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Feminism, American Style: Jewish Women and the Making of a Revolution

by **Pamela S. Nadell**

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The Ruderman Program for American Jewish Studies is a unique and groundbreaking academic program established in 2013 at the University of Haifa. The Ruderman Program covers a wide range of issues pertaining to Jewish life in the United States, the American society and the long-lasting and important bond between the American Jewish community, the State of Israel and Israeli society. The main goal of the program is to strengthen the relationship between the Israeli society and American Jewry, by expanding current knowledge, distributing it, and creating a well-founded educated community to act in academia and the Israeli professional fields. The Ruderman Program has two branches: one is a multidisciplinary and comprehensive MA studies program; and the second is promoting research on American Jewry, past and present, and creating a knowledge base for decision makers, opinion leaders, policy makers, professionals and for all those who take part in the public discourse in Israel.

The third research paper published by the Ruderman Program was written by Prof. Pamela Nadell of American University in Washington. Her article, ***Feminism, American Style: Jewish Women and the Making of a Revolution***, traces the roots of Jewish feminism in the United States and examines the tension between commitment to the feminist ideal and Jewish identity. Nadell presents the key figures who advanced the Jewish American feminist revolution and reviews their important work. Jewish feminism is examined in the general American context, as well as in its particular influence on Jewish religious and communal life in the United States. The last part of the article deals with American Jewish influences on Israeli feminism.

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Named American University's Scholar/Teacher of the Year in 2007, she was also recognized for outstanding teaching by Ohio State University. She has held fellowships from the American Jewish Archives and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, and received the Anti-Defamation League's Community Leadership Award. The American Jewish Historical Society recognized her distinguished service to the field with its Lee Max Friedman Award.

Nadell is currently completing a book on the history of American Jewish women from colonial days to the present to be published by W.W. Norton in March 2019.

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Summary

- ◆ Were it not for American Jewish women, the feminist revolution of the 1960s would have been a very different affair. The lineup of Jewish women in the forefront of the movement is astounding and requires explanation.
- ◆ In the mid-nineteenth century, when the woman suffrage movement launched in the U.S., the Polish-Jewish immigrant Ernestine Potowski Rose won acclaim for calling for married women's property rights and for woman suffrage. But Rose was the rare Jewish woman's rights activist back then.
- ◆ Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as American women created large organizations to advance women's roles and their public and social welfare projects, Jewish women began creating their own nationwide organizations. The National Council of Jewish Women, founded in 1893, at the Jewish Women's Congress at the Chicago World's Fair was the first. Associations of synagogue sisterhood women and Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America followed. East European immigrant Jewish women also banded together in labor unions. While these organizations and most of their leaders avoided the label feminist, their projects and activism prove that they were indeed influenced by the language of feminism that was abroad in American life in the 1910s and 1920s.
- ◆ National and international crises invariably push women's issues to the back burner. In America, feminist aims paled before the calamity of the Great Depression, the cataclysm of World War II, and the alarms of the Cold War and nuclear arms race. Feminism did not vanish, but its advocates carried it forward in decades dubbed the feminist doldrums.
- ◆ Yet, even if, in the popular view, cheerful conformity to gender roles and domestic contentment defined American women during the 1950s, some women began questioning the script of their lives. "You got educated, you married, you had children." Was there nothing more? Meanwhile, their daughters began to dream of living lives different than their mothers. They were not the first daughters to do so, but they came of age at a time when opportunities for other paths presented themselves.
- ◆ A new women's movement burst out in American life in the 1960s. John F. Kennedy's Presidential Commission on the Status of Women opened the door. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* crashed through it when she labelled women's despair over their constricted roles the "problem that has no name." But it was Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which barred discrimination in employment based on sex that left the door swinging wide open, and hundreds of thousands of women marching through.
- ◆ Friedan was but one of a myriad of Jewish women leading the vanguard of both equal-rights feminism, with its goals of equality before the law, in life and opportunity, and the more radical Women's Liberation. Although the new women's movement was often called Women's Liberation, the term refers specifically to those who saw that equity for women in the economy, government, and other sectors was half a solution. Women's Liberation critiqued the power relations between the sexes and demanded their complete revolutionizing. It held up to scrutiny every facet of a woman's life, searching for oppressions.
- ◆ The long list of names of Jewish women in the forefront of both sectors of the movement called second-wave feminism, to contrast it with the first wave from earlier in the century, demands explication. Some, like Friedan, located the origins of their feminism to their personal experiences of antisemitism; others to encounters with the memory of the Holocaust; others saw feminism as part of their task of *tikkun olam*.

But others plunged into feminism, angered at the sexism of Jewish tradition, or because they identified with radical politics and universal causes. Their feminism may have begun as another of their struggles against injustice, but ultimately it became their vital cause.

- ◆ Jewish feminism became an offshoot of this new wave. Judaism, by no means the only religion confronting the feminist critique, did so in multifarious ways. Jewish feminists demanded religious equality in their synagogues, amendments to religious law that disadvantaged women, and access to religious leadership. They revisioned American Judaism along feminist lines, inventing new religious ceremonies, writing feminist theologies, and producing new works of scholarship about women and gender.
- ◆ Jewish feminism's multiplicity in the U.S. includes constellations for Orthodox feminists, lesbian women, and the communal agencies, like the Federations and Jewish Community Centers, as distinct from synagogues, which comprise a significant component of American Jewish life.
- ◆ To their sorrow and anger, Jewish feminists also confronted vitriolic antisemitism and anti-Israelism in the international women's movement. Those face-offs caused some in the first generation of Jewish feminists, who, in the past, were either antagonistic or indifferent to Jewish particularity, to recognize Jewish difference and reconnect. Some also reached out to Israeli feminists.
- ◆ One of Israel's foundational myths is that the nation embraced women's equality. But feminists from abroad, like Friedan, and Israelis, who were *olim* from the U.S. and Britain, exposed those myths, and carried the new wave of feminism, American style to Israel. In its first decades, Israeli feminism evolved mostly under the influence of American feminists and *olim*.
- ◆ But increasingly, as it became clear just how much the situation of women in the U.S. and in Israel differed, in part because of Israel's religious establishment, Israeli feminism evolved more autonomously. Still, interplay between Israeli and American feminists continues, especially around shared concerns, like those affecting Orthodox women and the struggle of the Women of the Wall to win the right to pray at the Kotel.
- ◆ A half century ago the modern American women's movement launched. Fighting for equal-rights feminism, Women's Liberation, and Jewish feminism, American Jewish women, many of them in the forefront of feminism, American style, helped make a revolution.

Feminism, American Style: Jewish Women and the Making of a Revolution

International Women's Strike USA—a new feminist group roused to action after the election of an American president who routinely insults women and boasts of sexually harassing them—publishes a 750-word platform. It sets “the decolonization of Palestine” at “the beating heart of this new feminist movement” and demands “to dismantle all walls, from prison walls to border walls, from Mexico to Palestine.”¹ No other places are named in its brief statement. Outraged by its singling out of Israel for opprobrium, journalist Emily Shire asks in the *New York Times*, “Does feminism have room for Zionists?” Palestinian-American-Muslim activist Linda Sarsour, one of the organizers of the Women's March that saw millions of women in the United States and around the world take to the streets the day after Donald Trump's inauguration, pointedly responds: No. She tells Shire that she can “either stand up for the rights of all women, including Palestinians, or none.”² By extension she has dictated to the 88 percent of American Jewish women who reported, in 2013, that caring about Israel was an important, if not an essential part, of their being Jewish,³ that they have to choose. They can be feminists or Jews, not both.

Meanwhile, back at the Kotel, ultra-Orthodox protesters once again disrupt the prayers of the Women of the Wall.⁴ Hundreds of female students from religious Zionist schools try to block the women as they enter the plaza carrying Torah scrolls. From the men's side, curses and shouts rain down, seeking to drown out the women's voices in prayer. Despite innumerable government decisions and judicial rulings and efforts to find compromises, the ultra-Orthodox have been disrupting the prayers of Women of the Wall for nearly thirty years.

Battles like these, among feminists of different stripes and between feminists and anti-feminists, have raged at the top of the news cycle for more than half a century. This is not the first time that women have argued about the compatibility of feminism and Zionism and, for that matter, of feminism and Judaism. These debates draw us back into the past.

In the 1960s, an astonishing number of Jewish women appeared in the forefront of the feminist revolution. One coined the term “feminine mystique” to name the malaise of women who despaired that there was nothing more to life than being a wife and mother; one battled other lawyers when they ignored complaints about illegal employment discrimination because they were voiced by women rather than by African-American men; one wrote women into history and convinced her adopted country to acknowledge that past with an annual Women's History Month; and one redefined rape, not as a crime of lust, but as a crime of violence by which all men always threaten all women. Each was an American Jewish woman.

Against the backdrop of surging social movements for peace, civil rights, the eradication of poverty, and saving the environment, American women launched a new feminist movement. It demanded full equality and ripping down “the silken curtain of prejudice and discrimination against women in government, industry, the

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- 1 International Women's Strike US Platform, <http://www.womenstrikeus.org/our-platform/>, accessed Dec. 10, 2017.
 - 2 Emily Shire, “Does Feminism Have Room for Zionists?” *New York Times*, Mar. 7, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/07/opinion/does-feminism-have-room-for-zionists.html?_r=0; Collier Meyerson, “Can You Be a Zionist Feminist? Linda Sarsour Says No,” *The Nation*, March 13, 2017.
 - 3 Pew Research Foundation, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans” (2013), <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>. See the full report: “Caring about Israel,” graph, p. 83.
 - 4 “Hundreds of Orthodox Protesters Try to Block Women of the Wall Service,” *Times of Israel*, Feb. 27, 2017, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/hundreds-of-orthodox-protesters-try-to-block-women-of-the-wall-service/>

professions, the churches, the political parties, the judiciary, the labor unions, in education, science, medicine, law, religion, and every other field of importance in American society.”⁵

Looking back from today at those first years of outrage, what jumps out are the number of Jewish women in the forefront of the movement. At the time, most downplayed or utterly ignored their Jewishness; gender sat at the core of their identities; religion and ethnicity were irrelevant in the greater cause of women’s rights. Yet, for many, the double discrimination that they had faced, as women and Jews, had led them to feminism. History, family background, education, and status primed them for leadership. The result was the advent of an American feminist movement unimaginable without Jewish women in its vanguard.

This paper, written for the Ruderman Program for American Jewish Studies, looks back to the era when masses of women challenged their second-class status in American life and when no one dictated to Jewish women that they had to choose between feminism and being a Jew. It begins with a quick glance at the spaces and places where Jewish women demonstrated feminist commitments before this new women’s movement, dubbed in the late 1960s second-wave feminism, surged forward. That name distinguished it from the first feminist wave that rose after American women won the vote in 1920.⁶ This study then turns to Jewish women’s involvements in that second feminist current. It explores the emergence of a Jewish feminism bent on transforming American Jewish religious and communal life. Finally, it looks at how feminism, American style, was exported to Israel.

5 National Organization for Women, “Statement of Purpose,” <https://now.org/about/history/statement-of-purpose/> , accessed Dec. 10, 2017.

6 For the first *New York Times* reference to the “second wave,” see Martha Weinman Lear, “The Second Feminist Wave,” *New York Times*, Mar. 10, 1968.

Stage I: Jewish Women and the Woman's Rights Movement

In 1851, the Polish Jewish immigrant Ernestine Potowski Rose addressed the Second National Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts. There she roared: "It is high time ... to compel man by the might of right to give woman her political, legal and social rights."⁷

Only a few years before in Seneca Falls, New York, the woman's rights movement, one of the great reform movements of the nineteenth century, had launched. There, in 1848, some three hundred women and men, echoing the Declaration of Independence, resolved: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men *and women* are created equal."⁸ At the heart of their demands lay the call for female suffrage. Three years later in Massachusetts, Ernestine Rose echoed that *cri de coeur* as she insisted that her adopted nation take off the shackles that bound women and grant them the vote.

Born in Russian Poland, a self-described rebel at age five, Ernestine Potowski learned to read the Torah and then to spurn its patriarchal teaching, "He shall rule over thee" (Gen. 3:16). When she was sixteen, she refused to marry the man her father had chosen; then she sued her father to keep the money she had inherited at her mother's death, which he had intended to use for her dowry. She prevailed in her suit and left Poland behind. Stopping over in England, Ernestine Potowski polished her English and, marrying, became Ernestine Rose. Landing in New York in 1836, she immediately began advocating for the property rights of married women, at a time when the law of the land held that husbands took control of the property their wives brought into the marriage and their subsequent earnings. The abolition of slavery, the necessity for religious freedom, and the urgency for woman suffrage became her abiding passions. Rose was the only Jewish woman to win acclaim as a suffragist in her day. Her fierce intellect, powerful oratory, uncompromising convictions, and international contacts won her the confidence of suffrage leaders Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. That she did so at a time when the woman's rights movement carefully distanced itself from certain women considered less worthy of the vote, such as immigrants and free Blacks, was all the more remarkable. Suffrage leaders feared that the presence of such women would undermine their cause with the men who controlled the ballot box. Rose, championing justice for all, blazed a trail of activism that later American Jewish women would proudly follow.⁹

By the twentieth century, other American Jewish women—part of the more than two million Jews who had fled the poverty and degradation of life in Eastern Europe for the economic opportunities and freedom of the *goldene medinah*—were also clamoring for woman suffrage. In 1917, as the men of New York State headed to the polls to decide whether to give their mothers and sisters, wives and daughters the vote, East European immigrant Jewish women campaigned for suffrage on the streets of Manhattan's Lower East Side. Although no one noted it at the time, when the votes were tallied and New York had become the first state east of the Mississippi River to grant women full suffrage, the right to vote in all elections, they proved that men in Jewish neighborhoods had turned out en masse to enfranchise their women. That their wives and daughters had paraded for suffrage, and that their labor unions and the New York State Socialist Party had endorsed it, proved decisive for immigrant Jewish men and their American-born sons. As the politician Meyer London, one

7 Ernestine Rose's speech to the National Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts, Oct. 15, 1851; <http://www.brandeis.edu/wsrc/affiliates/ernestinerose/1851speech.html> ; accessed Dec. 10, 2017.

