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JEWISH FEMINISTS AND OUR FATHERS

An Introduction

REBECCA ALPERT AND LAURA LEVITT

When we began to gather our thoughts about Jewish feminists and our fathers, we were immediately reminded of Adrienne Rich's beautifully wrought portrait of her father in "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity."¹ In that essay Rich makes clear the ways in which her father's Jewishness shapes

her own Jewish feminist identity. For Rich, Jewishness is quite literally patrilineal. In the split roots of her family tree, Jewishness is the legacy of her father. And yet his very claims and disavowals of his Jewishness are complicated. In looking more closely at her father's story, Rich makes vivid Arnold Rich's ambiv-

ABSTRACT: *The authors of this essay use Adrienne Rich's essay "Split at the Root" to introduce their experience editing an issue of Bridges on the legacies Jewish fathers have left to their feminist daughters. They briefly explore how the Holocaust and loss haunt the volume, as well as different ways fathers both encouraged and wounded their daughters.*

alence. Rich introduces Arnold at a particularly trying period of his life. She first describes him as he awaited word on his tenure in the department of pathology at Johns Hopkins where he would become the first Jew ever to be tenured in the medical school. She explains:

The appointment was delayed for years, no Jew ever having held a professional chair in that medical school. And he wanted it badly. It must have been a very bitter time for him, since he had believed so greatly in the redeeming power of excellence, of being the most brilliant, inspired man for the job. With enough excellence, you could presumably make it stop mattering that you were Jewish; you could become the *only* Jew in the gentile world, a Jew so “civilized,” so far from “common,” so attractively combining southern gentility with European cultural values that no one would ever confuse you with the raw, “pushy” Jews of New York, the “loud, hysterical” refugees from eastern Europe, the “over-dressed” Jews of the urban South.

pp. 110–111

As his daughter tells us, for Arnold Rich there were good Jews and bad Jews, and he was desperate in his desire never to be associated with the bad ones. He would raise his daughters Episcopalian so that they, too, could escape that fate; there should be no public stain from this Jewish heritage he passed on to them. Yet this unnamed, unspoken Jewishness was everywhere in the Rich household, a part of the atmosphere touching everything and everyone in profound ways. Jewishness was thus a contamination to be zealously contained. It was the negation of this identity that defined the family through its absence:

Because what isn't named is often more permeating than what is, I believe that my fa-

ther's Jewishness profoundly shaped my own identity and our family existence. They were shaped by external anti-Semitism and my father's self-hatred, and by his Jewish pride. What Arnold did, I think, was call his Jewish pride something else: achievement, aspiration, genius, idealism. Whatever was unacceptable got left back under the rubric of Jewishness or the “wrong kind” of Jews—uneducated, aggressive, loud. The message I got was that we were really superior: nobody else's father had collected so many books, had traveled so far, knew so many languages.

pp. 112–113

To make sure that this superiority was at all times in place, pride and scrupulousness were always a part of the lives the Riches led. These commitments defined their Jewishness and shaped their lives. This “non-Jewish” Jewishness was a labor-intensive set of ritualized behaviors that demanded careful attention. In other words, maintaining this identity of superiority and containing any taint of the wrong kind of Jewishness took a great deal of work. One could always slip and such slips had to be carefully guarded against or otherwise avoided:

The Riches were proud, but we also had to be very careful. Our behavior had to be more impeccable than other people's. Strangers were not to be trusted, nor even friends; family issues must never go beyond the family; the world was full of potential slanderers, betrayers, *people who could not understand*. Even within the family, I realize that I never in my whole life knew what my father was really feeling. Yet he spoke—monologued—with driving intensity. You could grow up in such a house mesmerized by the local electricity, the crucial meanings assumed by the merest things. This used to seem to me a sign

that we were living on some high emotional plane. It was a difficult force field for a favored daughter to disengage from.

