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Engendering the Jewish Past: Towards a More Feminist Jewish Studies

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ABSTRACT

To engender the Jewish past is to continue to question how and what we think we already know about Jewish history and Jewish memory. In order to imagine other stories, we must risk engaging in other ways of doing Jewish study. Only by repeatedly engaging in these other practices can we begin to undo the assumptions about gender we have come to assume as normal or natural. This paper explores first, what it means to engender the Jewish past and then what a contemporary Jewish Studies informed by feminism looks like.

Keywords: Jewish Studies, change, feminism, history

What does it mean to 'gender the Jewish past'? Instead of assuming that this work is self-evident, that we all know what this means and how it is done, I want to step back and look again at these efforts and what they might mean. Given this, my essay explores first, what it means to engender the Jewish past and then what a contemporary Jewish Studies informed by feminism looks like. Throughout this essay, I hope to make explicit how academic practices are changing and then how I am doing this more specifically in my own work.

Because I want these discussions to be more fruitful, I risk saying things that academics are not supposed to say, like calling attention to bad reviews and not enough reviews of my work, calling attention to bodies that labor in the field of Jewish Studies and how gender matters, and by complaining more generally about how our field continues to marginalize women and theory among other things. Given all of this, I want to use this opportunity not only to share some aspects of my current work, I want to address more overtly how Jewish Studies is changing and how many of us are already making these things happen

now. Like many readers, I am tired of conferences and anthologies where the pieces are ultimately not in conversation with each other. I want to talk about some concrete practices in order to help us better as feminist scholars across traditions to make connections with each other. In this sense this paper is meant as a jumping off point, a conversation starter. It is not unlike what Miriam Peskowitz and I attempted to do in *Judaism Since Gender*.¹ Already at that time, we wanted to change the discourse of Jewish Studies and, perhaps we were naive, but we did think that we might be able to do this by bringing together some of the disparate voices of Jewish feminist scholarship and writing in the context of a book. Needless to say, we did not understand just how much a disciplinary discourse like Jewish Studies resists change. As I have said elsewhere, both in oral presentation and in print, I am an impatient person and feminist study has required me to learn to take my time, to remain persistent even if it often feels extremely frustrating.² I know that change can happen and that it can be extremely rewarding. I have seen these transformations take place in the various settings where I teach. I even have the writings and, more recently, the publications of my own students to make my case, but I want to focus here on how a field of study, in this case Jewish Studies, is changing and can continue to change.

In some respects Miriam Peskowitz and I were able to bring some of this kind of interaction into our volume by asking contributors to respond to Miriam's opening essay, 'Engendering Jewish Religious History', and write about what they do to 'engender Jewish knowledge'. Nevertheless, I had hoped that our book would have created more conversation by now. I do not want to give up on the visions and versions of Jewish Studies Miriam and I imagine in the introduction to our book or in our individual essays. Nor do I want to let go of the giddy sense of power and promise that propelled that project in the first place. Given this, part of what I want to do here is to repeat some of the key arguments, issues, and concerns we posed in *Judaism Since Gender* and push their implications.

My hope is that those who read this book, scholars of religion who are committed to addressing gender in our work, can talk to each other about what we do. In Jewish Studies this means engaging with what Miriam and I referred to as two critical frameworks that still shape

1. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (eds.), *Judaism Since Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

2. Laura Levitt, 'Judaism and Gender', *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (eds. Dr Neil J. Smelser and Dr Paul B. Baltes; Oxford: Elsevier Science Limited, 2001), pp. 8011-14.

Jewish studies in the present, making it difficult for us to imagine other ways of doing our work. As we explained then, in order to reconstitute the production of Jewish knowledges as a feminist project we need to reconsider both 'masculinism' and 'the legacy of European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' that introduced us to the so-called scientific, nonreligious study of Judaism. Given that these frameworks continue to shape what constitutes 'Jewish history' and 'Jewish studies' even in the present, how are we to gender the Jewish past? What are we to make of the ways in which what counts as the Jewish past gets made and remade over and over again without questioning who has the authority to make these claims or what counts as Jewish studies scholarship? For me, the various dimensions of scholarly production, who does what work, whose labor counts, who is paid, who gets to make knowledge or when is it possible to both produce and reproduce or naturalize new knowledges about Jews, Jewishness and Judaism, are what it means to engender Jewish Studies.