8 "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, Seneca Falls, 1848," in Miriam Schneir, ed., *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 77 [emphasis added].

9 On Ernestine Rose, see Bonnie S. Anderson, *The Rabbi's Atheist Daughter: Ernestine Rose, International Feminist Pioneer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

of only two Socialists ever elected to the US Congress, remarked, how could any foreign-born man who had fled oppression in the Old World oppose woman's suffrage in the New.¹⁰



As the women's rights movement gained momentum in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, it spurred middle-class women to uncover new spaces for female organization and activism in the interstices between the private sphere of their homes and the presumably exclusively male public domains of business, politics, and society. As American women founded large organizations, like the National Woman Suffrage Association and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, to advance women's status and their social welfare and political projects, Jewish women, too, came to play new roles in their Jewish communities.

In 1893 at the great World's Fair in Chicago, commemorating the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World, American Jews were invited to explain Judaism—its history, philosophy, and ideals—at a grand gathering of the world's faiths in the Exposition's World's Parliament of Religions. As Chicagoans began planning the fair, they established a Board of Lady Managers, to make certain that women participated fully in the fair's many assemblies and programs on subjects as diverse as religion, science, labor, and women's rights. The Lady Managers knew Chicago matron Hannah Solomon and asked her to oversee the participation of Jewish women. Because there were no female rabbis to invite and no national Jewish women's organizations whose leaders might speak, she wrote to rabbis around the country, asking them to help her find outstanding women to bring to Chicago to lecture about Judaism and the Jewish people.

When her arrangements were well along, the men designing the parliament's Jewish Denominational Congress belatedly asked Solomon to work with them. She agreed so long as the women she had contacted would play a significant role in the event. Then the men recessed to finalize their plans. When they returned to present their program, "lo and behold!" she exclaimed, not a single woman's name was on it. So Hannah Solomon stood up, stomped off, and announced that the women would hold an independent Jewish Women's Congress.¹¹ And they did.

For four days in September 1893, some two dozen women stood before overflowing crowds, lecturing, for the first time ever, as experts on Jewish history, culture, and society. At the end of their meeting, they founded the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), elected Solomon its president, and pledged to seek solutions to problems in philanthropy, religion, and education.¹² NCJW took up other causes too, entering into the politics of protecting immigrant girls from the perils of the notorious "white slave" traffic of the day.¹³

Two years later, the *American Jewess*, the first English-language Jewish woman's magazine in the United States, called Solomon "a representative Jewess of America." In these years, when she headed a Bureau of Personal Service to help impoverished Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the Windy City,¹⁴ she was just one of innumerable well-to-do American women, and American Jewish women, stepping out of their homes, fixing their sights on the nation's problems beyond their doorposts. As Jewish women ran employment

10 Elinor Lerner, "Jewish Involvement in the New York City Woman Suffrage Movement," *American Jewish History* 71 (June 1981): 442-61.

11 Hannah Solomon, *Fabric of My Life* (New York: Bloch, 1946), 80-83.

12 *Papers of the Jewish Women's Congress* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1894).

13 On white slavery, see Edward J. Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight against White Slavery, 1870-1939* (New York: Schocken, 1983).

14 "Mrs. Hannah G. Solomon," *American Jewess* 1, 1 (April 1895), 26-27.

bureaus for the poor, dispatched public health nurses into tenements, lobbied the state for widowed mothers' pensions, and demanded government funds for homes for delinquent and orphaned girls, something Solomon did, they entered into public service as volunteers.¹⁵ Seeking to make the world a better place, they helped advance the cause of woman.

The *American Jewess*, which appeared for only a few years (1895-1899), also called for advancing the cause of women in Judaism. It demanded that women be counted as full members of their congregations, and it featured a lay preacher and teacher named Ray Frank, ordained by the press "the girl rabbi of the golden west."¹⁶ Two decades later, new national Jewish women's organizations began emerging alongside the National Council of Jewish Women. Massing female armies to support their congregations through groups called sisterhoods, national federations of synagogue and temple sisterhoods appeared within the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox branches of American Judaism. Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, emerged to give American Jewish women a part in advancing the Zionist project in Palestine and to promote Zionism among American women. Other Jewish women's organizations, including new Zionist groups, would follow in the 1920s and 1930s.

These organizations rose on the horizon just as the woman's rights movement was giving way to a new paradigm, that of feminism.¹⁷ Feminism's arrival coincided with the closing of the campaign to grant all American women suffrage, as opposed to just those in certain states, like New York, which already permitted females to vote in at least some elections. In 1920, the states ratified the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution. It guaranteed: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

Women's Rights Yields to Feminism: The Invention of a Concept

In the 1890s, feminism, a word that once referred to the qualities of females, took on a new meaning, to promote women's equality. But the word was hardly ever used then. It only began to circulate widely in the second decade of the new century, and, even then, it was so unusual that it was often spelled with a capital F. The ascension of the notion of feminism signaled the end of the nineteenth-century woman's rights movement which deliberately used the term "woman" in the singular, rather than "women" in the plural. The woman's rights movement suggested that all women had one cause, that one movement spoke for everyone. In contrast, feminism emphasized women's diversity. It underscored differences among women, how they diverged by class, race, religion, national origin, and sexual preference. It acknowledged that this heterogeneity required a sweeping agenda, touching on all arenas of American life, to advance women's status. Feminism asserted that women, single and married, were entitled to satisfying work. It demanded that women and men be paid the same for the same work. It called for women to enter the professions, advance in the business

15 The Jewish Sisterhoods of Personal Service ran employment bureaus. Nurses from Lillian Wald's Henry Street Settlement healed the sick. Hannah Einstein championed mother's pensions in the New York State Legislature.

16 Rebecca J. Gradwohl, "The Jewess in San Francisco," *American Jewess*, October 1896, 10-12, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/amjewess/taj1895.0004.001/18:8?didno=TAJ1895.0004.001;rgn=full+text;view=image> For a fuller discussion of Ray Frank, see Pamela S. Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women's Ordination, 1889-1985* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 39-43.

17 Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

world, and become lawmakers. It anticipated women seeking autonomy and freedom in their lives, even sexual liberation. The “constellation[s] Feminism” came into view.¹⁸



This burgeoning feminism influenced American Jewish women as they built their new organizations and set out on pathways unexplored by those who had come before. Even when early twentieth-century Jewish women snubbed the term “feminism,” their words and actions reveal that they were influenced by the concept. Already they were raising issues that Jewish feminists would take up in the 1970s. Three Jewish women prominent during this first feminist era prove this point.

Carrie Obendorfer Simon, the founding president of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS), today known as the Women of Reform Judaism, is the first example. For at least half a century, American Jewish women had been organizing congregational ladies’ groups, sometimes called “sisterhoods.” Sisterhoods bought flowers for the bima, served Sunday school children refreshments, and arranged social events to raise money and help the synagogue pay its bills. As feminism was aborning, Carrie Simon, the wife of the rabbi of Washington Hebrew Congregation, the oldest synagogue in the nation’s capital, hit on the idea of uniting these societies into a powerful organization of women dedicated to Judaism.

In January 1913, women from fifty-two Reform synagogues gathered to establish the NFTS. Within the decade, the women of Conservative Judaism’s sisterhoods and those of American Orthodoxy had followed suit. These new organizations, with their tens of thousands of members, revealed the growing power and influence of American Jewish women in their synagogues. Sisterhoods propelled women, historically marginalized in religious worship, ritual, and governance, to leadership at home in their congregations and beyond them in their national religious movements.

Just two years after founding NFTS, Carrie Simon boasted:

Woman is looking around and ahead. ... She has been told that she was once a slave, an inferior, a minion. ... Power undreamed has been placed in her hands, and her scepter will sway from hovel to White House. She is only on the first step of the threshold, leading to the hall of civic, culture, and economic influences. Woman’s emancipation is no longer to be argued; it may be dreaded, deplored, or defied. But it is to be reckoned with.¹⁹

A few years later, when Martha Neumark, the daughter of a faculty member at Reform Judaism’s Hebrew Union College, tried to become a rabbi, Carrie Simon, the rebbetzin who championed women’s emancipation, took up her cause.

The life and work of Henrietta Szold, the founding president of Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, provides a second illustration of first-wave feminism’s influence on Jewish women. By the time that she and thirty-seven women met on Purim in 1912 to call forth a large group of women to build up Jewish life

18 *Ibid.* On “constellation Feminism,” 49. On the growing use and recognition of the term starting in the 1910s, see: https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=feminism&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smooth_hing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cfeminism%3B%2Cc0

19 Pamela S. Nadell, “‘The Synagogue Shall Hear the Call of the Sister’: Carrie Simon and the Founding of NFTS,” in Carole Balin et al., eds., *Sisterhood: A Centennial History of the Women of Reform Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2013), 18-48, quotation, 35.

and institutions in Palestine and promote Zionism in America, Szold was the best-known Jewish woman of her day. She had formed the first night school to teach immigrants English. She had run, albeit without the formal title of editor in chief, the Jewish Publication Society, the first successful press established to provide American Jews with the books indispensable to cultivating Jewish life in the golden land. She had studied rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary, not to become a rabbi but rather to gain the knowledge that she would need to edit the papers of her father, Rabbi Benjamin Szold. She had been the only female member of the provisional executive committee of the Federation of American Zionists, which later became the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA). But it was her journey to Palestine in 1909, where she saw children with wreaths of flies circling their diseased eyes, that led her to recruit masses of American Jewish women to Zionism.²⁰

In the 1920s and 1930s, when the men of the ZOA tried to control Hadassah, appropriate its funds, and dictate the acceptable arenas of women's Zionist work, Hadassah fought back. What these men wanted was an auxiliary and subordinate Jewish women's movement. What they got was an independent female Zionist movement, which, in 1935, raised the 2010 equivalent of \$7.5 million for Zionist projects and which, the next year, elected its own slate of delegates to the World Zionist Congress. Feminism demanded women's autonomy, and Hadassah became an independent player on the Zionist scene.²¹

But Szold did more than carve out an autonomous role for American Zionist women; she also stood up for religious equality. After her mother's death in 1916, she declined a male friend's offer to say kaddish, contending that Jewish tradition had never intended to prohibit a woman from honoring the memory of her loved ones and finding comfort by reciting the prayer if she so wished.²²

Militant labor activist Rose Schneiderman, who came from Poland to New York's immigrant ghetto as a child in 1890, provides a powerful third example. She was only nine when her father, not long after the family's arrival in America, died, and she had to leave school to care for her younger brothers and baby sister while her mother went out to work. A few years later, she entered a different schoolroom—the factory where she learned to sew linings for caps. In those days, everyone knew that employers paid female workers less than they paid men. When the capmakers went out on strike, the union, too, paid married men strike benefits, but women like Rose Schneiderman, who had to support widowed mothers and younger siblings, got nothing.²³

The labor movement's ambivalence towards working-class women propelled Schneiderman to make common cause with the middle-class reformers of the Women's Trade Union League, who were trying to improve the lives of working-class girls and women. She eventually became its national president. Schneiderman championed the cause of working women, most famously the immigrant women sewing shirtwaists until their aching fingers bled, whose 1909 strike on New York's Lower East Side galvanized labor activism in the heavily Jewish garment trades for the next decade. She campaigned for woman suffrage, ran for the United States Senate on the New York State Labor Party ticket, and entered national politics, first as the only female member of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's National Labor Advisory Board and then as secretary of labor for the State of New York.

20 On Szold, see: Marvin Lowenthal, ed., *Henrietta Szold: Life and Letters* (New York: Viking, 1942); Joan Dash, *Summoned to Jerusalem: The Life of Henrietta Szold* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

21 "Hadassah Leaders Tell Aims to 1,500," *New York Times*, Nov. 29, 1935; "General Aid Urged for All Palestine," *New York Times*, Dec. 29, 1936.

22 Szold to Haym Peretz, Sept. 16, 1916 in Lowenthal, *Henrietta Szold*, 92-93.

23 Rose Schneiderman and Lucy Goldthwaite, *All for One* (New York: P. S. Eriksson, 1967).

Pulled into the gravitational orbit of various stars in the feminist constellations, Simon, Szold, and Schneiderman's lives foreshadowed the American Jewish feminist future. Schneiderman, active in the fields of labor and politics, fought for women's political, legal, and economic equality. In addition, in never marrying and conducting a long-term relationship with another woman, Schneiderman portended the modern women's movement championing of sexual liberation. Simon's work centered on women's influence in the synagogue. When, in the 1920s, she called for the ordination of women, she took up what would become one of the major demands of religious Jewish feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, a challenge that still roils Orthodoxy today. Meanwhile, she too looked beyond the Jewish community, expecting American women to exert greater political and economic influence, even thinking that someday they would enter the White House, and not just as First Lady. Szold led American Jewish women to assert their independence in Zionist politics and in their numerous social welfare projects in the Yishuv, but she too took up the call for women's religious emancipation when she insisted on saying kaddish for her mother.

After second-wave feminism burst forth, American Jewish women turned to the past, searching for role models to validate what they were trying to do. They discovered Carrie Simon, Henrietta Szold, Rose Schneiderman, and thousands of others whose words and actions reassured them that the roads they were now paving had first been ploughed open by those who came before. Writing women into history, and into Jewish history, became bright constellations in the feminist firmament.

