

Laura and Miriam: On Friendship and Writing

by Sloan Seale

Laura Levitt's recent publication party was about more than celebrating her new book, *American Jewish Loss After the Holocaust*—though of course publishing a book is plenty to celebrate. It was also a celebration of family and friendship, and among the honored guests was Laura's decades-long friend, colleague, and supporter, Miriam Peskowitz. As many of you may know, Miriam herself is the best-selling co-author, along with Andrea Buchanan, of *The Daring Book for Girls*. (Currently #2 on *The New York Times* bestseller list). What an opportunity that afternoon was, then, to reflect on life and work, and the intertwining paths that these two close friends have followed to Mt. Airy. While Laura teaches and writes at Temple, and describes herself as "comfortable" with working and writing within an academic context, Miriam's writing career has morphed and evolved into something very different.

In the beginning, they were both academics. Laura was finishing up her dissertation for Emory University while starting out teaching at Temple, and Miriam was a Fellow at the Annenberg Center, also completing her dissertation, for Duke University. They met at a conference in Lehigh where, as Miriam recalls, she was first attracted to Laura's decidedly non-serious academic attitude. "She was already sitting with a friend of hers, and invited me to join them. They sat in the back of the auditorium, and as I recall the day, Laura lis-

tened with one ear—listened avidly—all the while chitchatting with me and providing a running commentary on the presentation! We even got in trouble, with people in the rows ahead turning back to shush us. I knew from that moment on that we would become fast friends, and we did." Laura's writing at that time concerned contemporary American Jewish identity and feminist theory. Miriam was writing her dissertation on the subject of the construction of gender and labor in early rabbinic material. "Through the writing of our individual first books, we talked each day (this being slightly before e-mail became the rule) about the twists and turns of each chapter. I couldn't have written that book without her eye, her intelligence, and her unwavering enthusiasm. She was sure I was brilliant, as I was sure that she was writing the most important book ever," says Miriam. In 1997, after they had both finished their dissertations, their edited book, *Judaism Since Gender* was published by Routledge.

This book, an attempt to look at the field of Jewish studies as it intersected with work on gender and in feminist theory, is a greatly expanded version of their dissertations, in which they were able to develop further their thinking about Judaism, gender, family, and work in Miriam's case, and issues of American Jewish identity in Laura's. *Judaism Since Gender* was a stepping stone for both Laura and Miriam, into fields which they would continue to explore in the future.



PHOTO BY SLOAN SEALE

WRITERS, ACADEMICS, FRIENDS, AND CO-OP MEMBERS
MIRIAM PESKOWITZ (LEFT) AND LAURA LEVITT

After Miriam's fellowship ended, she took a teaching position at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. While they were living states apart, Miriam and Laura continued to collaborate by phone and in frequent rendezvous at the beach in Florida or in Delaware. In 1998, while she was in the midst of the tenure process, Miriam began to realize that she wanted to be a writer more than a professor. "I wanted to write books that asked bigger and broader questions about society and life, and I wanted to write books that people would love." Once she had secured tenure and her daughter was born, Miriam made the decision—radical in the eyes of many—to leave behind academia on a fulltime basis. Out of her experiences as a mother, on the playground, in public, and in private, came her 2005 book, *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars*. The "mommy wars" is a phrase that denotes the current debate—drawn in simple terms as the square-off between moms staying at home and those working outside the home—that storms the pages of popular magazines. As the title implies, Miriam wants to move beyond

the superficialities of this cultural argument, to build from the ground up an alternative way to think about and confront the complexities of parenting for both mother and father. Laura is a presence in *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars*, as one of Miriam's interview subjects. In her interview, Laura speaks eloquently of the choice not to have children: "I live in a culture that makes it impossible to do all the things I want to do with my life—my teaching, my writing, my contributions—if I were to have children."

Laura, meanwhile, had also achieved tenure, at Temple, and was continuing to write and publish in her areas of special interest, Judaism and feminism, and the intersection between Judaism, family loss, and the manifestation of loss in public art such as film and photography. Before *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars* was published, Miriam moved back to Philadelphia, and happily Laura and Miriam were able to resume their friendship and collaboration in person. They worked together

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Laura and Miriam

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in a writer's circle; together they sponsored a public reading of *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars* at the Germantown Jewish Center the spring of its publication. Miriam's biggest achievement to date came with the publication, last year, of *The Daring Book for Girls*.