Easy to call that intensity Jewish; and I have no doubt that passion is one of the qualities required for survival over generations of persecution. But what happens when passion is rent from its original base, when the white gentile world is softly saying 'Be more like us and you can be almost one of us?' What happens when survival seems to mean closing off one emotional artery after another?

pp. 113–114

It was reading these words almost twenty years ago that enabled Laura to touch something powerful in her own family behavior and practices she would write about in both of her books, but especially in her most recent work, *American Jewish Loss after the Holocaust*. There Laura talks about the way her family taught her to not trust others. She tells about how her own father taught her to be wary; that "walls move and we need to protect ourselves."² The "closing off" of any number of emotional arteries, although not the same ones described by Rich, engendered loss and marked a Jewish pattern between fathers and daughters. Rebecca also noticed a pattern of mistrust and secrecy that closed off her immediate family from the outside world. Our families were decidedly the wrong kind of Jewish, according to Arnold Rich. Laura's parents were the loud and opinionated kind; Rebecca's the uneducated. Nonetheless, raised after World War II with both parents identifying as Jews, our families were neither self-hating nor particularly troubled by anti-Semitism. Still, like Arnold Rich we too had to work harder, accomplish more in order to be all right.

Adrienne Rich's description of her father

spoke to something structural, something deep that has shaped American Jewish family and identity. Although Laura's family identified proudly as Jews in the small town she grew up in, they worried a lot about what other people thought of them, how they appeared to the rest of the world. Given this, it may not be so strange that one of the first difficult vocabulary words Laura learned in her Jewish household was the word "ostentatious." As an eight- or ten-year-old, she learned that that showy behavior was to be avoided. Being conspicuous in any way was a tendency she needed to guard against. In other words, even in her proud Jewish family, there were limits. Certain kinds of practices were deemed excessive and, as such, out of bounds. For Rebecca, growing up in a working-class Jewish context, this necessary invisibility was already assumed; families without money went without notice and kept away from Jewish communal life to avoid the embarrassment of not dressing right or having enough money to pay synagogue dues.

Laura learned from both her father and her mother that to be accepted in the world, Jews needed to try harder than others. It was not okay to be merely ordinary. We had to make ourselves worthy of social acceptance by being extraordinary. The effort to live this out was ongoing and ever present, even in the Levitt home. Such careful attention to what others think was a lonely business. Like the Riches, the Levitts too were always on guard. They too needed to be careful not to show too much, not to expose vulnerabilities. For Adrienne Rich's father, over the course of his life this behavior led to what she describes as a profound form of social isolation, manifested in a real withdrawal from the world into the safety of his own home. As Rich explains, after having attained tenure, Arnold Rich became quite lonely; he lived out the flip side of what it means to be a kind of token,³ the isolation of

being the one, the only Jew at Hopkins. To make this point, Rich contrasts her father's willed isolation from what women of color do for each other by insisting on not being alone, on not being the only one:

The loneliness of the "only," the token, often doesn't feel like loneliness but like a kind of dead echo chamber. Certain things that ought to don't resonate. Somewhere Beverly Smith writes of women of color "inspiring the behavior" in each other. When there's nobody to "inspire the behavior," act out of the culture, there is an atrophy, a dwindling, which is partly invisible.

p. 114

In this way, Rich attempts to get at the pain, the loss at the heart of her father's wager not to be associated with the wrong kind of Jew. It is this fierce position that his daughter rejects as she attempts to claim her own Jewishness among those very other Jews he so despised.

Again there are threads that tie Irving Levitt to Arnold Rich. There is both pride and vulnerability, a need for approval and recognition that is both well deserved and at the same time reveals an insecurity that marks these two American Jewish fathers, both fathers of feminist daughters, men whose lives together span the full stretch of the twentieth century. If this shared dynamic is the legacy of that century, writing now in the twenty-first we wonder what is it that our Jewish fathers living and dead have left us? What has changed since Rich wrote about her father, and what remains the same? Does this kind of ambivalence still mark many of our contemporary Jewish feminist positions? Are we more secure, less ambivalent? Are there generational differences, and if so, what are they? What has the growing number of proud Jewish feminist fathers meant for a

now large number of feminist men and women, sons and daughters?