Feminism in the Doldrums

National and international crises invariably push women's issues to the back burner. The urgency of the moment overpowers everything else, obliterating "secondary" concerns; and anything to do with women's rights always seems to fall into that latter category. Policymakers are convinced that women can wait until the emergency has passed. From 1929 through the 1950s, feminist aims paled before the calamity of the Great Depression, the cataclysm of World War II, and the alarms of the Cold War and nuclear arms race. Feminism did not vanish, but its advocates carried it forward in the decades dubbed the "feminist doldrums."²⁴

In truth, the feminist expectations for a revolution in women's status following the ratification of the suffrage amendment had never been realized. In these years most educated women remained locked in feminized occupations such as teaching and nursing. The few who managed to climb into the professions of medicine and the law were so rare that the press touted their accomplishments.²⁵

Nevertheless, some feminists continued to press their demands. In 1923, the National Woman's Party, led by Alice Paul, convinced Congress to propose an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution. Considered the next step needed to guarantee equality for American women, the ERA was reintroduced into every subsequent session of Congress, even as the cataclysms that began with the Great Depression rolled onward. Finally, in 1972, Congress passed the amendment and sent it to the states for ratification. But ratification by the required 38 states failed, and even today the US does not explicitly guarantee its female citizens equal rights under the law.

24 Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

25 William H. Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 100.

But a sign of American women's progress in the decades of the doldrums was their expanded participation in the labor force and their entrance into the armed forces during World War II. Even though a Congressman grumbled—who will “maintain the homes fires, who will do the cooking, the washing, the mending?”—the crisis forced the country to enlist women in the war effort. Posters featured “Rosie the Riveter,” her hair wrapped in a bandanna, flexing her biceps, announcing to the world that “We Can Do It,” before heading off to work welding airplane parts and assembling munitions. By war's end, more than 350,000 women had served in the US armed forces, while millions more had taken over jobs formerly restricted to men.²⁶ Of course, most of the women in the armed forces worked as nurses or clerks, typists, and secretaries. Still, the doors to women's military service had swung open, and they did not slam shut after the emergency ended, even though many of the women who had entered the factories while the men were off fighting were fired when the GIs came home.

Although, in these years, feminism failed to mobilize masses, historians have discovered “lively characters” and small groups advancing feminist aims, even though they, like the women who enlisted in the military and worked in wartime industries, would rarely have labeled themselves feminists.²⁷

Lively feminist characters also popped up among American Jews. When the women of Hadassah sent their own delegation to the World Zionist Congress, they obliterated the last vestige of their subordination to the ZOA. Twelve members of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps first officers' class were Jewish women.²⁸

Synagogues too saw some feminist characters. In 1922, Judith Kaplan, daughter of Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, celebrated what was then widely assumed to be the first bat mitzvah. On a Shabbat morning she recited the blessings and read, in Hebrew and English, part of the weekly Torah portion from a printed Bible. Despite considerable debate, bat mitzvah spread during the doldrums. Rabbis endorsed it because it required Jewish education and synagogue attendance for girls and prepared them to become good Jewish wives and mothers ready to raise the next generation of Jewish children. It also, happily for the rabbis, boosted synagogue membership and the turnout for services and their sermons. Parents embraced bat mitzvah as an appropriate coming-of-age ceremony for their daughters, proof of Judaism's commitment to equality of the sexes. By 1960, almost all Conservative and Reform American synagogues permitted girls to have a bat mitzvah.²⁹

Even as the bat mitzvah took off during the doldrums, it was decidedly meant to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience for a girl to ascend the bima. But a few women dared to challenge that assumption. In 1939, Helen Levinthal, the daughter and granddaughter of leading American rabbis, completed the rabbinical curriculum at New York's Jewish Institute for Religion, a liberal seminary that would later merge with Reform's Hebrew Union College. When she graduated with the degree of Master of Hebrew Letters, rather than the rabbinical ordination her classmates received, the popular *Time* magazine proclaimed her “as near to being a rabbi as a

26 Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 114.

27 Susan M. Hartmann, *The Other Feminists: Activists in the Liberal Establishment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

28 *Women in the Military: A Jewish Perspective* (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Jewish Military History, n.d.).

29 Regina Stein, “The Road to Bat Mitzvah in America,” in Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna, eds., *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives*, (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2001), 223-234.

female might be.”³⁰ In the mid-1950s, after Conservative rabbis permitted women to have aliyot, hundreds of shocked congregants fled their High Holiday seats when their rebbetzin was called to the Torah.³¹

These events demonstrate some figures trying to push women’s equality into American Judaism. It was one thing for an adolescent girl to have a bat mitzvah, a ceremony that, like Judith Kaplan’s, then differed from a boy’s bar mitzvah. In fact, in many synagogues when bat mitzvah appeared, it was held on Friday night and often was a group ceremony.³² But it was quite a different thing for a grown woman to step out of her place and into a man’s role. Unsurprisingly, in the years of the doldrums, when women crashed the gender line in the synagogue, they encountered tremendous resistance, facing the same opposition other lively feminist characters confronted elsewhere in American life.

30 Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis*, 85.

31 Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 120-21.

32 For a late example, see the discussion of future Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagen’s 1973 bat mitzvah in David G. Dalin, *Jewish Justices of the Supreme Court* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 260.

Stage II: Launching Second-Wave Feminism

Cheerful conformity to gender roles and domestic contentment presumably defined American women during the Cold War.³³ That “war” began shortly after World War II as an Iron Curtain descended over the eastern European satellite states of the Soviet Union, and the United States pushed back to contain the spread of communism. Veering away from fifteen years of privation and war, young women rushed into marriage and motherhood. With growing families in tow, they and their husbands, the fathers who knew best—so claimed a beloved show on that new marvel, television—fled to the burgeoning suburbs. There, so popular culture recalls, young Jewish mothers spent their days driving their children to Little League baseball practices and Sunday school and themselves to Hadassah and Parent Teacher Association meetings.

Yet, despite the persistent image of smiling housewives, in pearls and aprons, welcoming home their masters at the end of each day, social and economic transformations portended change. New domestic technologies had eased women’s burdens in the home; female life expectancy increased. But entrenched attitudes about gender had not shifted. When a medical school dean quipped in 1961, “Hell yes, we have a quota. . . . We do keep women out, when we can. We don’t want them here—and they don’t want them elsewhere, either,” he was speaking for an American workplace that channeled working women to the feminized careers of clerks, secretaries, teachers, and nurses.³⁴ But an expanding service economy had opened up thousands of new jobs. The proportion of American women in the labor force continued to rise, and the percentage of married women working outside the home doubled.³⁵ As America raced against the Soviet Union for international dominance, government leaders recognized that they had failed to utilize female talents fully and that, to win the Cold War, they had better do so.

While the media mostly ignored or attacked women who dared to transgress stereotypical female roles in these years, when the Presbyterian Church, one of the largest and most important Protestant denominations, ordained its first female minister in 1956, the press lauded the breakthrough.³⁶ Meanwhile, feminist stalwarts kept the ERA alive in Congress, while women in the public eye, like former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and television psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers, the daughter of two Jewish lawyers, belied the domestic stereotype.

Moreover, those reportedly contented mothers pushing baby carriages had an awful lot of time to think.³⁷ Some were not only thinking about what they would cook for dinner or their next Mah Jongg game. Instead, they began questioning the script of their lives: “You got educated, you married, you had children.” Was there nothing more?

As their baby daughters grew up, some sensed their mothers’ disappointments—the careers thwarted by marriage and motherhood, the boredom, the despair. There and then they resolved not to let that happen to them. They were not the first daughters to dream of living lives different than their mothers, but they came of age at a time when they had the opportunities to do so. A new feminist movement was about to burst out of

33 Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

34 Quoted in Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 20.

35 Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 300-303.

36 “A First Lady Minister in Robes of a New Role,” *Life*, Nov. 12, 1956, 151-152.

37 Eugenia Kaledin, *Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), 214.

those questions and discontents, and some of the mothers and daughters asking them as the 1950s gave way to the 1960s would become its leaders.³⁸

At the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, executive director Jane Evans was a lively feminist character. As she began planning, in 1961, for the organization's upcoming biennial conference, she sensed that American women were stirring anew. A young president, John F. Kennedy, had already established a Presidential Commission on the Status of Women. Appointed to its Committee for Protective Labor Legislation was the veteran labor activist, Russian Jewish immigrant Bessie Abramowitz Hillman.

As the NFTS prepared to convene in Washington, Evans decided that the women of Reform Judaism should undertake their own study: not a commission on women's status in American life, but an examination of the paramount signifier of women's inequality in their world of Reform Judaism, ordaining women rabbis.

Two years later both groups reported their findings. The Presidential Commission's report, *American Women*, was hardly a feminist statement. It reaffirmed women's proper roles as wives, mothers, and housekeepers. But it did document the inequities women faced in the work place, and it included items that had long been on Bessie Hillman's agenda—paid maternity leave for working women and childcare centers.³⁹ Meanwhile, when the women of NFTS convened to celebrate its golden anniversary in 1963, the thousand delegates voted overwhelmingly that it was high time that Reform Judaism resolved, once and for all, the question of women rabbis.⁴⁰



By then, second-wave feminism was bursting out in American life. In 1963, housewife and journalist Betty Friedan, née Bettye Goldstein, published *The Feminine Mystique*. There she chronicled the boredom, discontent, and dismay of her generation of female college graduates confined to suburban homes which she denounced as “comfortable concentration camps.” Describing their malaise as “the problem that has no name,” Friedan blamed the media, social scientists, and other authorities for propagating a “feminine mystique,” dictating to women that their role in life was to sublimate their own desires to nurture those of their husbands and children. Calling for an end to women's subordination in the home and workplace, *The Feminine Mystique* became an instant classic and was translated into a dozen languages, although Hebrew is not one of them.⁴¹ It launched a revolution, and Friedan, who later linked her sensitivity to sexism to the exclusion she faced as a Jew growing up in the American Midwest, became the mother of a new feminism.

Congress paved the way for women to act on their discontent as it passed the Equal Pay Act of 1963. Then, a year later, Congress enacted one of the most sweeping pieces of civil rights legislation in the nation's history. It outlawed racial discrimination in American life. No longer would water fountains be labeled “whites” and “colored.” No longer could restaurants refuse to serve African Americans. No longer could Southern states use special tests to prevent African-American men and women from voting.⁴²

38 Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 40, 119-120.

39 On Hillman, see Karen Pastorello, *A Power among Them: Bessie Abramowitz Hillman and the Making of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

40 Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis*, 138.

41 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963). I thank Prof. Renée Levine Melammed for confirming that only an excerpt of the book has been translated into Hebrew.

42 These guarantees were extended by the 24th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibiting a poll tax, which was ratified in 1964, and by the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Unexpectedly, thanks to a conservative Southern congressman who injected gender into the bill that became law, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act made it unlawful for employers to discriminate in hiring on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, and ... sex. A year later, the government established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to enforce Title VII. Its officials and staff had expected that the Commission would deal mostly with racial bias. They were stunned when more than a third of the complaints filed in the first year claimed sex discrimination. Was it still legal for employers to advertise “Help Wanted, Male” and “Help Wanted, Female”? Could states continue to “protect” women by barring them from certain jobs? Could airlines routinely fire stewardesses, as flight attendants were then called, when they reached the old age of thirty-five?

The EEOC hired its first female lawyer, Sonia Pressman (Fuentes). As a child, she had escaped Nazi Germany. As a lawyer looking for a job, she interviewed with a man who told her to apply to be his legal secretary. Now this exasperated feminist, infuriated by how her bosses on the commission were belittling and dismissing the sex discrimination complaints, groused to Friedan: Women needed their own civil rights organization.⁴³ In 1966, Friedan became the founding president of the National Organization for Women (NOW), established to demand equal rights for women. Twelve percent of its founding members were Jews, at a time when Jews were 3 percent of the American population. The birth of NOW heralded the arrival of the new women’s movement in American life.⁴⁴

Four years later, Friedan spearheaded the Women’s Strike for Equality. On August 26, 1970, fifty years after American women had won the right to vote, women around the nation rose up. They marched and protested, held teach-ins and rallies. How many actually went out on strike, covering their typewriters to shine a light on women’s limited job opportunities, or left the beds unmade and the dishes unwashed to underline inequality of labor in the home, is unclear.

But in New York and cities around America, tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, turned out. Hoisting placards reading “Don’t Cook Dinner Tonight—Starve a Rat Today” and “Repent. Male Chauvinists, Your World is Coming to an End,” the throngs overflowed the one lane they were allotted on New York’s Fifth Avenue.⁴⁵ Then the crowd streamed into a park to hear their leaders speak. There they heard Friedan exclaim:

In the religion of my ancestors, there was a prayer that Jewish men said every morning. They prayed, “Thank Thee, Lord, that I was not born a woman.” Today I feel, feel for the first time, feel absolutely sure that all women are going to be able to say, as I say tonight: “Thank thee, Lord, that I was born a woman, for this day.”⁴⁶

Nearly fifteen years later, telling this story to a group of American and Israeli feminists meeting in Jerusalem, Friedan recalled that she was startled by her own words. She claimed that she had had no idea that she even knew the prayer.⁴⁷ At this defining moment of second-wave feminism, she stood before the world as an American, a woman, a feminist, and a Jew.

By then, of course, she was just one of the myriad of Jewish women on view in the constellations of feminism, American style.

43 Sonia Pressman Fuentes, *Eat First—You Don’t Know What They’ll Give You: The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter* (n.p.: XLibris, 1999).

44 Email from Sonia Pressman Fuentes to Jacqui Ceballos, dated Apr. 14, 2013, forwarded to author, Feb. 24, 2017.

45 Linda Charlton, “Women March Down Fifth Avenue,” *New York Times*, Aug. 27, 1970.

46 Betty Friedan, *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women’s Movement* (New York: Random House, 1976), 154.

47 Betty Friedan, “Women and Jews: The Quest for Selfhood,” *Congress Monthly* 52(2) (Feb./Mar. 1985): 7-11.

Mapping Jewish Women in Second-Wave Feminism

Second-wave feminism wrought a revolution. Women won the right to keep their surname when they married and, while married, to get financial credit on their own. Jobs once routinely held almost exclusively by men opened to women. Women flooded into the professions, which, until then, had only token female representation. In 1970, on the day that *Newsweek* magazine published its cover story “Women in Revolt” on the new feminist movement, forty-six of its female employees—those locked in the job of researcher, the few who had made it to writer, and the many who knew that no woman could ever hope to be an editor at *Newsweek*—revolted. They filed a class-action lawsuit charging the magazine with sex discrimination in hiring and promotion. One of those forty-six, Lynn Povich, had been the first girl in her synagogue to have a bat mitzvah.⁴⁸ After Title IX of the 1972 Education Act prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally-funded education program, colleges and universities had to offer their coeds, not just their male students, athletic programs. By 1974, an entire new field of study had emerged and more than a thousand colleges and universities were offering courses in women’s studies.