Towards a More Feminist Jewish Studies

Why do I use the word *feminism* when many object to its Western, activist, and even separatist associations? I do so because I believe that feminism is much more than an ideology driving organized political movements. It is above all an attitude, a frame of mind that highlights the role of gender in understanding the organization of society. Feminism provides the analytical tools for assessing how expectations for men's and women's behavior have led to unjust situations, particularly but not necessarily only for women. Feminism provides a crosscultural prism through which to identify moments of *awareness* that something is wrong in the expectations for women's treatment or behavior, of *rejection* of such expectations, and of *activism* to affect some kind of change.³

Often I see the word *gender* used as a practical synonym for *women* or for *feminism*. When this substitution happens, there is a problem. The critical force of *gender* is lost. Masculinity is still assumed as the universal, and femininity continues to function as the mark of difference. *Gender* becomes a replacement for more specific and critically acute words. Sometimes, too, *gender* becomes a euphemism or replacement for the term *feminist*. This usage is problematic—in that it neutralizes feminist critique—as it is inaccurate. Gender is only sometimes an element of feminist discourse, and gender is not exclusively found in feminist discourse.⁴

3. Miriam Cooke, 'Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies', in Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan (eds.), *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 143.

4. Miriam Peskowitz, 'Engendering Jewish Religious History', in Peskowitz and Levitt, *Judaism Since Gender*, p. 30.

I use these two quotes to clarify what I mean by a more feminist Jewish Studies. I begin with Miriam Cooke to draw a connection between Jewish and Moslem and Arab women in defining what feminism might be as a critical stance, as a way of addressing injustice across a whole array of borders and boundaries. Like Cooke, I see feminism as a prism, a framework through which I do my own work. And, following Cooke's lead, I also believe that feminist scholarship is built on the awareness that something is wrong in our expectations about how women are treated or behave and that we must reject these expectations and actively effect political change.

To do this we need to be clearer about how 'gender' is not the same as 'feminist'. This is why I have cited the passage above from Miriam Peskowitz's essay. Women, gender and feminism are not synonyms. I am concerned about reinscribing the masculine as the universal with the feminine functioning as the mark of difference. In terms of the work I hope we can do together, I want to use gender as in 'gendering the Jewish past' as a way of talking about how notions of masculinity and femininity have been constructed in specific Jewish texts and contexts and how these constructs have been interpreted at different times and places. I want to keep the force of feminism or feminists to insist that I am concerned about righting injustices, that I want to challenge asymmetries of power in the present by challenging hegemonic readings of Jewish texts and Jewish pasts as always already gendered in particular ways as if these were God given. I do not believe this and want to get at how this belief in particular has solidified certain very disturbing expectations about how women have been treated and should be treated even in the present. Again, I am committed to affecting certain kinds of change.

Finally, in regard to my feminist perspective, I am especially concerned about returning to these issues, issues that may seem to be old fashioned by now. Didn't feminists already deal with that problem? This dismissal assumes that raising an issue once or twice effects changes in practice, in social relations, when in fact reified practices are extremely difficult to change and require repeated critique.

Given how hyped up the pace of all of what we do is these days, the buzz of the Internet, the work day as all day and all night, the proliferation of data, etc., I worry about forgetting these things, losing track of how so many basic issues remain unfinished when it comes to the inequities that still shape the lives of women, especially in Jewish Studies. We work so fast that we hardly have time to think or reflect on how, despite some of our best thinking, so much of how we live and how we work has not changed. I am concerned with how we address this slowness, the difficulty of change in this time of seeming hyperactivity

when the hype itself gets used to keep us from reflecting on these more persistent and quotidian worries and structural arrangements.⁵

Performativity, Making Change, Ritual and Repetition

Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration'.⁶

In this passage from the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler's groundbreaking study of feminism and the subversion of identity, Butler addresses some of her critics and explains, in part, how her own thinking has changed over the intervening ten years. She focuses on gender as performative. After explaining that her position has shifted, she reiterates her argument in terms of where she began and where her current work has moved. Her initial efforts build on Derrida's reading of Kafka's 'Before the Law'. She used this text to explain that there is a kind of anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning for which one waits in the performance of gender. In other words, the anticipation of an authoritative revelation itself creates its object, in this case, gender. This was her initial insight, as she explains, 'I wondered whether we do not labor under a similar expectation concerning gender that it operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed' (xiv). In other words, the anticipation of a gendered essence produces precisely this reality. The process is tautological. Her second point, as presented in the passage I have cited as the epigraph to this section, is a further iteration of her argument. For performativity to have meaning, it must be repeated. It must be enacted as a kind of ritualized activity. It is not a single act. Through repetition the performance becomes natural or normal, changing our expectations about what is to be revealed in the first place, at least at its most hopeful.