In other words, how has the advent of feminist fathers made what we thought we knew about Jewish feminists and our fathers different from what Rich and Levitt have written about their fathers? Then there are just so many different Jewish father stories. What kinds of insights do the feminist daughters of Holocaust survivors bring to these discussions? How might the queer daughters of ultra-Orthodox families think now about their fathers? Finally, what happens when we pay attention to where these families live across the globe? These are some of the questions that shaped our desire to create this special issue of *Bridges*. While Rich's words still resonate powerfully for us, we are no longer sure that Adrienne's, Rebecca's, or Laura's experience speaks to new generations of Jewish feminist women and men.

Like many of the most powerful projects both Laura and Rebecca have been involved in, this special issue was conceived in conversation. In the spring of 2007 Laura presented a portion of the introductory sections of her latest work, *American Jewish Loss after the Holocaust*, to the Jewish feminist scholars and writers circle in Philadelphia. The book was still in production. The material she presented was very much about her relationship with her father. In many ways the entire book is an homage to her father. As she explained then, the book moves between a series of intertwining stories about her father and his two mothers—a story about intimate loss and contemporary works of Holocaust commemoration to make associations and distinctions between these different legacies of loss.

Laura writes:

My father's mother, Lena Levitt, died in 1936, at the age of 37. My father was ten years old at the time, the oldest of her three children.

Even now no one in the family knows for sure the cause of her death. This was not a topic ever discussed in my father's extended family. Three years after Lena died, in the midst of the Depression, my grandfather remarried. Mary Levitt became my father's mother and the woman I would come to know as my paternal grandmother. In each of the book's chapters, I look at different pieces of this story as illuminated through formal connections to works of Holocaust commemoration, an experimental film, photographic memorials, and other works of Holocaust scholarship. In so doing, I also show how my more intimate tale of ordinary loss sheds new light on what it might mean to remember the Holocaust in the twenty-first century. I show how different stories of loss touch each other. In a sense the book demonstrates how this family story about my father and his past haunts not only my relationship with my father but my Jewish feminist scholarship.

The discussion that followed Laura's presentation of this material was powerful. Many of the women in the group talked about their own fathers. It was moving and often thrilling for Laura to see what writing about her father inspired in these other women. Rebecca talked briefly about her father and his long struggles with depression; she also mentioned a piece she had written about his death. After that meeting Rebecca sent Laura that unpublished essay. While Irving Levitt and Irving Trachtenberg's lives bore only a few common themes, they left us with common legacies of loss and secrecy; of fathers' lives that we needed to unravel because they had not been revealed.

Reading Rebecca's essay convinced Laura that the topic deserved more critical attention. It became the inspiration for this issue. Moved by Rebecca's account of her father, Laura insisted that she publish the essay. But where? As

Rebecca explained, it was originally written for a volume that Jewish feminist writer Jyl Felman had thought to put together on the topic more than a decade ago. In this conversation it became clear to both of us that such a collection still had a great deal of potential. Laura's first thought was to contact *Bridges* to find out if they might be interested. The breadth of what *Bridges* normally publishes—personal essays, poems, art, fiction, and review essays in Jewish feminist voices that range across nationality, age, class, race, and gender—really appealed to us.

We saw a clear connection between *Bridges*, a progressive feminist journal, and stories of fathers and daughters that have yet to be told. Our vision for the collection was to focus on relationships, in order to understand the legacies of our fathers, how feminist work has reshaped and reconceptualized these legacies, and how Jewish feminists are passing these legacies on to the next generation.

As the call for submissions indicated, we were looking for works by Jewish feminists who had something to say about their own complicated relationships to their fathers. We were interested in works that took seriously the personal as well as the familial and communal and what it meant to pay careful attention to these relationships. We did not limit our authors to writing about their biological fathers (although most did); we recognize that there are different kinds of father figures in our lives. These include all the men (grandfathers, uncles, family friends, and teachers) who have raised, mentored, and fathered us. We look at them now with a critical eye and a deep appreciation for the legacies of patriarchy and masculinist power that shaped our relationships to them. We sought essays that took into account questions of power and justice as well as loving emotional bonds. In other words, we were concerned about the ways the

personal is political without collapsing either into the other or ignoring the larger contexts in which these relationships reside.