The Supreme Court legalized abortion. Rape and the threat of rape, recognized for their ubiquity, became understood as expressions of masculine power, ways men dominate and humiliate women. Domestic violence and sexual harassment entered the lexicon; the title “Ms.” replaced Miss and Mrs., which identified women by their marital status. Feminists ran for local, state, and national office, and some won their elections. They wrote literature and poetry, made movies, and appeared on television. It is hard, in this short paper, to convey the breadth of these transformations. Within two decades, the political, legal, social, and cultural landscape of the United States underwent a seismic shift around gender issues.⁴⁹

Although the term “women’s liberation” is often used colloquially to refer to second-wave feminism, women’s liberation refers to only some of the feminist constellations. Friedan advanced equal-rights feminism, demanding for women political, legal, and economic equality with men. She fought for women to have access to the same jobs as men and to be paid the same as men for the same work. Equal-rights feminism emphasized legislative and political change. It traced its origins to other revolutions. Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 tract *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was inspired by the French Revolution. In America, when Abigail Adams, later the nation’s second first lady, wrote to her husband John, she urged the Continental Congress, as it drafted the Declaration of Independence, to “remember the ladies. . . . All men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”⁵⁰

Two centuries later, Friedan helped foment that long-delayed rebellion. For equal-rights feminists, like her, its goals remained equality before the law, in life, and opportunity.

By contrast, women’s liberation was its radical counterpart. Equality was not enough. Instead women’s liberation homed in on the power struggles that exist between men and women everywhere, in the boardroom, the courtroom, the bedroom, and the kitchen. It insisted that gender roles are not fixed biologically; they are

48 Lynn Povich, *The Good Girls Revolt: How the Women of Newsweek Sued Their Bosses and Changed the Workplace* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012); Danielle Cantor, “Lynn Povich Still Fighting for Women in the Workplace,” *JW Magazine* (Winter 2012).

49 On the breadth of the changes, see Rosen, *The World Split Open*.

50 <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/abigail-adams-urges-husband-to-remember-the-ladies>, accessed Dec. 10, 2017.

socially and historically determined. Women's liberation called for a complete restructuring of the relations between the sexes. Convinced that the personal is political, that everything personal is impacted by the political, women's liberation held up to scrutiny everything that touched women's lives: relationships, sexuality, marriage; birth control, abortion, menopause, and the medical system; work and the workplace; body image, the fashion and cosmetic industries, and the media; housework and childcare. Some of its advocates called for abolition of the nuclear family, arguing that a radical reinvention of what had, for far too long, been deemed the norm was essential to women's liberation.⁵¹

The litany of Jewish names in the forefront of both equal-rights feminism and women's liberation is dazzling. Because many of the names will be unfamiliar to readers of this paper, here is a tiny sampling of the brightest Jewish stars in the feminist sky.

Bella Abzug joined Friedan on the podium at the Women's Strike for Equality. As a child, she had been a member of the Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatsa'ir; as a peace activist, she rode the crest of second-wave feminism into the House of Representatives. Journalist Gloria Steinem also spoke that evening. Her father was Jewish; her mother was not. Both those who champion feminism and those who excoriate it have called her out as a Jew. In 1972, she launched the feminist magazine *Ms.* Its editor Letty Cottin Pogrebin had turned her back on Judaism as a teenager, when, wanting to say kaddish for her mother, she was excluded from the minyan. When she confronted antisemitism in the women's movement a decade later, she exposed it in the pages of *Ms.* magazine and the *New York Times*.⁵²

Gerda Lerner had escaped Vienna after the Anschluss. In America, already in her forties, she earned a doctorate in history, pioneered the new field of women's history, and lobbied the government to designate March "Women's History Month." She also blamed the Hebrew Bible for centering patriarchy and the subordination of women at the core of Western civilization.⁵³

Growing up, Ruth Bader Ginsburg remembered seeing signs, "No dogs or Jews allowed." At Harvard Law School, the dean made her justify why she deserved a spot in the classroom that could have gone to a man. After she graduated, Felix Frankfurter, a Jewish Supreme Court justice, refused to hire her as his law clerk; at the time no one hired female law clerks, and he would not be the first to break tradition. As director of the American Civil Liberties Union Women's Project, she argued landmark cases that overturned sex discrimination. In 1993, she became the second woman and the sixth Jew named to the Supreme Court.⁵⁴

When a twelve-year-old girl had to quit her baseball team because the Little League association barred girls from the diamond, Prof. Judith Weis convinced her NOW chapter to file a sex-discrimination suit. When Judge Sylvia Pressler heard the case, she ruled that even if "whites like to be with whites, blacks like to be with blacks, and Jews like to be with Jews, ... we must start somewhere in reversing the trends in this society. The sooner

51 On Jewish women and women's liberation, see Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

52 Letty Cottin Pogrebin, "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement: A Jewish Feminist's Disturbing Account," *Ms.*, June 1982, 145-49; eadem, "Hers: Can Judaism and Feminism Afford to Be in Conflict?" *New York Times*, Aug. 25, 1983, C2.

53 Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 179.

54 Linda Hirshman, *Sisters in Law: How Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg Went to the Supreme Court and Changed the World* (New York: Harper, 2015).

that little boys realize that little girls are equal,” the better. Two Jewish women had opened the nation’s favorite pastime to the girls of America.⁵⁵

As a child, Marilyn Salzman (Webb) was shocked when a Little League coach told her, “You can’t try out. You’re a girl.” In January 1969, at a counter-inauguration rally held the day before Richard Nixon was sworn in as president, she and Shulamith Firestone, who had attended an Orthodox yeshiva, stepped up to the microphone to speak about women’s equality. They expected their friends in the antiwar New Left to “get it,” to make women’s liberation another of their aims as they sought freedom for all. Then all hell broke loose. As they tried to speak, their male comrades-in-arms shouted, “shut up” and “take them off the stage and rape them.” Traumatized, they broke with the New Left and helped launch women’s liberation. Salzman Webb went on to found its newspaper *Off Our Backs* and to get thrown out of Senate hearings investigating the dangers of the birth control pill when she interrupted to ask why only men were testifying.⁵⁶

Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* blamed the family, where women bore and raised children, as the root of their oppression. She was one of the many Jewish feminists who wrote their rage onto the page in articles and books that became classics of women’s liberation. Alix Kates Shulman’s “A Marriage Agreement” created a contract for husband and wife to split all household tasks 50-50, from waking the kids in the morning to “wife strips beds, husband remakes them.” Originally published in 1970 in a small feminist journal, the article swept out to the nation as it was reprinted in the national weekly *Life*, the women’s magazine *Redbook*, and even in a Harvard textbook on contract law.⁵⁷ Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* defined rape not as a crime of lust but as a crime of violence, and made the startling observation that the threat of rape is a “conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.”⁵⁸

Many of these women and hundreds of thousands of others came to understand their oppression through consciousness-raising groups. Borrowing the practice from the civil rights movement, women began meeting regularly to talk about their lives. They spoke about their childhoods, boyfriends, marriage, housework, and days spent in the company of young children. Women in the civil rights and New Left movements compared notes and realized that they spent their days licking stamps and cleaning up; movement men did the writing and became the spokesmen. Some told of what happened when their professors and bosses invited them up to their offices and slammed the doors shut. As the women shared their stories, the collective came to comprehend that what they thought were isolated private experiences was sexism, endemic to society, rooted in cultural and institutional discrimination. Their consciousnesses raised, these women became feminists, “ready to turn the world upside down.”⁵⁹ “The personal had become political,” and the movement’s slogan was born.

55 Quoted in Pamela S. Nadell, “‘Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend’: Jewish Women and Baseball,” in Josh Perelman, ed., *Chasing Dreams: Becoming Americans and Baseball*, (Philadelphia: National Museum of American Jewish History, 2014), 158-163.

56 Marilyn Salzman Webb, “The Feminist,” in Jeff Kiseloff, ed., *Generation on Fire: Voices of Protest from the 1960s, an Oral History*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 167-182.

57 <https://jwa.org/feminism/shulman-alix-kates>; accessed Dec. 10. 2017.

58 Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975). http://www.susanbrownmiller.com/susanbrownmiller/html/against_our_will.html

59 Joyce Antler, “‘We Were Ready to Turn the World Upside Down’: Radical Feminism and Jewish Women,” in Hasia R. Diner, Shira Kohn, and Rachel Kranson, eds., *A Jewish Feminine Mystique? Jewish Women in Postwar America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 210-234.

For many feminists, like Robin Morgan, who included Israeli politician Shulamit Aloni's "Up the Down Escalator" in her anthology *Sisterhood Is Global*, Jewish descent was unimportant and irrelevant. Morgan helped plan one of the iconic events of the women's liberation movement, the 1968 protest at the Miss America beauty pageant. The protestors crowned a sheep "Miss America" and tossed into a Freedom Trash Can implements of "female torture," like false eyelashes and high-heels. They never burned a bra, but, from that day forward, feminists were called "bra-burners."⁶⁰

A group of activists organized as the Boston Women's Health Book Collective began protesting the male medical establishment and its patronizing treatment of women. They started teaching women to take control of their own bodies. Nine of its twelve founding members were Jewish. In 1973 they published *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, a book that has since sold millions of copies in multiple languages around the world. They had created a full-blown women's health movement.⁶¹

As a child, Heather Booth had wanted to be a rabbi—but, of course, women could not be rabbis back then. In 1965, after she helped a friend arrange for an illegal abortion, she founded Jane, a clandestine referral service that helped over 10,000 women find safe abortionists until abortion on demand became legal in the United States in 1973.⁶²

This introduces just a few of the Jewish leaders of second-wave feminism. Other names belong here: psychologists Phyllis Chesler and Carol Gilligan; historians Ellen Carol DuBois and Linda Gordon; Governor Madeline Kunin of Vermont and Manhattan Borough president Ruth Messinger; publisher Florence Howe; artists Helène Aylon and Judy Chicago; novelists Marge Piercy, Anne Roiphe, and Meredith Tax; writers Andrea Dworkin, Vivian Gornick, Adrienne Rich, and Ellen Willis.⁶³ The prominence of Jewish women in the constellations of second-wave feminism, American-style, raises questions. What attracted so many of them to the cause?

They leapt into second-wave feminism because of the convergence of their unique experiences as women, Jews, and Americans. Jewish women experienced triple discrimination as women, as Jews, and as Jewish women. As girls and women, they had met men like the law school dean who had demanded that the handful of women in Bader Ginsburg's Harvard law class justify why they deserved a spot that should have gone to a man.

As Jews, they had coped with prejudice from Gentiles. Friedan traced the origins of her feminism to the antisemitism that she experienced growing up. In high school, all her girlfriends were invited to join sororities, but, because she was Jewish, she was not. That rejection isolated her. She felt marginalized, standing outside the dominant culture, looking in. It fueled her passion against injustice. From the exclusion she, an assimilated Jew, faced, it was but a short leap to realizing the oppression she endured as a woman.⁶⁴

But Jewish women also encountered chauvinism within Judaism and their Jewish communities. Even a purported advance in girls' status, like the proliferation of the bat mitzvah, was carefully curbed. Povich

60 Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 160.

61 For a full discussion, see Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*, ch. 4.

62 <https://jwa.org/feminism/booth-heather>, accessed Dec. 10. 2017.

63 I am not the first to observe the striking number of Jewish women involved; see David A. Hollinger, "Communist and Dispersionist Approaches to American Jewish History in an Increasingly Post-Jewish Era," *American Jewish History* 95(1) (March 2009): 1-32. For more names, see: <https://jwa.org/feminism/key-concepts>.

64 Betty Friedan, "Jewish Roots: An Interview with Betty Friedan," *Tikkun* 3(1) (January/February 1988): 25-29.

celebrated that she was the first girl to have a bat mitzvah at her synagogue—but that meant that she knew that every woman before her had not had one. Pogrebin was propelled to feminism by her exclusion from her mother’s mourners’ minyan. Friedan repudiated the prayer “*shelo asani ishah*” (“who hast not made me a woman”) when she upended it to thank God for making her a woman.

Yet Judaism could have a paradoxical effect, propelling some to feminism. In the 1960s, tikkun olam, reformulated as demanding social justice, emerged as a powerful expression of American Jewish identification.⁶⁵ For many American Jews, being Jewish came to mean advancing social justice and standing up against all forms of discrimination, including sexism. Passover, the holiday of freedom, celebrated the triumph over oppression. Heather Booth traced her lifetime of activism to a visit to Yad Vashem. Encountering its record of injustice, she determined to spend her life fighting for justice. She was not the only feminist whose activism germinated in the shadow of the Holocaust.⁶⁶

Turning over a different page in the Jewish past uncovers the long history of American Jewish women’s political activism. Hannah Solomon and Henrietta Szold’s lives and accomplishments lived on in the memories of the organizations they founded. Other American Jewish women remembered their grandmothers and mothers as labor activists, socialists, communists, and anarchists, whose politics of the left, with its own rage against injustice and its own struggle against oppression, became their faith. Others perhaps remembered hearing how their grandmothers and mothers campaigned for birth control, peace,⁶⁷ consumer rights, Zionism, civil rights, and nuclear disarmament. Even if the Jewish women marching forward into second-wave feminism did not fully comprehend the breadth of this historical experience, they sensed that they stood in a long line of Jewish women activists.

We can understand why Jewish women were drawn to feminism—but why were they so disproportionately represented in its leadership? Family background, education, and social class provide clues. Having grown up arguing politics at the dinner table in leftist homes, they felt empowered to break the stereotype of nice quiet girls and raise their voices for their cause. Perhaps, there was also something distinctive about Jewish women’s rage against sexism, a rage augmented by the dread of turning into their bored suburban mothers if they did not strike out in new directions.