I cite Butler in order to make explicit the theoretical underpinnings of my deployment of reiteration as a feminist practice. Following Butler and extending her argument, I repeat a number of critical arguments

5. Here I find myself in good Jewish company. Like the rabbis who were more than committed to reading and rereading sacred texts over and over again, feminist scholarship also demands a kind of repetitive reading, a reading and rereading of the same issues over and over again in the hope of shifting meaning, or as Judith Butler argues, with the hope that we might in the act of repeating change the practices we have come to assume were normal or natural through disidentification. I thank Marian Ronan for her brilliant reading of Butler in the context of Catholic lay identity for helping me see this belaboring as critical. Marian Ronan, "Tracing the Signs of the Cross" (PhD dissertation, Temple University, 1999).

6. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999, 1990), p. xv.

and concerns in order to demonstrate what I mean by resisting the automatic invocation of the new to justify what we do as scholarship. I use repetition as Butler suggests to implement change, to slowly make the new not so new but rather normal or nature, in other words, to normalize feminist practices within Jewish Studies and demand that we pay attention to the various materialities of scholarly production.

What Jewish Feminist Scholars Do

What does it mean for Jewish Studies scholars to take seriously the feminist challenge to rethink Jewish Studies as a feminist practice? In what follows, for the sake of clarity, I offer both a series of specific enactments of the kinds of labors Jewish feminist scholars do, and then, turn to a more specific case that addresses the content of the scholarship some of us do in Jewish Studies. This final discussion builds on my desire to open up the range of what might constitute the stuff of Jewish Studies scholarship.

On Doing Jewish Studies Otherwise

1. *The Work*

What is the work academics do, the actual labor of doing history or Jewish Studies scholarship as an exhausting process? How does this labor produce certain pasts and not others? What are the real Jewish pasts? Whose stories count and whose do not? Where are women in this labor?

Academic disciplines require specific tasks and that they be followed in a particular way to produce scholarly results. Given this, I am interested in the discipline of 'history' as the authorized discourse that is able to assess, name, and, indeed, define the Jewish past. Why, for example, can a book like *Judaism Since Gender* be reviewed as essentially not historical?⁷ Who defines the scope of historical research as opposed to other forms of scholarship? Which definitions of history count in Jewish Studies, which do not? How can Miriam Peskowitz's opening essay 'Engendering Jewish Religious History', not be understood as an essay about history? How does the 'recognition' of a historian known to the reviewer get used to re-enforce what counts literally as historical as opposed to efforts that complicate these very categorical claims?⁸ On the other hand, in yet another review, another Jewish feminist scholar also uses notions

7. See, for example, Deborah Dash Moore's review of *Judaism Since Gender*, *The Journal of American Ethnic History* 19.2 (Winter 2000): 106-107.

8. In this review the author notes that there is only one historical essay in the entire volume, an essay by another American Jewish historian.

of what counts as real Jewish Studies, a kind of *Wissenschaft* scholarly practice to claim that texts like ours do not count precisely because they rely on recent critical theory.⁹ Here the crucial argument is that the use of theory itself is out of bounds, making the work not a part of real Jewish studies scholarship. In both of these instances a very narrow task gets to define what counts as real history or real scholarship over and against what is offered in our feminist book.¹⁰