We were hoping these contributions would build on the legacy of Jewish feminist writing about fathers that began with Adrienne Rich's now classic essay, "Split at the Root," to look at what gender and feminist writing, theory, politics, and practice have meant for shaping relationships, for reimagining the legacies of our fathers or those we pass on to our sons, the men (and women) who have mentored and parented us, and those we parent in a world that remains very much under the sway of patriarchy despite all of the heretofore unimaginable possibilities that have opened up for how we make homes and families in the present. We were not disappointed by what we received, and are delighted to share a portion of that work with you in this special issue.

We were deeply gratified to receive far more fine work than we could ever include in this slim volume. It was among our goals to represent a variety of social locations in this publication, in keeping with *Bridges'* commitment to exploring the gamut of Jewish diversity. Our contributors come from many countries, range in age from 20 to 80-something, write in several languages, and represent lifestyles that span a broad spectrum of Jewish religious practice and ethnic identification. Some of our lesbian contributors deal with the complexity of their relationships with their fathers in relation to their sexual identity, but it is not a major focus. While some of the authors have published in *Bridges* before, many are new to this Jewish feminist space. Several contributors were men, and we asked a friend who is not Jewish to work on this issue as a reviewer and editor as well. We did not receive any contributions from a transgender perspective, however we would imagine that the next generation of Jewish

feminists will have something to say about being raised by fathers who themselves were raised as women.

Although we claim "Split at the Root" as a primary inspiration for this collection, we also wish to acknowledge other work that has been published in this genre. In fact, stories of Jewish fathers and daughters have proliferated in the past few years. Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Rebecca Walker, and Mary Gordon's memoirs are significantly about the influence of their fathers. Loolwa Khazzoom's collection of Mizrahi women writers, *The Flying Camel*, includes many portraits of fathers, as do the stories of Gloria Kirchheimer centered on Sephardi families and Joyce Zonana's memoir *Dream Homes* about her Egyptian immigrant family.

While we could not include previously published works we either knew about or that were sent to us, we are pleased to review a few of them. Judith Goldstein and Sharon Teitelbaum share their response to Deb Filler's performance piece, *Filler Up!* Filler bakes challah on stage while telling the story of her father, a Holocaust survivor and baker, transforming the baking into a legacy she can live with, by "baking her father's challah and her own." Ruth Ost examines Joanne Leonard's *Being in Pictures, An Intimate Photo Memoir* to understand why Leonard's father is presented only in the negative (a nonetheless resonant image for a photographer) and puzzles over Leonard's disappointment in her under-expressive father. Carol Zemel looks at the way Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblett enables her father to express himself artistically and the magical world of his Eastern European childhood that he recreates through his magnificent paintings. We are grateful to Barbara for granting permission for us to reproduce some of the art for this volume. Finally, Laura Levitt reviews Naomi Seidman's scholarly work, *Faithful*

Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation, with an eye to how Seidman's opening anecdote about her father, who acted as a translator for the Polish Jewish refugee community in France after World War II, sets up the book's broader argument about the ways political considerations have defined Jewish translation practices. It is notable that all the fathers recalled in these reviewed works grew up in Europe, and that all of them, in disparate ways, were their daughters' teachers, even if unintentionally.

The Holocaust haunts this volume, as it does Levitt's recent book and the works under review here. Arlene Stein, Bernice Mennis, and Esther Kane Meyers rediscover and muse over paternal legacies lost and altered by Nazism in Europe. Many others tell stories with backdrops in other lands and stories of immigration which often had roots in a troubled Europe: Nitza Agam, Marjorie Agosin, Ruth Behar, Mónica Gomery, Diane Greenberg, and Karen Margolis evoke images of their fathers' heritages in Israel, Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, Great Britain, Germany and Ireland. Davi Walders searches for her grandfather's immigrant legacy as a peddler in the United States. Heléne Aylon examines her father's legacy in an old photograph that hung in her childhood home in Brooklyn. No matter where the events take place, all our contributors are telling stories, whether in prose, poetry or visual images, and all see story-telling as a Jewish feminist imperative. As Mónica Gomery argues, "stories matter more than fact." In telling these stories, we are not searching for an elusive truth, but trying to preserve memories and sketch out legacies.