Moreover, Jewish families, both working and middle class, prized education as the path to success, and sent their daughters to college along with their sons. As a result, for much of the twentieth century Jewish women were (and today still are) better educated than their non-Jewish peers. In the 1950s, they were graduating from college at nearly double the rate of other American women.⁶⁸ even if, back then, many went to college for their “Mrs. degree” as much as for their B.A. College polished skills useful to political movements: how to hone an argument, speak in public, debate, and write. No wonder so many of these Jewish women wrote works that became feminist classics.

Finally, coming from middle-class homes or having ascended into the middle class thanks to their educations, Jewish women had the resources to engage in political activism. They could afford to join the civil rights

65 Jonathan Krasner, “The Place of Tikkun Olam in American Jewish Life,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 25(3 & 4), November 1, 2014 <http://jcpa.org/article/place-tikkun-olam-american-jewish-life1/>.

66 Judith Rosenbaum, “Jewish Feminist Leaders: What Drove Jewish Women into the Feminist Movement,” <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-feminist-leaders/>

67 On Jewish women campaigning for birth control and peace, see Melissa R. Klapper, *Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace: American Jewish Women’s Activism, 1890-1940* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

68 Diner, Kohn, and Kranson, *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?*, 3.

activists heading South and the New Left activists meeting in Chicago and Washington. Striving to end other oppressions, they realized their own and absorbed critical lessons in organizing. They came to the feminist movement knowing what to do, what tactics to use to disrupt the status quo, how to plan a protest, occupy an office, get the attention of the media, and operate a mimeograph machine. No wonder so many Jewish women stepped into leadership.

Yet, except for Friedan's remarkable speech at the Women's Strike for Equality, feminist leaders who came from Jewish backgrounds mostly ignored their Jewishness in those early years. Why?

For those whose religion was progressive politics, radical causes, and universal human rights, Jewish identity held scant significance. But that was not true for all. Moreover, the blinders about Jewish particularity extended well into the future. Even historians who were Jewish, such as Ruth Rosen, author of the excellent *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, ignored the striking phenomenon of the movement's Jewish leaders. As the distinguished historian and feminist Paula Hyman intuited, for feminism's leaders and for those who wrote them into history, "gender trumped all other aspects of identity."⁶⁹

Only later, in the mid-1970s and 1980s, after antisemitism and anti-Israelism exploded in the international women's movement, did some of these feminist leaders acknowledge their Jewishness. The United Nations, declaring 1975 to 1985 the International Women's Decade, convened three global conferences. The first, in Mexico City, denounced "Zionism as racism" months before the UN General Assembly did. The others, in Copenhagen and Nairobi, saw outrageous outbursts of antisemitism and attacks on Israeli feminists. When, in Mexico City, Leah Rabin, the wife of the Israeli prime minister, got up to speak, the Arabs, the communists, many African, and some Asian delegates stormed out. Friedan, leading the American delegation, was so incensed that she marched up to the podium to shake Rabin's hand. After Mexico City, Friedan, attacked there as an American and a Jew, proclaimed herself a Zionist and a Jewish feminist.⁷⁰ By the time that she and other second-wave feminist leaders conceded the magnitude of Jewish particularity, they encountered a Jewish community and Judaism that had been having their own feminist awakening.

"We Call for an End to the Second-Class Status of Women in Jewish Life"

By the early 1970s, Jewish feminism, demanding women's equality in the synagogue, liturgy, ritual, halakhah, and rabbinate, had appeared as a series of clusters in the feminist sky. Women, deeply committed to Judaism and Jewish life, whether in the Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox traditions, and now sensitized by feminism to see gender bias everywhere, refused to keep checking their feminism at the door of the synagogue on their way into Shabbat services. Outside its portals, they were demanding full equality in the home, the workplace, and society. But, inside the house of prayer, only men were on the bima, and everyone addressed God as "He." When a boy was born, there was a huge celebration for his *brit milah*; when his sister was born, her father's aliya on the Shabbat after her birth paled in comparison. Jewish women felt degraded by the law that disqualified them as witnesses in rabbinic courts. They protested that Jewish society denigrated women when it dictated that they could not be rabbis. If women were going to win equality everywhere in American life, then the American synagogue and American Jewish community would also have to adapt and embrace egalitarianism—and Jewish feminists would show them just how to do that.

69 Quoted in Antler, "We Were Ready to Turn the World Upside Down," 210.

70 Betty Friedan, "Scary Doings in Mexico City (1975)," in *It Changed My Life*, 350. For a full discussion of this, see Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*.

Jewish feminism arose amidst the euphoria sweeping American Jews in the wake of Israel's triumph in the Six-Day War. It sprang out of the American Jewish counterculture, a variant of the wider anti-establishment movement of the 1960s whose members marched against the war in Vietnam and for civil rights, and, paraphrasing one of the movement's gurus, turned on, tuned in, and dropped out to unconventional lifestyles. The American Jewish counterculture had another aim: the revitalization of American Jewish life. In 1969, student activists stormed the annual meeting of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds in Boston to demand more funding for Jewish education. Meanwhile, in Boston, New York, and elsewhere, young Jews created intimate study and worship groups, known as havurot, as alternatives to the spiritually arid, impersonally grandiose synagogues they remembered from their childhoods and now deplored.⁷¹

The first women to come to Jewish feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s felt torn in two. Their feminism promised them political, social, legal, economic, and intellectual equality with their male peers. But Judaism relegated them to second-class status in their synagogues, Jewish communities, and halakhah. At a time when young Jews were voicing their alienation from Judaism, these feminists asked whether the Jewish people could afford to ignore and demean half its members. Embracing the feminist challenge to Jewish patriarchy, they argued, could only strengthen the Jewish people. That object was paramount for these women, for Judaism sat at the very core of their being. Their commitment to its laws, rituals, Sabbaths, and holidays distinguished them from the "secular" Jewish feminists, for whom Jewish identity was only a single strand in the fabric of their lives. They shared with "secular" feminists frustrations over exclusion, exemptions, and downright gender discrimination. But for the Jewish feminists frustrations also included lack of access to text study, marginalization in religious worship, exclusion from religious leadership, and the injustice of inequity in religious divorce.⁷²

Judaism was not the only American religion wrestling with the feminist critique. From its inception, NOW sponsored an ecumenical task force on women and religion. Demanding women's equality within their churches, gender inclusivity in language and liturgy, and an end to exclusionary policies and practices, feminism stormed the bastion of American religion. NOW's task force campaigned as the Episcopal Church voted on the question of ordaining women and circulated petitions calling for Catholic women's ordination. It called for new Bible translations to emphasize women's roles. The Women and Religion Task Force proved that religious equality, no matter the faith, was an equal-rights feminist aim.⁷³

Already there were signs of the first meetings between second-wave feminism and American Judaism. *Time* and *Newsweek* reported that Hebrew Union College rabbinical student Sally J. Priesand planned to become "Rabbi Sally."⁷⁴ The *New York Times* discovered Hilda Abrevaya, the first woman cantor in the United States.⁷⁵ In 1971, in *Davka*, a publication of the Jewish counterculture's student press, Rachel Adler published what

71 Riv-Ellen Prell, "Triumph, Accommodation, and Resistance: American Jewish Life from the End of World War II to the Six-Day War," in *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America*, ed. Marc Lee Raphael (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 114-141.

72 Paula E. Hyman, "The Other Half: Women in the Jewish Tradition," in *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun (New York: Schocken, 1976), 105-113. For another overview of this topic, see Pamela S. Nadell, "A Bright New Constellation: Feminism and American Judaism," in *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America*, 385-405.

73 Ann Braude, "Faith, Feminism, and History," in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*, ed. Catherine A. Brekus (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 232-252.

74 "Rabbi Sally," *Newsweek*, 23 February 1970, 89; "Women at the Altar," *Time*, Nov. 2, 1970, 71ff.

75 Irving Spiegel, "A First in the States, a Woman Cantor," *New York Times*, May 30, 1971.

would become a Jewish feminist classic: “The Jew Who Wasn’t There: Halakhah and the Jewish Woman.”⁷⁶ A year later, the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations invited Jacqueline Levine, president of the women’s division of the American Jewish Congress, to speak about the position of women in the Jewish community. When she pointed to the gross under-representation of women in Jewish communal affairs, the women in the audience gave her an ovation. The men, she later recalled, seemed utterly bewildered.⁷⁷ Against this background the women of Conservative Judaism’s *Ezrat Nashim* coalesced.

Its founders, members of the New York *havurah*, were deeply committed to Jewish tradition. But elsewhere in their lives, they were active in the women’s movement. Martha Ackelsberg had participated in a consciousness-raising group; graduate student Paula Hyman had helped organize the women’s caucus in Columbia University’s History Department. Along with six others, including educator Deborah Weissman, who made *aliya* in 1972, and Elizabeth Koltun, who edited *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives* (1976), one of the first books on Jewish feminism, they formed a study group, one of several in the *havurah*. Deeply disturbed by Judaism’s bias in favor of men’s learning and prayer, they set out to explore the social and historical forces that had shaped Jewish women’s roles. Soon a few others, among them the future Jewish Theological Seminary Talmud professor Judith Hauptman, joined the group.⁷⁸

It took but a single event to transform this informal group into a gang of protesters. When leaders of the Jewish counterculture insisted that a conference they were planning be restricted to men, the women of *Ezrat Nashim* exploded in rage. Moving beyond their private conversations, they went public. In January 1972, they issued a position paper, “Jewish Women Call for Change”: “We’ve had enough of apologetics: enough of Bruria, Dvora, and Esther, enough of Eshet Chayil.” Then the women listed their demands. Women must become full members of their synagogues, be counted for a *minyan*, participate fully in worship (called to the Torah, read from it, lead the prayer service), accepted as witnesses by rabbinical courts, initiate divorce, permitted to attend rabbinical and cantorial schools, serve as leaders in their synagogues and the Jewish community, and be considered as bound, as men are, to fulfill all the commandments. “For three thousand years, one-half of the Jewish people have been excluded from full participation in Jewish communal life,” they wrote. “We call for an end to the second-class status of women in Jewish life.”⁷⁹

Ezrat Nashim’s demands resonated with American Jewish women and men already exposed to second-wave feminism. Its members were deluged with requests to share their message widely. They spoke to synagogues, communal organizations, student groups, and the American and Jewish presses. They also helped plan the first National Jewish Women’s Conference, held in New York City in February 1973.

That conference drew more than 500 women from all across America. Their varying interests and concerns exposed the many currents of Jewish feminism. Like the American feminism of which it was a part, Jewish feminism is exceedingly diverse. It fractures along denominational lines and exposes feminist and Jewish differences. This first conference shined a light on the issues that would define Jewish feminism, American style: women’s status in halakhah, the synagogue, Jewish communal life, Jewish education, and the State of Israel.

76 Rachel Adler, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There: Halakhah and the Jewish Woman” (*Davka*, summer 1971); repr. in *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken, 1983), 12-18.

77 Ruth Abusch-Magder, “The First National Jewish Women’s Conference: A Study of the Early Jewish Feminist Movement” (B.A. senior thesis, Barnard College, 1991), 13. Ruth Abusch-Magder Papers, P-841, Box 1, American Jewish Historical Society, Center for Jewish History.

78 Alan Silverstein, “The Evolution of *Ezrat Nashim*,” *Conservative Judaism* 30 (Fall 1975): 41-51.

79 <https://jwa.org/media/jewish-women-call-for-change>, accessed Dec. 10, 2017.

The agenda included topics that would spark enormous feminist creativity in the years to come—developing new rituals to acknowledge significant moments in women’s lives ignored in Jewish tradition, discovering historical feminist role models, revisioning an androcentric God and prayer, creating Jewish women’s studies, and opening up space for lesbians.

At the conference, the women gathered for Shabbat services. Those who had never had an aliya or read from the Torah did so with tears in their eyes, experiencing a spiritual moment that every Jewish male from the age of thirteen was entitled to have but which they, as girls and women, had never expected to know in their lives. In a stunning first for most, at the weekday minyan the future theologian Rachel Adler not only wore a tallit and put on tefillin, she also taught others how to do so.⁸⁰

The speakers included future luminaries of Jewish feminism. Ezrat Nashim was represented by Paula Hyman and Judith Hauptman. Laura Geller, Lynn Gottlieb, Rebecca Trachtenberg, and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, who would become some of the first female rabbis, led discussions. Blu Greenberg, later the mother of Orthodox feminism, gave the keynote address—although the organizers had originally approached the Greenbergs to ask her husband, Prof. Irving Greenberg, to give those remarks. The theologian Judith Plaskow (then Goldenberg) spoke about sexism in Jewish tradition. There were workshops on poor, single, married, and gay Jewish women; on growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust, and on growing up Jewish. A session on women in Israel exposed myths and realities, and a panel of rabbis, all male, of course, spoke on women and halakhah.⁸¹

But the real “stars of the show,” wrote one participant, were New York congresswomen Bella Abzug and Elizabeth Holtzman. Their presence underscored the diversity of Jewish feminists. Women committed to religious observance who were deeply disturbed by Judaism’s gender bias stood next to those for whom being Jewish was but one aspect of their lives. Abzug and Holtzman, prominent second-wave leaders, expected feminism to transform all of American society. That it would also transform American Jewish life was, for them, a happy byproduct of that wider revolution. So Abzug stood with those at the conference to proclaim: “Today we are writing a different kind of history. Your being here is the history of the future.”⁸²

As the conference ended, the delegates launched several projects reflecting their different aims. They planned to encourage consciousness-raising and form study groups, to found an abortion-counseling service for Jewish women, and to spread Jewish feminism through a speakers’ bureau and publications.⁸³ Soon the issues raised there and in other forums and publications, like *Lilith*, the first Jewish feminist magazine, which debuted in 1976 and is still published today by founding editor Susan Weidman Schneider, trickled down to the women who had long found outlets for their activism in the historic Jewish women’s organizations.