Building on my last point, these kinds of disciplinary moves become normative. Certain kinds of methods count while others do not count in Jewish Studies as academic work. Here a series of binaries are clearly in place with *Wissenschaft*, historical critical methods, a kind of positivist scholarship all placed in sharp contrast to more contemporary methods and approaches including: the so-called literary turn or rhetorical turn in the Social Sciences and Humanities, Cultural Studies, Feminist Studies, more broadly, the move to theory, or critical theory, deconstruction, postmodern criticism or poststructural critiques. These latter terms are set up in sharp contrast to the normative claims of the older methodologies of the field. In part I want us to look at the deeply anachronistic nature of precisely these arguments and what they say about the field of Jewish Studies in the present. Ironically, in this instance, I want to proclaim the importance of what are now not so new, but in Jewish Studies still clearly configured as all too new approaches and methods for doing scholarship. I want to push us to consider why these methods are so threatening that they have produced such a powerful backlash in the field as attested to by, for example, the reviews cited above. Why can't these approaches count?

2. *Work for Wages*

Who gets Jewish Studies' jobs and who does not? How does the field reinforce certain norms, disallowing other voices by clearly patrolling the gates of who is officially teaching Jewish Studies in university settings? And even when jobs are had, the policing continues when it comes to tenure and who does and does not get it. Here again leading

9. Rochelle Millen, 'Judaism Since Gender: A Review Essay', *Modern Judaism* 20 (2000): 103-12.

10. For a more complicated and engaged review of *Judaism Since Gender* alongside my *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home* (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Miriam Peskowitz's *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) see Elizabeth Castelli, *Signs* 25.2 (Winter, 2000): 621-24. Other engaging reviews include: Matti Bunzl, 'Jews, Queers, and Other Symptoms: Recent Works in Jewish Cultural Studies', *GLQ* 6:2 (2000): 321-41; Gail Labovitz, 'Internalizing Feminist Scholarship', *Bridges* 8:1-2 (Spring 2000): 67-76; David Blumenthal, review, *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 2 (Spring 1999): 173-77.

scholars, established scholars in the field, are asked to judge the work of more junior colleagues, in the case of feminist scholars, scholars whose work may not conform to the scholarly norms of their more senior Jewish Studies evaluators. For this reason we need to think about who makes these decisions and on what basis.¹¹

We also need to consider what happens to those who either do not merit such positions or chose to make their living in other ways? If one does scholarship outside of the academic system of wage labor is one still a 'scholar'? What is opened up for these 'independent scholars' and what is closed off? Here I am thinking about what it takes to get grants, postdocs, book subventions, fellowships as well as book contracts, positions on the boards of journals, etc.

Here I want to push us to think about who is in or out of the field; how we work as a community; what is done in the name of the field; hiring practices as well as what counts as Jewish Studies scholarship. What does it mean to be a part of a labor union or a professional organization in particular settings and not others? Who represents us as a group of scholars? How, especially on issues of gender, do these notions of professionalization work to define not only working conditions but hiring practices, interview practices?¹² In addition to this, worker interests also include what the professional organizations we belong to are willing to take a stand on and what not. Here I have in mind issues of day care, family leave, anti-discrimination policies, etc.

3. *The Mixing of Labors, Gendered Bodies at Work*

Of course, workers are not just workers, we have lives outside of the profession, intimacies and families, and for some that means that while working we do other labor including bringing children into the world and nurturing them. Given the double meaning of the word 'labor' it is especially important to look carefully at how the profession deals with the labor of childbirth. Can one who gives birth expect to be supported by her university or the professional organizations she belongs to? Are there family leave policies, flex-time or part-time work for academic laborers with children?¹³

11. For an account of an early version of this kind of exclusion and its consequences in the case of Hebrew literature, see Esther Fuchs, 'Exiles, Jews, Women, Yoridim, I—An Interim Report', in Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (eds.), *Women Writing in Exile* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 295-300.

12. See Beth Wenger, 'Notes From the Second Generation', in Peskowitz and Levitt, *Judaism Since Gender*, pp. 113-19.

13. For a powerful interrogation of these questions about childcare, mothering, parenting and professional life, see Miriam Peskowitz, *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars: Who Decides What Makes a Good Mother* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2005).

Childcare was an issue supposedly already dealt with by an earlier generation of feminist scholars which remains an ongoing challenge. As such it can and does act as a reminder of all that feminism has yet to accomplish. Such recognition is both painful and uncomfortable for all involved. My concern is that another generation not continue to suffer at the impossibility of being both a parent and an active Jewish Studies scholar, literally a laboring body and an academic laborer in the field. Here I do not want to blame an earlier generation for what they were unable to accomplish. Instead, I want to use this instance as an opportunity to make overt the cyclical and ongoing nature of feminist scholarly practices. I want us to think some more about how difficult it is for us to re-imagine scholars as those capable of not only reproducing scholarship but also as those whose bodies give birth to another generation.