Much feminist energy has been devoted to exploring what our mothers gave us. The authors in this volume are finding ways to acknowledge that our fathers played a role in our stories, too. One of the goals of this vol-

ume is to shift our gaze to the men who raised us. A key lesson of feminism, as Susannah Heschel suggests in her essay, is to foster a change in perspective by claiming the power to tell the story from our own points of view. Heschel reminds us that to have women narrating these stories about men provides an alternative lens through which to see the world. She derives this lesson not only from feminism but also from what she learned from her own father.

Some of these daughters tell their stories by invoking or inventing rituals of connection across gender or generations. Hara Person connects to her father and son through the statistics and numerology of baseball. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz finds her father through an unexpected insight at a *yahrzeit* and some Yiddish lessons. Esther Kane Meyer and Arlene Stein use the iconography of family photographs to open up the hidden stories of their grandfathers. Rayzel Raphael invites her father to go with her to bury her son's placenta, and he does so with an open heart. For Rayzel, this is a way to welcome the supportive "patriarch in[to] women's ritual."

For all the contributors, writing provides a powerful outlet to tease out the legacies left to them by their fathers. Many of the writers who responded to our call wrote about their experiences as their fathers were dying. Several narrate the experience of losing their fathers and finding moments of solace through bittersweet memories, as Jewish tradition encourages us to do. Ritual also provides outlets to deal with these losses, to work through psychological legacies through the written word, through art, and through symbolic acts. Rebecca Alpert reclaims her father by eating his favorite meal when she learns of his death. Nitza Agam evokes her childhood memories of swimming on her father's large back as she tries to remember him as a

healthy, lively man. Judith Arcana remembers the kindness of her father strategically placing the newspaper comics before her every Sunday. Kathryn Hellerstein bonds with her father during his last illness through their mutual love of Yiddish literature. Hara Person and Diane Greenberg remember their fathers by watching sports on television, to honor them as fans of baseball and soccer. Marjorie Agosin writes a cycle of eulogies. Arlene Stein finds her too-silent father's voice in old family letters. Rebecca Trabin lost her father as a child, but can find him now, ever so tentatively, in the photographs he took of her birth, thanks to Laura Levitt's encouraging her to do the kind of personal writing that carries us through grief and makes change possible.

Writing about Jewish fiction on fathers and daughters, Lori Lefkowitz suggests that Jewish fathers, like Sholem Aleichem's Tevye, are often portrayed as "the indulgent fathers of ambitious Jewish girls" who are both "gratified and consoled" by the Jewish women who carry on their legacy, even at the risk of abandoning some elements of Jewish tradition. Our contributors do not characterize their fathers' support as merely indulgent, however. Some fathers are described as enacting, whether consciously or not, a feminist vision. Most of these men were not themselves "card-carrying" feminists, although some were influenced by feminist ideals. They lived out feminist principles, however: respect for their daughters' humanity, openness to taking on the nurturing roles normally assigned to women, willingness to challenge patriarchal norms to support our rebellions.

Alicia Ostriker's grandfather, a radical secular Jew, taught her about the importance of standing up for what you believe. Alice Nakhimovsky's father did the laundry, but

also supported his daughter's unusual career choices. (How far did his feminism go? Would he have indulged his son's refusal to be a doctor/lawyer/engineer? This is a hypothetical question that Alice must also pose.) Faye Ginsburg's father's willingness to raise her among the wolves and dogs he worked with in his laboratory translated into valuable life lessons about how to interact with the human species, too. Lisa Grunberger's father accepted her choice to love women and shared moments of pleasure, teaching her joy. Miriam Solomon shared her father's love of philosophy. Susannah Heschel's father supported her childhood desire for Jewish study and ritual performance by being present for her and giving her opportunities, even as a child, to stand up and make these demands to powerful men. Lynn Alpert's father taught her the value of rebelling against authority and being your own person. Emily Glazer's father provided a role model of a Jewish leader in her traditional community and gave her room and the courage to carve out her own religious path.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that the women whose fathers were most able to "indulge" them were themselves successful rabbis, lawyers, or professors. For other contributors, their fathers' pain and sense of victimhood, whether caused by their class status, historical or geographical location, or their own psychological burdens, made their daughters' relationships to them more difficult. Malkeh Henne was a first born daughter, burdened by the needs of a father who more than likely wanted to have a son. Being raised with a father who brings you close and teaches you well is a gift, but for Malkeh Henne it also had the effect of keeping her from appreciating her mother's wisdom and talents. Rebecca Alpert's and Arlene Stein's fathers kept silent, kept secrets, and kept