What did American Jewish feminism demand? For many, transformation of women’s roles in the synagogue tops the feminist agenda. For those affiliated with the liberal denominations of American Judaism, with the Reform and Conservative movements, this meant reconfiguring the synagogue as an egalitarian institution. But the contours of that reconfiguration depended on the particular branch of Judaism and its unique balance of tradition and change.

80 Rachel Adler to author, email, May 6, 2005.

81 The program is in Abusch-Magder, “The First National Jewish Women’s Conference: A Study of the Early Jewish Feminist Movement,” Appendix A.

82 Shirley Frank, “Women: Writing the History of the Future,” *Attah* (1973): 4-5.

83 Shirley Frank, “Concrete Results Noted on Journals, Midwest Parley in Fall,” *Attah* (1973): 5.

It may be hard for Israelis to understand, but in America, where religion is a major expression of Jewish identity, it is indeed possible to be “religious,” in the sense of observing Jewish custom and practices, within the liberal branches of American Judaism. Rabbis and congregants observe Sabbaths and holidays, interpret the texts of the Jewish past, and perform rituals according to their movement’s theology and ideology.

Today Reform Judaism is the largest American Jewish religious movement; throughout its history it has been the most open to calls for religious change. In the early twentieth century most Reform leaders opposed Zionism, a position that shifted as the Nazi persecution of the Jews increased. Reform Judaism recognizes patrilineal descent and permits its rabbis to officiate at intermarriages. In some of its synagogues the Torah is read, not chanted, at the Friday evening service, which begins at 8 p.m., summer and winter, and there are no services on Shabbat morning unless there is a bar or bat mitzvah.

Orthodox Judaism, of course, provides a powerful counterpoint. In America, it spans a wide spectrum, from the centrist Modern Orthodox to the ultraorthodox haredim, but it too has seen change. At one time, in the 1950s and into the 1980s and, in a few cases, even beyond, some Orthodox congregations permitted men and women to sit together in the sanctuary during prayer, and at social events mixed dancing was perfectly acceptable. Yet, in recent decades, Orthodoxy has tilted to the right on such practices, even though some of its leaders have sought halakhically permissible compromises for expanding women’s religious roles and have begun ordaining women.⁸⁴

Conservative Judaism straddles a middle ground, seeking to preserve traditions that unite it to Jews around the world while adapting to changing times. When, in 1973, the Conservative movement decided to count women in a minyan, the *New York Times* broke the news on the page one.⁸⁵ An important American religious movement had taken a step towards equality for women, and, in the largest Jewish city in the world, that was front-page news.

The key point is that, in the United States, where Jewish identification so often means the Jewish religion, faithful Jews are “religious,” but the term has a different connotation than it does in Israel. The Reform rabbi who reads the Torah in his—or her—temple (as Reform Jews call their synagogues) on Friday night and takes the family to the art museum on Saturday afternoon is an observant Jew according to Reform traditions. Conservative congregants who invite family and friends for Shabbat dinner, turning the lights and stove on and off and driving to synagogue on Shabbat morning, are also “religious” Jews according to their movement’s interpretations of Jewish law.

Experiencing a feminist awakening, recognizing sexism in the synagogue, Reform and Conservative Jews demanded change. The result: Today their congregations look different. In some, women pray wearing kippah and tallit and even put on tefillin. Adult women, having learned Hebrew and mastering liturgical skills, celebrate the bat mitzvah they never had as girls. Women read Torah, lead many parts of the service, sit on the bima as the synagogue president, and, in the most dramatic transformation, some became rabbis.

The history of women’s quest for rabbinic ordination dates back to the late nineteenth century, when the debate over a woman’s right to be a rabbi emerged as part of a larger debate about American women’s access to all the learned professions. If women wanted to become doctors, lawyers, and ministers, why should they not also want to be rabbis? But despite a series of challengers and discussions that went on for nearly a century,

84 Adam S. Ferziger, *Beyond Sectarianism: The Realignment of American Orthodox Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015), chs. 5 and 9.

85 Irving Spiegel, “Conservative Jews Vote for Women in Minyan,” *New York Times*, Sept. 11 1973, 1.

it took the collision of second-wave feminism with American Judaism to propel women into the rabbinate. In 1972 in Reform Judaism, in 1974 in Reconstructionist Judaism, and in 1985 in Conservative Judaism, the first women rabbis were ordained.⁸⁶

As hundreds of women became rabbis, they furthered the feminist agenda in American Jewish life. They hold the key to understanding how so many of the innovations wrought by the encounters with feminism went mainstream so quickly. These rabbis' visibility in the pulpit, their writings, and their presence in their communities gave them enormous influence. Standing on the feminist front lines, the women who became rabbis were often among the first to adopt its revolutionary changes.

Because of their titles and where they stood, they brought feminism home to America's Jews. Touched by feminist rabbis in the classroom, on the bima, at Shabbat dinner, and often at the most vulnerable moments of their lives—when they wed, celebrated their newborns, rejoiced at b'nai mitzvah, and mourned the dead—boys and girls, men and women encountered a Judaism transformed by feminism. The women who became rabbis laid the bridges over which the feminist critique of Judaism crossed into the homes, synagogues, and communities of modern American Jews. Collectively, they communicated feminism's agenda to American Jewish women and men.⁸⁷

One sign of the feminist revolution is ritual invention. As feminists turned a critical lens on Judaism, they realized that, despite its array of blessings and ceremonies, few affirmed the transformational moments in women's lives. Feminists have sought to link Judaism to the occasions, great and small, that rest at the core of the female experience and are often intimately linked to a woman's body and life cycle.

Not surprisingly then, some of the very first ritual innovations focused on the newborn, a response to the very different customs for welcoming infant boys and girls into the community. In 1973, *Response*, another of the journals of the Jewish Student Press Service, published the first ceremonies for bringing a newborn baby girl into the covenant.⁸⁸ More would follow.

In this arena of ritual creativity, the female rabbis of the liberal movements, as they realized just how little the tradition they had mastered met their own spiritual needs, took the lead. They created a dazzling array of prayers, readings, and ceremonies for all those moments of life, especially of women's lives, that Jewish tradition had ignored. These rabbis have published prayers and rituals for falling in love for the first time and having the first sexual experience, finding out that the biopsy is negative, becoming a grandparent, cooking a grandmother's recipe, and even discovering Jewish feminism. There are prayers for going to the mikveh, with special ones for an evening when the couple wishes to conceive, for the first months of pregnancy, for entering the ninth month, for the onset of labor, for a Caesarean birth, and for nursing for the first time. New rituals sustain those grieving infertility, suffering stillbirth, seeking medical intervention, and turning to adoption. Ceremonies mark the onset of menses and the completion of menopause, offer solace after rape, affirm remaining single, and acknowledge marital separation.⁸⁹ This remarkable creativity suggests that no event or personal milestone in the female life cycle has remained untouched by feminist spiritual experimentation.

86 This story is told in detail in Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis*.

87 This is discussed more fully in Pamela S. Nadell, "Bridges to 'a Judaism Transformed by Women's Wisdom'," in *Women Remaking American Judaism*, ed. Riv-Ellen Prell (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 211-228.

88 Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, "B'rit B'not Israel: Observations on Women and Reconstructionism," *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review* 8(2) (Summer 1973): 101-105.

89 See, e.g.: Debra Orenstein, *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones*, vol. 1 (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1998); Nina Beth Cardin, ed., *Out of the Depths I Call to You: A Book of Prayers for the Married Jewish Woman* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1991).

Feminists have not only sought to sanctify the private, they have also turned their attention to public rituals and celebrations, creating new venues for communal spirituality. They reclaimed Rosh Hodesh as the women's holiday, inventing ceremonies that draw on the similarities between the female monthly cycle and the lunar cycle, as both wax and wane, ebb and flow.⁹⁰ They reappropriated the mikveh, making it a space for women to celebrate Rosh Hodesh, mark a milestone, or bring closure to a crisis. Feminists have devised public ceremonies for "crowning," honoring women who have reached the age of sixty, the age of wisdom. Some have formed feminist spirituality groups. Their retreats and gatherings over the years have offered spaces for ritual invention and liturgical creativity.

Of the communal feminist spiritual innovations, the one that spread most widely is the women's seder. The foremother of these seders took place in New York in 1976. Each year its founders and guests, a roster of feminist icons, like Abzug, Cottin Pogrebin, and Chesler, get together. Rewriting the Haggada, the women's seder speaks not of the rabbis of old, but of wise women. The questions of the four sons are asked by four daughters. They ask: "Why have our Mothers on this night been bitter?" They answer: "Because ... they did the serving but not the conducting. They read of their fathers but not of their mothers." The story recovers those mothers, gives Miriam her due, and recalls women from the Jewish past who have become role models for contemporary feminists.⁹¹ By the end of the twentieth century, women's seders had sprung up in Jewish communities across the United States.

Not surprisingly, Orthodoxy also has its own Jewish feminist constellations. Not only did the spiritual mother of feminism in the Orthodox world, Blu Greenberg, deliver the opening address at the first Jewish feminist conference, she also led the charge of the feminist challenge to Orthodoxy. Already in the mid-1980s Greenberg, the author of *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*, dared to ask, "Will there be Orthodox women rabbis?" Prophesying the trajectory of their ordination, she could see that, with institutions for women's higher learning already emerging, the "access route" to Orthodox female religious authority had been paved. It would only be a matter of time before a small group of Orthodox rabbis would defy the condemnation of their colleagues and ordain some of the deeply learned and pious women graduating from these institutions.⁹² Today, no matter the title—rabba, maharat, rabbanit, and even rabbi—the first generation of Orthodox women rabbis, in both the United States and in Israel, preach, teach, and lead.⁹³

Other signs of feminism's impact on Orthodoxy have surfaced. Orthodox parents celebrate their daughters' bat mitzvah. The learning revolution for American Orthodox girls includes a year of post-high school study in women's midrashot in Israel. Orthodox women, gathering in women-only prayer groups, take on ritual roles not open to them when men are present.

Greenberg famously asserted that "where there's a rabbinic will, there's a halakhic way," and expected rabbis to resolve the plight of agunot and *mesoravot get*, chained to marriages that were no longer tenable. In 1997, she helped organize the first International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy, and JOFA, the Jewish

90 For Rosh Hodesh readings, see Penina V. Adelman, *Miriam's Well: Rituals for Jewish Women around the Year* (New York: Biblio Press, 1990).

91 E. M. Broner, *The Telling* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1993). The film *Miriam's Daughters Now* (New York: Center for Visual History, 1986) shows a feminist seder.

92 Blu Greenberg, "Will There Be Orthodox Women Rabbis?" *Judaism* 33(1) (Winter 1984): 23-33.

93 Pamela S. Nadell, "Rabbi, Rabba, Maharat, Rabbanit: For Orthodox Jewish Women, What's in a Title?" *Sightings* (Jan. 28, 2016). <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/rabbi-rabba-maharat-rabbanit-orthodox-jewish-women-whats-title>.

Orthodox Feminist Alliance, was born.⁹⁴ At JOFA's ninth international conference in January 2017, more than a thousand women from the United States and Israel gathered. The opening plenary, "From Vision to Reality: Orthodox Women Rabbis and the Woman Who Willed It into Being," honored Blu Greenberg.⁹⁵ Panels and workshops explored topics long extant on the Orthodox feminist agenda, such as the agunah crisis and Women of the Wall, and newer ones, such as women writing responsa, Hasidic women's empowerment, mothers who never married, and transgender persons.⁹⁶

Another constellation of American Jewish feminism spotlights powerful works of Jewish feminist theology: Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai*, Rachel Adler's *Engendering Judaism*, and *Expanding the Palace of Torah* by Tamar Ross, who grew up in Detroit before making aliya.⁹⁷ They all critique Judaism's androcentricity and its obliteration of the voices and perspectives of women, and work from within Jewish tradition seeking avenues to find theological and legal ways to redress the wrongs of women's exclusion. This work is complemented by that of feminist liturgists, like Marcia Falk, whose prayers praise God in female, as well as male, terms in the gendered language of Hebrew, and, in their English versions, in gender-free language, praising the Spirit of the World and Source of Life.⁹⁸

At the 1973 National Jewish Women's Conference, one woman mused: "We have the ideas, we have the potential to make history quite specifically as Jewish women; but we need the textbooks, the equipment, the basic technical skills, with which to explore our past and create our future."⁹⁹ As women's and gender studies emerged in academia, the first generation of feminist Jewish Studies scholars began researching and writing. They have made major contributions to the study of Bible, rabbinics, history, sociology, anthropology, and literature.¹⁰⁰ A two-volume encyclopedia of the history of Jewish women in America, followed by an historical encyclopedia of Jewish women around the world, and then the remarkable website, the Jewish Women's Archive (jwa.org)—where readers may access both encyclopedias—convey the breadth of this scholarship.¹⁰¹

94 Shuly Rubin Schwartz, "Ambassadors without Portfolio?: The Religious Leadership of Rebbetzins in Late-Twentieth-Century American Jewish Life," in Nadell and Sarna, *Women and American Judaism*, 235-267.

95 <http://jbstv.org/2017/02/jofa-2017-opening-plenary-blu-greenberg-honored/>, accessed Dec. 10, 2017.

96 JOFA: *Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, Chart Your Course Program Book* (New York: January 14-15, 2017).

97 Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990); Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2004). Rochelle Furstenberg, "Profile: Tamar Ross," *Hadassah Magazine* (August/September 2008), <http://www.hadassahmagazine.org/2008/08/02/profile-tamar-ross/>, accessed Dec. 10, 2017.

98 Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

99 Frank, "Women: Writing the History of the Future."

100 Here are just a few titles: In Bible, Tikva Frymer-Kensky's *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken, 2002) and Tamara Cohn Eskanazi and Andrea L. Weiss's *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary* (New York: Schocken, 2008); in rabbinics, Judith Hauptman's *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); in philosophy, Hava Tirosh-Samuels' *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy, Jewish Literature and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); in history, Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: How Jewish Women Shaped Modern America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1997); in sociology, Sylvia Barack Fishman's *A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community* (New York: Free Press, 1993); in anthropology, Susan Starr Sered's *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and in Jewish literature, Naomi B. Sokoloff, Anne Lapidus Lerner, and Anita Norich's *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992).