The book, a compendium of ideas for girls of all types and ages, debuted on the *New York Times* Best Seller list and has stayed there ever since. "Best of all," says Miriam, we (she and co-author Andrea J. Buchanan) get lovely e-mails from girls all over telling us how much they like the book and what it means to them—precisely the type of dialogue that Miriam was hoping to engage back when she made the decision to move beyond academia as her career.

Now New York University Press has published Laura's new book, *American Jewish Loss after the Holocaust*. The book is not a change of direction for Laura, but it develops her previous work about family and memory in new and challenging ways, moving between an intimate portrait of her own family, especially her father, Irving Levitt, and the understanding of personal Jewish loss in a broad cultural context. Miriam's presence is felt in *American Jewish Loss after the Holocaust* not only in the form of a discussion in the book that refers to *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars*, but also, Laura says, in the

methodology of the book. Although Laura says she does not "expect to ever make any kind of best sellers list," she has written this book for a wider audience than her earlier work.

When Laura and Miriam talk about each other, the subject of academia inevitably comes up often. It's where they both started out, where and how they met each other, and to a certain extent offers some sense of self-definition to each, even if that's only about the choice to stay or to leave. Laura is always modest about her accomplishments, and defers to Miriam's success. "There are so few of us who start out in academia who are as multi-talented as Miriam is! It is thrilling to see her accomplish so much so quickly in realms so far from where she began." Miriam says of Laura, "Laura and I have stayed best friends through all this, even as we went in different directions, both in terms of how we write, and in where we do it. I'm still her biggest fan, she has one of the most discerningly creative academic voices I know—and that's nationwide—and she comes at her work in ways no one else can even imagine. She's incredible." Working inside and outside the academy, Laura and Miriam are finding new ways to give voice to their ideas, exploring the issues that are most important to each of them, and continuing to nurture their long and productive friendship.

Old House Fair Returns for 2008

by Patrick J. Hauck, Director of Neighborhood Preservation Programs, Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

Following on the success of last year's Old House Fair, when over 500 intrepid preservationists braved a winter storm to attend, the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia is pleased to present the 2008 Old House Fair on Saturday March 22, at the Germantown Friends School, 31 W. Coulter Street, from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

The 2008 Old House Fair has been expanded to 75 booths, including professional vendors, consultants and specialists, marketing preservation-related products and services related to the preservation and maintenance of older and historic homes, and a select group of representatives of state and local preservation and design organizations.

In addition to the numerous vendor booths, the event will feature a variety of presentations by participating professionals about products, skills or services that they offer throughout the day. A central area will offer attendees the opportunity to see specialty craftspeople in action in a number of hands-on demonstration workshops.

If you are looking for free advice, the Old House Fair is the place to be! Attendees will have the opportunity to speak with preservation and design professionals about a variety of topics at the fair's "Ask the Experts" table, where free, 15-minute consultations with old house professionals



HANDS-ON DEMONSTRATIONS WITH EXPERIENCED PROFESSIONALS ARE PART OF WHAT MAKES THE OLD HOUSE FAIR INVALUABLE FOR OWNERS OF OLDER HOMES.

will be available throughout the day.


Does choosing colors for your house give you pause? Help is also on the way! "The Color Doctor," John Crosby Freeman, featured in the *Old House Journal*, has generously offered to provide free, 15-minute exterior paint color consultations to attendees of this year's fair.

And what would a fair be without prizes? A highlight of the fair will be the presentation of the "2008 Awards of Recognition" to private homeowners who have shown exemplary stewardship in historic preservation through renovation and maintenance of their property. New to this year's event will be the presentation of the first Robert Levy Award, which will recognize a preservation craftsman to honor the memory of this loved and well-respected Philadelphia preservationist.

So mark your calendar and save the date! It will be a full day and you won't want to miss it. Tickets are on sale now: \$10 General Admission/\$8 Preservation Alliance Members. For more information, visit our website www.preservationalliance.com or contact George Hoessel, 215-546-1146 ext. 7 or e-mail george@preservationalliance.com.

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