their daughters from knowing who they were. Nitza Agam pushed herself to care for her father in his declining years, even though “he repulsed me in many ways.” Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz grew up with a father who could not acknowledge her value or her successes. Karen Margolis is shut out of her father’s will. We learn, too, from these wounded fathers who wounded us. As Ruth Behar tells us, her father’s incapacity to demonstrate love taught her the valuable lesson of the need “to return compassion for fury.” Ultimately, the contributors all identify as Jewish feminists, perhaps because of our fathers, perhaps in spite of them, perhaps both.

Three of our contributors give voice to fathers. One is Dan Morris, who provides a window on what it means today to be the father of a young Jewish daughter. Willa Schneberg takes her father’s viewpoint to tell the story of how his own mental illness affected his daughter’s growing up. Deborah Bauer, finally, makes the father the narrator of her short story about his wife’s death and its impact on his relationship to his college-age daughter and the family dog, whose name is Bashert.

Perhaps this volume, too was “bashert,” meant to be. Laura and Rebecca teach in the same department, enjoy each other immensely as colleagues, and see our collaboration as somehow inevitable. It would not have been possible, however, without the enormous support we’ve received from our friends along the way. We are of course deeply indebted to Clare Kinberg and the editorial board of *Bridges* for the opportunity to serve as guest editors for this volume. We also are deeply grateful to our students and colleagues who worked with us on this effort: The inimitable Ruth Ost, poetry editor extraordinaire; Elizabeth Lawson and Nancy Krody, who brought their professional ex-

pertise to these efforts; Rachael Kamel, who copy edits with precision and flair.

ON THE IMAGES

In the case of a few pieces the author has supplied family and personal photos to accompany her essay these images are discussed in these essays and poems. Faye Ginsberg secured permission to include images from *Look Magazine* in her essay.

Deb Filler gave us permission to reproduce the publicity photograph taken by Guntar Kravis for her show “Filler Up.” And from the public domain we include an image of Susannah Heschel and her Father taken by Jacob Teshima.

We are grateful to artist Helène Aylon for allowing us to include one of her images as well as the brief text that accompanies it. Helène’s work now serves as a permanent cover image for the journal. We are also grateful to artist Joanne Leonard for allowing us to reproduce a series of images from her book *Being in Pictures: An Intimate Photo Memoir* which is reviewed by Ruth Ost in this issue.

We are delighted and honored to be able to include 6 paintings by Mayer Kirshenblatt from his book with his daughter, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust*. This book is reviewed by Carol Zemel as a part of this special issue of the journal.

“Pals,” a painting by Laura Levitt’s father Irving Levitt is included in the editors’ introduction and a version of Irving Levitt’s signature drawing is included alongside Deborah Bauer’s short story “Bashert, the Beloved.” And finally we have included a found image. This photograph was discovered in a thrift store in Glasgow Scotland by Laura Levitt in September 2008.

Finally, of course, we thank our fathers, Irving Trachtenberg (1905–1984), and Irving

Levitt (1926–), who provided the inspiration for this endeavor.

NOTES

1. All citations from this essay are taken from the version printed in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1986). Page numbers are provided in the text.

2. On this see Laura Levitt, *American Jewish Loss after the Holocaust* (New York: NYU Press,

2007), chapter 3, “Secret Stashes,” especially p. 95.

3. In this way, he may have served as the model for the very notion of tokenism his daughter would so eloquently write about in terms of race and gender elsewhere in *Blood Bread and Poetry*.