101 Paula Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, eds., *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 1997); *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* (Jerusalem: Shalvi Publishing, 2006).

Scholars are not the only writers energized by Jewish feminism. In *The Women's Torah Commentary*, female rabbis from across the denominations interject women into almost every one of the fifty-four weekly Torah portions. They write about female characters left unnamed in the text, like Naamah, Noah's wife, and use the laws of kashrut as a platform for commenting on Jewish women cooking holiday foods and for raising concerns about anorexia.¹⁰² This creativity includes stories and novels that are really midrashim, like Anita Diamant's wildly successful *The Red Tent*. Here Diamant imagines Jacob's daughter Dinah whispering the stories of her father's wives. Each month, as they bled, they retreated to the red tent where they shared secrets and handed them down to Dinah, their only surviving daughter.¹⁰³ Feminist writers of serious fiction also riff upon Jewish tradition, as Cynthia Ozick did in *The Puttermesser Papers*. Its protagonist, Ruth Puttermesser, creates a female golem to help her get elected mayor of New York City. Younger writers carry the feminist critique forward. Danya Ruttenberg's collection of essays, *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*, speaks for a new generation whose feminist critique extends to issues of racial and economic justice, the environment, and international politics.

Jewish feminism has also transformed marriage and the Jewish family. Jewish tradition celebrates both. The rabbis taught: "A man who does not have a wife lives without joy, without blessing, and without goodness."¹⁰⁴ And: "He who does not engage in propagation of the race is as though he sheds blood."¹⁰⁵ A point of contention between Jewish feminists and women's liberationists was the latter's depiction of the nuclear family as the source of female oppression and their radical attacks on it. The first National Jewish Women's Conference took note of the women's liberation agenda as a speaker called for shifting child-rearing "from the Jewish Mother to the daycare center, in kibbutz fashion."¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, most Jewish feminists continued to uphold the centrality of marriage and family.¹⁰⁷

Yet, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, American Jewish families had indeed been affected by the shifts sparked by feminism and the transformations in post-industrial American society. Recent surveys report that only about half of American Jews are currently married, and that about a quarter of Jewish women, aged forty to forty-four, the years women complete child-bearing, are childless.¹⁰⁸ By the twenty-first century, a plethora of Jewish family configurations existed in the United States, and they included lesbian families.

At the 1973 conference, even though there was a workshop on gay Jewish women, lesbians staged a protest over their exclusion.¹⁰⁹ Evelyn Torton Beck's 1982 *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* was only the first book to expose the painful dichotomy these women face: marginality as lesbians in the Jewish world and invisibility as Jews in their lesbian communities. In *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation*, the authors write

102 Elyse Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2000).

103 Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). *The Red Tent* has been sold millions of copies and been translated into twenty-eight languages.

104 BT *Yevamot* 62b.

105 BT *Yevamot* 63b.

106 Frank, "Women: Writing the History of the Future."

107 Paula Hyman, "Jewish Feminism Faces the American Women's Movement: Convergence and Divergence," in Pamela S. Nadell, ed., *American Jewish Women's History: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 297-312.

108 Pew Research Foundation, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," (2013), ch. 1. "The National Jewish Population Survey, 2000-01: Strength, Challenge, and Diversity in the American Jewish Population," (New York: United Jewish Communities, 2003).

109 Frank, "Women: Writing the History of the Future."

of the ramifications of revealing their sexuality to their teachers and congregants and of choosing whether to limit their careers to leading one of the many gay and lesbian synagogues that have cropped up. The 2001 film *Trembling before G-d* depicts the despair of Orthodox gays and lesbians rejected by their communities.¹¹⁰ Asserting their right to remain fully within Jewish tradition, Jewish lesbians have stood under a huppah when they wed.¹¹¹

One of the most widely known feminist ritual innovations is the addition of an orange to the seder plate, a custom created by scholar Susannah Heschel, editor of *On Being a Jewish Feminist*. In the early 1970s, she was told that she could not become a rabbi at the Jewish Theological Seminary even though her father was its prominent professor Abraham Joshua Heschel. Many think the orange refers to that episode. The story goes that a man, exercising his authority to chastise the feminist scholar, told her that a woman belongs on the bima like an orange belongs on the seder plate. In fact, Heschel added the orange as a mark of solidarity with Jewish lesbians and gays. The alteration of its origin story is yet another signifier of gays' and lesbians' invisibility.¹¹²

Jewish feminism has also impacted the enormous network of national and local advocacy, welfare, and communal agencies, like AIPAC, the American Jewish Committee, B'nai B'rith, the Jewish Federations of North America, and the JCC (Jewish Community Centers) Association. Jacqueline Levine's charge to the General Assembly of the Jewish Federations, in 1972, reverberated: "Women are stating, in clear and resounding cadences, that they will no longer be second-class citizens." She demanded that the Jewish community open its leadership ranks to women beyond the positions they held in the women's organizations like Hadassah.¹¹³

The result was a shift in some Jewish communal organizations. The American Jewish Congress, which had long maintained a separate women's division, disbanded it in favor of integrating the sexes. Others, like B'nai B'rith, saw its women's division secede to become Jewish Women International rather than face integration. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Jewish women's associations founded more than a century ago, like the synagogue sisterhoods and Hadassah, continued to offer women rich and varied opportunities for voluntarism and professional work. But their policy agendas—training women to lead religious services, lobbying for an end to violence against women—showcased their feminism.

Outside the women's organizations, women's progress in advancing as volunteer and professional Jewish leaders was checkered. A 2005 study by Ma'yan—The Jewish Women's Project concluded that Jewish organizations still limited women's access to power virtually everywhere. Despite incremental change, there was still a glass ceiling in Jewish institutions—synagogues, communal agencies, and schools.¹¹⁴

If feminists have been disappointed by their failure to transform the Jewish community to the extent they envisioned when Jewish feminism first burst out, they have also been deeply disturbed and shocked by rampant antisemitism in the women's movement.



110 Sandi Simcha DuBowski, dir. *Trembling before G-D*, New Yorker Video, 2001.

111 Joe Berkofsky, "San Francisco Simchas?: Gay Jews among Those Lining up to Wed, Seek 'Equal Rights,'" *Deep South Jewish Voice* 14(4) (2004): 39, 42.

112 Susannah Heschel, *The Origin of the Orange on the Seder Plate* (Miriam's Cup, 2001, accessed Dec. 10, 2017); http://www.miriamscup.com/Heschel_orange.htm

113 Jacqueline Levine, "The Changing Role of Women in the Jewish Community, 1972," in Jacob Rader Marcus, ed., *The American Jewish Woman: A Documentary History* (New York: Ktav, 1981), 902-907.

114 Tamara Cohen, Jill Hammer, and Rona Shapiro, *Listen to Her Voice: The Ma'yan Report; Assessing the Experiences of Women in the Jewish Community and Their Relationship to Feminism* (New York, 2005).

Christian feminists blame Judaism for inventing patriarchy, the source of women's oppression. They imagine that before the emergence of ancient Hebrew civilization, the goddess reigned in all her matriarchal glory. They argue that Jesus wanted to restore gender equality but was thwarted by lingering Jewish patriarchal influences. These theological canards perpetuate in a feminist guise Christian anti-Judaism. But the antisemitism of the international women's movement stunned those who thought that their solidarity with feminists around the world precluded their being singled out as Jews.

Prominent Jewish feminists discovered, long before Linda Sarsour burst on the scene, that the women's movement dismissed Jewish identity as a legitimate category of difference, even as it embraced so many other kinds of difference—ethnicity, nationality, other religions, and sexuality. Not only did it discount Jewishness as a category, the international women's movement also spouted virulent antisemitism and anti-Zionism. The political attacks on Israel at the international UN women's conferences revealed its depths. Reported one who attended the Copenhagen meeting: "I heard people say that Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, and Bella Abzug all being Jewish gives the American Women's Movement a bad name. I heard, 'The only good Jew is a dead Jew.' I heard, 'The only way to rid the world of Zionism is to kill all the Jews.'"¹¹⁵ Shaken by this overt, wildly irrational antisemitism, some American Jewish feminists reassessed their own Jewish affinities even as they tried to compel the women's movement to reject its visceral anti-Jewish animus.

The antisemitism displayed at the UN women's conferences made a Zionist out of Betty Friedan and compelled her and the American delegation to organize to fight back. They succeeded at the 1985 conference in Nairobi, when all references to Zionism were expunged from the final document. These same outbursts of anti-Zionism propelled Letty Cottin Pogrebin to expose "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement" in *Ms.* magazine in June 1982. Hearing "death to the Jews" at the Dreyfus trial, Theodor Herzl became a Zionist. Hearing "Zionism is racism," the woman who had left Judaism over its sexism returned. Cottin Pogrebin was not the only Jew and feminist to experience for herself the paradox of antisemitism's strengthening her Jewish identity.¹¹⁶



The impact of feminism is apparent wherever one looks. As an American historian, I would argue that it may be the most significant movement in American life of the last half century. It has affected every family, if not every American. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine American Jewish life today stripped of feminist markers. Feminism's influence is on display in the pulpits where female rabbis preach and in the pews where Jews pray to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. It is evident in classrooms where girls learn Talmud and in homes where couples gather family and friends to bring their infant daughters into the covenant. It is present in Jewish communal boardrooms every time leaders deliberately seek out women for inclusion, in college classrooms where feminist scholars teach Jewish studies, and in the daycare programs at Jewish community centers.

Its stars were on display during a celebration of 350 years of American Jewish women's activism, held in Washington, D.C., in the fall 2004. Of the twenty-two women honored that evening, all had lived lives and had careers scarcely imaginable before second-wave feminism. The founders of Jewish feminism were there: Blu Greenberg, of course, and also Rabbi Sally Priesand, the first American woman ordained a rabbi, and songwriter Debbie Friedman, whose celebration of Miriam's dancing with timbrels became a staple of the women's seder

115 Cottin Pogrebin, "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement."

116 Gil Troy, "When Feminists Were Zionists," *Tablet* (Mar. 8, 2013). Michael A. Meyer, *Jewish Identity in the Modern World* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 33-58.

and whose melodies were embraced by Jews all over the world, including in Israel. Jewish communal leaders were there, like Shoshana Cardin, whose long list of “firsts” includes the first woman to head the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Jewish Studies professor Deborah Lipstadt was honored for triumphing over Holocaust denier David Irving in a British courtroom and also for her feminism, visible in her essay “And Deborah Made Ten” about saying kaddish.¹¹⁷ The feminist filmmaker Joan Micklin Silver, director of *Hester Street*; artist Judy Chicago, who created the iconic “The Dinner Party”; and actress Tovah Feldshuh, who portrayed Golda on Broadway, were also there. If the 1973 Jewish women’s conference had politicians Abzug and Holtzman, this one had Vermont Governor Madeline Kunin and Congresswomen Shelley Berkley and Nita Lowey. Surely, the brightest star of all that evening was Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. All shone as women, Americans, Jews, and feminists, the makers of a revolution.

Importing Feminism, American Style to Israel

In the early twentieth century, as feminism emerged around the world, nationalist movements calling for self-determination lofted its banner. Ending gender-based discrimination and empowering women became contested issues in the debates between imperialists and colonialists. This was no less true of the nascent society of the Yishuv and new State of Israel. Promoting socialism, many of the early settlers also espoused gender equity.¹¹⁸

Signs of women’s equality seemed to be everywhere in Israel’s early history: the halutzot on the kibbutzim, compulsory military service for women, the 1951 Equal Rights for Women Law, and the presumably unparalleled access to political life exemplified by Prime Minister Golda Meir. But journalists and scholars have exposed the realities belying these myths of women’s equality. They decried David Ben-Gurion’s status quo agreement with the religious parties as a case of socialist men compromising with Orthodox men to sell out Israeli women. The omission of provisions for civil marriage and divorce made the Equal Rights for Women Law a lie. The halutzot’s reality meant sixteen-hour days spent washing shirts and peeling vegetables. Military service, in which the vast majority of women were recruited for combat support and service roles, contributed to the strengthening of gender segregation in Israeli society.¹¹⁹ These exposés fueled Israel’s encounter with the new wave of feminism, a movement disproportionately stoked in Israel by American Jewish women, immigrants, and Israeli women exposed to feminism during sojourns across the Atlantic.

One of these early Israeli feminists, Marcia Freedman, had been raised in Newark, New Jersey, the daughter of a father purged from his union during the McCarthy era in the 1950s, when Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities conducted witch-hunts against communist sympathizers. Three weeks after the Six Day War ended, Freedman made aliya, with husband and cranky baby in tow, and settled in Haifa. On return visits to America, this philosophy doctoral student browsed bookstores, gobbling up the

117 Deborah E. Lipstadt, “And Deborah Made Ten,” in Heschel, *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, 207-209.