This is not just a women's issue but instead one of the sites where we need to reconsider what kinds of bodies our scholarly practices produce and who gets left out. It is the structural barriers to change including the implementation of partial measures that might at least make the lives of those with children somewhat less difficult as they go to work at colleges and universities and attend professional meeting. These are issues that must be addressed again and again.

Second, more metaphorically, what does it mean for us to see our profession as engaged in the reproduction or the new production of knowledges about Jews, Judaism, or Jewishness? Who is able to make these moves? What is considered out of bounds? How do these efforts support certain notions of who or what counts as Jewish? How can we challenge these norms through the reproduction of differences, deviations from these norms?

4. Repetition and Reiteration: Making Change is Exhausting

Here I want to remember how tedious this work can be, how much we need to do over and over again to get even a little new ground.¹⁴ I want to consider how burn out, frustration and impatience also inform our work. I also want us to think about how painful it has been to realize that there are few other places to go, especially in the academy. I am thinking specifically about my own desires to see women's studies and literature as happy spaces, as more open academic fields for my Jewish feminist work, only to find that here, too, there are limitations. In these other places, often it is Jewishness, Judaism and Jews that are the problem.¹⁵ These other disciplines have a problem with Jews and this too is

14. On this kind of labor, see Miriam Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies*, pp. 49-76.

15. On the problems with feminist studies for Jews, see Part Two, 'Feminist Study: Reconfiguring Jewish Identity', in *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home*, pp. 107-31.

extremely painful and frustrating, and so I return again and again to Jewish Studies, and these are not the only issues.

What has it meant for individual feminist scholars, women and lesbians in particular to take on this burden, to do this work and pay the consequences? I want to acknowledge how many of the first generation of Jewish feminist scholars just gave up on Jewish Studies, got tired of the struggle, the lack of respect and recognition.¹⁶

We also struggle to support recently trained feminist scholars in the field in ways that are, still unprecedented and, as such, hard to enact. This work is painful precisely because it reminds those of us from the generations who came before what it is that we did not get and wished to have had. This work makes us confront our own shortcomings and pushes us to work against repeating the painful experiences that many of us went through ourselves.

Jewish Studies 'Through a Gender-Tinted Lens'¹⁷

I now want to turn to a different set of issues, what are the topics, the texts, the practices that count as worthy of study. What figures are

16. Here I am aware of the sacrifices made by many of my teachers and colleagues including Judith Plaskow and Rebecca Alpert for whom Jewish Studies can only be done professionally in the context of the study of Religion, at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and not the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS). Here Judith Plaskow was not only a founder of the Section on Women and founding editor of *The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Plaskow has also served as the President of the entire organization. Rebecca Alpert is a member of the committee on the Status of Women and is currently on the board of the Women's Section of the AAR.

Other lesbian feminist writers and activists have been ostracized for not being religious. These Jewish feminists found no place at either the AJS or the AAR. These include the editors and many of the contributors to the groundbreaking collections Evelyn Beck (ed.), *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, 1984, 1982) and Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz (eds.), *Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, 1986). I also call attention to Faith Rogow's essay, 'Why is This Decade Different from All Other Decades? A Look at the Rise of Jewish Lesbian Feminism', in the first issue of the journal *Bridges* 1:1 (Spring 1990): 67-71. Faith Rogow is a brilliant Jewish feminist historian who no longer works as an academic. Her essay highlights the important and dangerous leadership roles played by lesbian Jewish feminists. This history is also powerfully accounted for in Rebecca Alpert's *Like Bread on a Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

17. I take this subtitle from Riv Ellen Prell's essay 'American Jewish Culture: Through a Gender-Tinted Lens', in Peskowitz and Levitt, *Judaism Since Gender*, pp. 78-81. As will become clear, this entire section is indebted to Prell's argument for a scholarly turn to gender and the family in Jewish Studies especially in relation to American Jewish experience and particularly, in the case of her essay and my own work, the legacy of the vast majority of American Jews, Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the United States at the turn of the last century.

given honor in the Jewish past and who are forgotten? I want to be clear about how often women's stories are lost and how difficult it is to reclaim them, to find them after they have been buried and silenced.¹⁸

I also want to think more about the smaller stories, the legends, those minute pieces that do and do not make up a whole, those fragments that become the stuff of history still in pieces, the building blocks found in archives, in oral testimonies and how they too need to be taken more seriously when it comes to gender.

