) and her mother Sylvia (Renée Taylor).  
Screenshot from The Nanny.*

## **The Nanny**

(Season 3, 1995-96: Episode 3, "The Dope Diamond," and Episode 24, "The Cantor Show"; created by Peter Marc Jacobson and Fran Drescher)

### **Avner Shavit**

The Jewish mother is one of the most notorious stock characters in the history of American television.

However, few are as outlandish and stereotypical as Fran's mother, Sylvia Fine (Renée Taylor) in *The Nanny*.

Two of the show's most canonical episodes, "The Dope Diamond" and "The Cantor Show," featuring Sylvia, encompass most of the attributes stereotypically associated with the Jewish mother: she is loud, has no subtlety or manners, and is obsessed with both feeding her daughter and fixing her up—preferably with a Jewish doctor.

These episodes also explore the mother-daughter dynamic. Fran is considered a groundbreaking Jewish and female character, subverting the male gaze and breaking many stereotypes associated with the Jewish American Princess. However, as *The Nanny* is playing with the image of the Jewish daughter, it perpetuates the stereotypes connected to the Jewish mother, maintaining her position as a scapegoat of the Jewish American culture.

*The Nanny* enjoyed immense popularity in its initial run in the 1990s and has retained its cult status thanks to its humor, strong characters, and incredible performances, especially by its eponymous lead Fran Drescher, who emerged as one of the most prominent Jewish American personalities of the generation, including in her role as SAG-AFTRA president. *The Nanny* will be a great choice in courses dealing with Jewish American culture and media, especially in units on gender, humor, and media representation.

*The Nanny* is streaming on Amazon Prime Video, Tubi, and other platforms.

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**OLGA GERSHENSON** is professor of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies and of Film Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her most recent book is *New Israeli Horror: Local Cinema, Global Genre* (Rutgers University Press, 2023). She is now working on the Oxford Handbook of Judaism and Film.

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**AVNER SHAVIT** is an Israeli film critic and scholar. He has been covering both the local and international scenes for two decades, including major film festivals in Cannes, Venice, and Berlin. He holds a PhD from the New Sorbonne University in Paris and is visiting professor at Wesleyan University.



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The financial support from this [travel] grant enabled me to present at the AJS Annual Conference for the first time. Without it, presenting at the conference would have been extremely difficult for me, given my financial situation as a graduate student. Speaking at the AJS Annual Conference helped me forge connections between my research and other developments in the field, which will considerably strengthen my own work and foster my career.

—Hannah Zaves-Green, *visiting professor, Sarah Lawrence College*



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