118 Kalpana Misra and Melanie S. Rich, eds. *Jewish Feminism in Israel: Some Contemporary Perspectives* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003). For comparable examples from Egypt and India, see Pamela S. Nadell and Kate Haulman, eds., *Making Women’s Histories: Beyond National Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

119 Natalie Rein, *Daughters of Rachel: Women in Israel* (New York: Penguin, 1979); Lesley Hazelton, *Israeli Women: The Reality Behind the Myths* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977); Barbara Swirski and Marilyn P. Safir, eds., *Calling the Equality Bluff: Women in Israel* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1991).

foundational texts of feminism. She started with the French writer Simone de Beauvoir and progressed from Betty Friedan to Shulamith Firestone. Freedman became a feminist.¹²⁰

Back in Israel, feeling isolated, she and a group of like-minded friends, a mix of new immigrants from the United States and Britain and native-born Israelis, launched Israel's first women's consciousness-raising group. They expanded their ranks by hosting meetings at the University of Haifa. Then they began demonstrating, rallying, and petitioning for many of the same issues that were propelling American women to march. They supported a wildcat strike by female workers demanding equal pay, petitioned for abortion reform, and called for the university set up a daycare center. They also took up causes unique to Israel, protesting inequities in the divorce procedures of rabbinical courts. Meanwhile, other feminist groups emerged in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Freedman believes that the Yom Kippur War constituted the defining moment when feminism, which had languished since pioneer days, surged again. The war left Israel stunned, and not only because of the initial military disasters. It exposed the fact that, with all the men gone, the country had virtually shut down. Israel did not have a single female bus driver because the bus cooperative barred women. When women volunteered for defense work, they were told to go home and knit caps and bake cakes for the soldiers. The war catalyzed a new generation of Israeli feminists who borrowed their organization, ideology, and tactics from the American women's rights movement.¹²¹

Freedman, elected to the Eighth Knesset in 1974, third on the list of Shulamit Aloni's Citizens Rights Movement, determined to place feminist issues on the Knesset's agenda, introduced pro-choice abortion legislation. Outside the Knesset, she helped establish the country's first shelter for battered women and children and generated publicity to debunk the myth that Israel had no domestic violence problem. As the first books on feminism began appearing in Hebrew—Tehiya Bat-Oren's *Shihzur ha-ishah* (*Women's Liberation*, 1975)—Freedman also spearheaded the country's first Women's Center, a combination bookstore, library, reading room, coffeeshop, and meeting space. It became a magnet for Israel's feminist and lesbian communities. But Freedman's embrace of radical women's liberation and her peace advocacy and defense of the Palestinians in the 1970s, coupled with the locals' sense that the Americans were trying to exert control, distanced most Israeli women then from feminism's messages.¹²² Frustrated, she eventually returned home to America.

But feminism American-style remained influential in Israel in the 1980s. In the summer of 1984, the American Jewish Congress, a venerable advocacy group, convened its annual America-Israel Dialogue in Jerusalem. This time the topic was "Woman as Jew, Jew as Woman: An Urgent Inquiry." The American delegation included Friedan, Greenberg, former congresswoman Holtzman, Professor Hauptman, *Lilith* magazine editor Weidman Schneider, and Ozick. The Israeli delegation included MK Shulamit Aloni, former MK Tamar Eshel, future rabbi Naamah Kelman, women's rights lawyer Sharon Shenhav, Orthodox feminist Pnina Peli, the women's studies scholar Marilyn Safir, and educators Deborah Weissman and Alice Shalvi. Kelman, Shenhav, Peli, Safir, and Weissman were born in the United States, Eshel in Great Britain, and Shalvi in Germany (but educated in Britain and married to an American immigrant). These women were Israelis, but they carried cultural baggage from abroad. In Israel, those speaking feminism spoke in American and British accents.¹²³

120 Marcia Freedman, *Exile in the Promised Land: A Memoir* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1990).

121 Marcia Freedman, "Theorizing Israeli Feminism, 1970–2000," in Misra and Rich, *Jewish Feminism in Israel*, 1-16.

122 Rochelle Furstenberg, *The Women's Movement in Israel* (n.p.: The Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations of the American Jewish Committee/The Argov Institute for the Study of Israel and the Jewish People of Bar-Ilan University, 1994), 11.

123 "Woman as Jew, Jew as Woman: An Urgent Inquiry," *Congress Monthly* 52(2) (February/March 1985).

The dialogue revealed a growing feminist groundswell in Israel, as crowds clamored for admission. Sessions that would have been closed to the public had to be opened.¹²⁴ In her keynote address, Friedan recounted how her remarks about Judaism's misogynistic prayer had just burst out at the Women's Strike for Equality and how breaking through to the feminine mystique connected her to the Jewish people.¹²⁵ The next days put on view the catalogue of the equal-rights feminist agenda: equality in the workplace and the family; pro-family feminist policies like daycare centers; access to the political system and to leadership throughout Israeli society; solutions to domestic violence; acknowledging rape for what it is, a violent crime perpetrated by men, not incited by women; and abortion reform.

The dialogue underscored the vast difference between women's situation in Israel and North America. In 1946, when Golda Meir stepped in to head the Political Department of the Jewish Agency after the British arrested its chairman Moshe Sharett, the religious parties denounced the appointment of a woman: "There are boundaries and limits, and each sex must recognize its limits."¹²⁶ The Israeli women knew that little had changed since then. Religious courts, the religious establishment, the politicization of religion, and the recalcitrant attitude to halakhic reform oppress Israeli women. No matter their gains in political and economic life, the rabbinical laws of marriage and divorce hold women hostage. Husbands blackmail wives into paying ransom for their divorce. A childless widow cannot remarry unless her brother-in-law performs the halitzah ritual. Yet, except for the Orthodox, these issues are irrelevant for American Jewish feminists. Instead, the egalitarian minyan Naamah Kelman led during the conference, which no native Israelis attended, better showcased their concerns.¹²⁷

At the conference, Friedan observed that Israeli women did not have to follow the American way, but that they had much consciousness-raising work to do to transform the personal into the political. That work began immediately. The dialogue concluded with the adoption of "A Statement of Concern," after which the delegates marched to the King David Hotel, where Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Shamir were holding coalition talks. The men interrupted their negotiations to receive the statement. Shamir promised that whatever government was formed would take serious note of the feminists' demands.¹²⁸

Of course, that did not happen. But the dialogue catalyzed the birth of the Israel Women's Network to press the chief institutions of the nation—the government, Israel Defense Forces, and employers—to advance women's status in Israel. With Shalvi as its founding chairwoman, Israeli feminism scooted some distance away from the shadow of American influence.

Meanwhile, American Jewish feminists' calls for religious reforms were making inroads into Israel through feminist *olot*. Unknowingly, they were following in the footsteps of Henrietta Szold and other Hadassah leaders who had settled in Israel in the 1920s and 1930s. Deploring how Jerusalem synagogues relegated women to a tiny room railed off from the main congregation, Szold and others met privately on Shabbat mornings to read the weekly portion.¹²⁹

124 James Feron, "A Spirited Israeli-American Dialogue on Women's Issues Opens in Jerusalem," *New York Times*, Aug. 1, 1984.

125 Friedan, "Women and Jews: The Quest for Selfhood," 7.

126 Quoted by Shulamit Aloni, "The Political Perils of Israeli Women," *Congress Monthly* 52(2) (February/March 1985): 45-47.

127 "Woman as Jew, Jew as Woman: An Urgent Inquiry," 50.

128 James Feron, "Israeli Women Seek New Role," *New York Times*, Aug. 5, 1984.

129 Bertha Badt-Strauss, *White Fire: The Life and Works of Jessie Sampter* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1956), 80.

By the end of the twentieth century, feminist immigrants had propelled Reform and Masorti (Conservative) Israeli congregations, mostly filled with other immigrants, to egalitarian worship. Jerusalem's Orthodox Kehillat Yedidya, where Weissman was a founding member, boasted that its mehitzah created equal spaces for men and women and that women's voices sang in harmony during services. Kelman, born in New York, was the first woman ordained at the Jerusalem campus of Hebrew Union College. One of the earliest pioneers of Orthodox women's ordination in Israel, Haviva Ner-David, learned to put on tefillin when she was living in Washington, D.C. as Haviva Krasner.¹³⁰ Wherever religious feminism found a foothold in Israel, it did so largely through American influence.

Orthodox feminists in Israel spawned another quieter revolution that focused less on the synagogue and the ritual innovations characteristic of feminist American Judaism and more on women's access to the study of sacred Jewish texts. Before the twentieth century, when most women in the world had limited access to education, the question of women's formal Jewish education was largely moot. Then encountering modernity, challenged by assimilation and secularization, leading rabbis approved girls' text study, chiefly to make them knowledgeable mothers, competent to raise pious, observant children.¹³¹ Unintentionally, this shift paved the way for Orthodox women's access to higher Jewish learning.

Like other aspects of Israel's encounter with feminist aims, this too was set in motion by those who came from America. Many of the first Israeli settings for women's advanced text study, including the Michlalah,¹³² Midreshet Lindenbaum, Matan, and Nishmat, were founded by American *olot* and *olim*.¹³³

Out of higher education came religious innovations unique to Israel. The institutions of female learning began training women as halakhic advisors and legal advocates to represent women—and men—in divorce and custody cases in the rabbinical courts. A graduate of New York's Stern College, Rabbanit Chana Henkin (founder of Nishmat), established a program to train female counselors in the laws of family purity. They became authoritative guides on subjects like menstruation, sexuality, and new reproductive technologies.¹³⁴

Similarly, some of the Israelis who attended the first JOFA conference in 1997 returned home to establish Kolech, Religious Women's Forum. Its first conference drew a thousand women. Two hundred of them completed a questionnaire. Its findings showed that the talmudic statement that a woman prefers to be married to any man rather than to live alone did not conform to their personal experiences.¹³⁵

Finally, the American inflection remains prominent in the continuing saga of the Women of the Wall. In Jerusalem, in November-December 1988, the American Jewish Congress and the Israel Women's Network convened the First International Jewish Feminist Conference on the Empowerment of Women. A thousand Jewish women from more than twenty countries showed up. In her opening speech, Bella Abzug remarked that it was high time for a woman to become president of the United States: "she could hardly do worse than the men have

130 Haviva Ner-David, *Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey toward Traditional Rabbinic Ordination* (Needham, MA: JFL Books, 2000).

131 Norma Baumel Joseph, "Jewish Education for Women: Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's Map of America," *American Jewish History* 83(2) (1995): 205-22.

132 The Jerusalem College for Women (Michlalah) was founded by an Irish-born rabbi and his Chicago-born wife in 1964.

133 Furstenberg, "The Flourishing of Higher Jewish Learning for Women."

134 *Ibid.*, 5.

135 Email communication to author, Mar. 13, 2017, from Dr. Rachel Levmore, who conducted the study and qualifies the description in Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah*, 230.

done.” South African anti-apartheid activist Helen Suzman and Renee Epelbaum, founder of the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina, were there. So was the former refusenik Ida Nudel.¹³⁶

But it was an event outside the conference hall that still roils Israel three decades later. On the morning of December 1, carrying a Torah and a small folding table for the reading, seventy women from across the religious spectrum, some wearing tallitot, went to pray at the Western Wall. Many were Americans. Brooklyn’s Rivka Haut, who set the plot in motion, was the founder of one of the earliest women’s prayer groups. Canadian Norma Baumel Joseph is an expert on Rabbi Moshe Feinstein’s responsa. Writer Francine Klagsbrun, who helped propel the Conservative movement to ordain women, carried the Torah. Rabbi Deborah Brin led the halakhically compliant service. Rabbi Helene Ferris chanted that week’s Torah portion, Vayeshev.

The service began peacefully. Then, when the women unrolled the Torah, other women began screaming and ultra-Orthodox men climbed onto chairs to stare over the mehitzah and shout obscenities. One woman reported hearing the Kotel administrator say: “Let them continue. They are not violating halakhah.” The women finished and left the plaza, singing Oseh Shalom, “He who makes peace.”¹³⁷ They had made history.

Since then, women who have tried and, more often than not failed, to pray at the Kotel, some organized as the group Women of the Wall, have been assaulted and dragged off to jail. But they have also garnered international support and repeatedly sought redress in the Israeli courts. Media in the U.S. and in Israel have covered each sortie in this war.

When I wrote this report in March 2017, the press quoted Prime Minister Netanyahu assuring American Jews that he would resolve the impasse that had let the ultra-Orthodox parties block a government-approved compromise for an egalitarian prayer space at the Kotel.¹³⁸ Three months later, he resolved that impasse by freezing the plan, and American Jews, and some Israelis, erupted in fury. Since then, American Jewish religious leaders, male and female, trying to pray together at the Wall, have encountered violence. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, America’s largest synagogue group, was pushed, shoved, and his suit torn when, carrying a Torah intended for egalitarian prayer, he clashed with security guards there.¹³⁹ The ongoing struggle over women’s right to egalitarian prayer, to read Torah, and to lift their voices at the Wall attests once again to the powerful influence feminism, American-style, has had on Israel.

136 Linda Gradstein, “In Jerusalem, a Feminist Call,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 10, 1988.

137 Phyllis Chesler and Rivka Haut, eds., *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground of Judaism’s Holy Site* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2003), esp. xix, xx, 210, 219.

138 “Netanyahu Tells U.S. Jewish Reform Leaders: I’m Committed to Western Wall Deal,” *Ha’aretz*, Mar. 12, 2017.

139 Ari Feldman, “Torah in Hand: Leader of United States’ Largest Jewish Group Roughed Up at Holiest Site,” *Forward*, November 16, 2017, <https://forward.com/news/israel/387794/torah-in-hand-leader-of-united-states-largest-jewish-group-roughed-up-at-ho/>, accessed Dec. 10, 2017.

Conclusion

Historians rest their arguments on facts. Lately, though, some have toyed with the “what ifs” of counterfactual history. What if the Romans had not destroyed the Temple? What if Spain had not expelled the Jews in 1492? What if the Weimar Republic had survived? What if the Jewish state had been established in Uganda instead of Palestine?¹⁴⁰

So I ask: what if Jewish women had not funneled into the American women’s movement in the 1960s? Would someone else have exposed the “feminine mystique”? Would another lawyer have taken the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to task? Would a magazine other than *Ms.* have become a major voice of the movement? Would there be a federally recognized women’s history month? Would others have revolutionized our understandings of domestic violence and rape as crimes of power? Would women have become rabbis? Would there be an Israel Women’s Network?

Of course, no one can know the answers. But this litany of questions attests to the remarkable impact of American Jewish women on the feminist movements in the United States and Israel. No matter whether they defined themselves as secular or religious, Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox, leftist or universalist, women who emerged from Jewish cultural milieus crafted a feminism informed, whether they acknowledged it or not, not only by their experiences of female oppression but also out of their Jewish pasts.

More than half a century after the modern women’s movement launched, the many constellations of feminism—equal rights, women’s liberation, and the variations on Jewish themes—glimmer in the feminist firmament.

140 Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, ed. *What Ifs of Jewish History: From Abraham to Zionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

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