A story: Imagine a group of old Jewish women in a small Jewish community center in Greenwich Village in the mid-1980s learning about Jewish feminism from a young Jewish feminist. As part of their lesson the young woman tells them about Lilith. She offers them new *midrashim*, the Jewish feminist Journal named after this powerful Jewish figure.¹⁹ She tells them about why she thinks Lilith has been reclaimed by Jewish feminists in the present. In the midst of this discussion the older women have tales of their own. Slowly it dawns on some of them that they know about this mythical figure, they remember other stories and tell them. One woman remembers being called a 'lilith' by her father when she was bad, when she did things that were wrong, that went against her father's authority. Others remember a witchy figure who might come at night and kill little babies in their sleep. Lilith returns to the room of the Jewish community center in different guises. The group must figure out who they think she is but in retrospect what is the young woman to do with these other tales? How is she to bring together her liberating reclamation of Lilith with these other lived experiences of this mythical figure? How is she to honor

18. Here I am especially moved by feminist works that have broadened our collective knowledge about Jewish women of the past. These scholarly works include: Ellen Umansky's *Lily Montagu and the Advancement of Liberal Judaism: From Vision to Vocation* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983); Paula Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore (eds.), *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Carole Balin, *To Reveal Our Hearts: Jewish Women Writers in Tsarist Russia* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2000); Bernard Cooperman (ed.), *Rememberings: The World of A Russian-Jewish Woman in the Nineteenth Century, Pauline Wengeroff* (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2000); Michael Galchinsky, *The Origin of the Modern Jewish Woman Writer: Romance and Reform in Victorian England* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996). The Jewish Women's Archive has been an extraordinary resource for scholars and laypeople alike in bringing attention to little known Jewish women of the past. Their excellent website is www.jwa.org. The Archives' posters of Jewish women of achievement have been especially powerful in bringing the stories of these women to wider audiences.

19. *Lilith* the independent Jewish women's magazine began in 1977 and remains in circulation under the leadership of its editor-in-chief Susan Weidman Schneider. *Lilith* remains an important Jewish feminist publication.

the memories of the women she is teaching? How is she to both learn from them and have her new telling? Is there room for all of these contradictions in the present for both the young and the older women? Can they take all of these things with them into the future? How does the young woman's retelling now, shift the stories she might have told then? What does it mean that even in the twentieth century in America Jewish women learned to fear and despise Lilith, to fear any association with her not so very long before she is transvalued and reclaimed as a feminist heroine?

Or, more broadly, even now, what does it mean to reclaim and reverse these understandings of what it means to be a woman who stands up to a man's authority, who proclaims her independence, who says no to the authority of tradition? And what does it mean for younger women who proudly proclaim their connections to this once demonized figure to hear what these older women have to tell them about where Lilith has been even in their lifetimes? How are these obstacles to reclaiming her both a part of what it means to reclaim and a challenge to such reclaiming?²⁰

Getting Closer to Home

When Jews describe what they consider uniquely Jewish—the family, the kitchen, celebrations, and why or why not Jews are attracted to, marry, and raise children with one another—they invariably focus on private life... Jews see one another as members of a family and most often represent their experience through the family.²¹

In her essay 'American Jewish Culture: Through a Gender-Tinted Lens', Riv Ellen Prell writes powerfully about the legacy of Eastern European Jewish immigration and acculturation into American culture during the twentieth century. As she explains, the way these American Jews have narrated the process of becoming American Jews, has always been through stories about their families. These accounts are everywhere in the cultural productions of Jews, poetry, drama, journalism, music, and eventually film (78). These stories about family offer profound insight into the larger project of assimilation. 'For much of this century images of the Jewish family have continued to serve as metaphors for Jew's relationships to the larger culture' (78). By contrast, as Prell shows, scholars

20. On these issues of reclaiming and recreating the Jewish past especially through feminist midrash and the complications involved in such efforts especially around the issue of rape, see Julie Pfau, 'Dina is Still Silent: Trauma and the Unrealized Potential of Midrash' (Master's thesis, Emory University, 2002).

21. Riv Ellen Prell, 'American Jewish Culture Through a Gender-Tinted Lens', in Peskowitz and Levitt, *Judaism Since Gender*, pp. 78-81 (79).

of Jewish Studies and social scientists in particular, have ignored this central aspect of American Jewish life. Instead of taking seriously the centrality of the family, they have looked elsewhere to both access and assess American Jewish life.

By contrast, Prell urges scholars to take another look at these alternative texts and what they tell us about American Jewish identity and the centrality of family. As she goes on to explain, 'These pervasive images and metaphors [about the family] point us towards salient questions about American Jewish life, questions that will allow us to understand how – in various decades and under changing conditions in the United States – Jews have understood themselves as Jews' (79). To do this means shifting focus from the lifecycle of Jewish men towards a more gendered analysis. Instead of assessing the education, occupations and religious attitudes of Jewish men and their participation in synagogues and other public Jewish institutions, Prell argues that social scientists should look again at the evidence of Jewish cultural production and take seriously the powerful role of the family and home life in their studies.

This means shifting from a focus on Jewish men and the public sphere to Jewish woman and domestic life. By following the lead of Jewish cultural self-representation, according to Prell we might be better able to see anew the legacy of Eastern European Jewish assimilation into American culture. For Prell, Jewishness is ultimately a gendered and a relational category, and as such the experience of neither Jewish men nor Jewish women alone can stand in for the collective. By addressing the social construction of these gendered relations, Prell imagines a very different picture of Eastern European Jewish immigration and acculturation rejecting the ethnic studies model of Jewish sociologists that have focused on Jewish men as the norm.²² By taking gender seriously and the role of the family in Jewish self-understanding, Prell takes her clues from the very experiences at the heart of a century of American Jewish cultural production.

In many ways my work builds on precisely these insights. Like Prell, as a scholar of Religion, I too have tried to get at this cultural legacy by addressing issues of gender. I have asked what gets lost when scholars look exclusively at the work of Jewish men, at the writing produced by and for Jewish men to the exclusion of Jewish women. But more than this, and perhaps this is the shift in my own work, I have increasingly

22. In a note Prell suggests following the lead of cultural anthropologist Phyllis Chock who challenges the overarching strategies devised by Glazer and Moynihan. Phyllis Chock, 'Landscape of Enchantment: Redaction in a Theory of Ethnicity', *Cultural Anthropology* 4 (1989). See Prell, pp. 80-81 n. 5.

asked what happens when we take seriously the everyday experiences of ordinary Jewish women and men, in this case, the experiences of the vast majority of Eastern European Jews who came to this country at the turn of the last century, and ask what they have to tell us about contemporary Jewish life and what it means to identify oneself as Jewish.

Carrying On

What do we carry with us known or unknown? What are the things that take up space in our minds and our pockets that hold some allure? Why do we hold on to the stuff of the Jewish past, our pasts, our families' pasts, and what does it mean? Why do I continue to wear my grandmother's clothing twenty years after her death? Why do I keep framed pictures of dead relatives on my desk and want so desperately to write about them? What do these things hold for us that remain as of yet inarticulate, unspoken in the work of Jewish Studies? How can we use them to remember, to shape Jewish Studies scholarship, to place ourselves and these things that we love on the map of Jewish study? Can we risk exposing these ordinary things to the scrutiny of scholarly inquiry and even if we do, who will listen? Who will acknowledge the merits of this labor and its affective implications for the future? At least, for me, bringing these things to Jewish Studies as a way of expanding the work we do is crucial. I want to risk reading and writing about the stuff of ordinary Jewish life in order to open up what counts as Jewish texts and the object of Jewish studies scholarship.

A Feminist's Work is Never Done

To engender the Jewish past is to continue to question how and what we think we already know about Jewish history and Jewish memory. In order to imagine other stories, we must risk engaging in other ways of doing Jewish study. Only by repeatedly engaging in these other practices can we begin to undo the assumptions about gender we have come to assume as normal or natural.