

"Jewish Women—Images of Ourselves:" A Family Life Education Program

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"Because of this group I have a much better understanding of my Mom . . ." "I learned quite a bit about being a Jewish woman in the historical perspective . . ." ". . . I think I have a starting point to continue questioning and learning."

Two distinct and seemingly contradictory voices echo in the hearts and minds of many American Jewish women today: on one side, the voice of tradition which views the ideal Jewish woman as the good wife and mother¹ and on the other side, the voice of feminism which urges women to fulfill their own destinies and not to obtain their satisfactions vicariously. As two American Jewish women, we were aware of those tensions within ourselves and others. As professionals, we were also aware of a parallel conflict that kept recurring in our caseloads: that between mothers and daughters. We wanted to create a workshop in which women could grapple with the Judaism-feminism conflict; by making the group intergenerational, we hoped to illuminate the mother-daughter conflict as well. Our goal was to help these women integrate the Jewish and feminist pulls within them. As clinicians, we recognized that the best way to achieve that integration would be to deepen their awareness of their Jewish legacy and their feminist strivings. Then we would encourage them to play out the conflict by seeing what each of these value and belief systems can contribute to their lives today.

¹ Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is with People; The Culture of the Shtetl*. New York: Schocken Books, 1962, p. 130.

In less than a hundred years, we've come from a time when marriages were arranged by parents with the aid of *shadkhens* to an era when Jewish women are questioning their desire even to marry. This kind of rapid change in values sets in motion a barrage of feelings: the mother feels personally rejected by her daughter's decisions; the daughter is pressured by the mother's feeling of rejection; and the cycle keeps deepening! When change occurs so fast, we tend to emphasize the differences between us and forget the similarities. We anticipated that in bringing Jewish women of different generations together, we would first focus on the common ground: what's distinct about Jewish women. Once we had established that base and become more aware of the ways in which Judaism has contributed to our identities, it might then be easier to confront the ways in which we have departed from our Jewish past.

Setting

The Jewish community of Greater Hartford numbers about 25,000 and is a well-organized one. The Jewish Federation in the area recently sponsored a series of lectures on "Jewish Awareness for Women." While the topics were intriguing, the lecture format prompted some disappointment and frustration. One professional woman stated, "As a feminist, I'm

really struggling with my Jewish identity. I wanted some time in these seminars for me, a chance to work out some of my own conflicts."

We decided that in our group we would not call in the experts. We recognized that our members would be their own best authorities—personal histories would replace speeches from a podium. During the past decade, there have been many opportunities for women to heighten their consciousness about themselves as women; there have been fewer chances to raise their Jewish consciousness. Our concern was that as women became caught up in the excitement of the womens' movement, their Jewish consciousness was submerged.

We decided to call our prospective group "Jewish Women: Images of Ourselves." We promoted the program in the following way:

A workshop which will consider the stereotypes and realities of Jewish women and how those images have changed through the generations.

A group which will give you the chance to explore how Judaism, Feminism, and the American culture have influenced your individual identity.

Because we wanted to attract a broad range of women, we decided to co-sponsor the group with the Jewish Community Center and to hold the sessions there.

The program was advertised as an inter-generational workshop open to women in two age groups: women in their twenties and women in their forties and fifties. Our purpose was to approximate as closely as possible the generational mix present in a mother-daughter relationship. After careful discussion, we decided not to publicize the group as an actual mother-daughter group. We reasoned that in a short-term group (the program was planned for six consecutive sessions), it might be easier for non-related women to disclose internal conflicts as well as the interpersonal

tensions they feel in their relationships with their mothers and/or daughters.

Group Composition

Twelve women, aged from twenty-three to fifty-nine, participated in the program. The five women in their twenties were all single, and college graduates. Two were still in graduate school and three worked. Of the seven participants in their forties and fifties, all were married except one who was divorced. The median age range of their children was eighteen to twenty-five. Unlike their younger counterparts, the educational backgrounds of the older women varied: of the seven, three were college graduates including one who was working toward her Ph.D. All but one worked at least part-time.

The Jewish backgrounds of these women were quite diverse. Some were attracted to the group by the appearance of the word "feminist" in the advertising. Said one woman, "I've been involved in feminist interest for years. I haven't been at all involved in Jewish concerns. I lived way out in the 'boonies' where there wasn't much of a Jewish community." At the other extreme were women like Helen who identified strongly with their Judaism but seemed to be somewhat threatened by the impact of feminism. In her introduction of herself, she stated: "I'm interested in what other Jewish women are thinking these days. Thank goodness, I did alright. I have three sons, two lawyers and a doctor, and they're each married to a Jewish girl." Defining herself in terms of her children, in what one might consider stereotypically Jewish-mother ways, she seemed three hundred and sixty degrees away from the feminist. The majority of the women, like Ruth, fell in the middle: "I was intrigued by the group because I am a feminist. I've also been very involved in the Jewish community, and I'm most interested in the combination.

Course Outline and Format

The agenda for the six sessions was established with the members during the first meeting. The topics for each week were planned as follows:

Week 1: *A Personal Voyage Back through Generations*

Week 2: *The Evolution of the Jewish Woman from Europe to America*

Week 3: *Judaism and Feminism: Conflict and Coexistence*

Week 4: *Balancing Our Roles as Wives, Mothers, and Daughters*

Week 5: *The Relationship between Jewish Mothers and Daughters: An Inter-generational Dialogue*

Week 6: *A Look at the Changes We're Making as Jewish Women and a Review*

The format for the series was a potpourri of mini-lecture, exercises, role-playing, and discussion. Selected readings were handed out each week and highlighted in the discussion. In addition, a bibliography for background reading was given to the members.

It was stated at the outset that the group was neither an academic seminar nor a therapy group. Rather, this Jewish family life education program would borrow from each. Like an academic seminar, knowledge of Jewish women in history would be explored through lecture and readings. Like a therapy group, the discussion would be a personal one; however, unlike a therapy group, the personal discussion would be limited to specific topics and themes. The members were assured that they would not have to "bare their souls."

The goals established by the leaders and shared with the members during the first session were:

- (1) Deepening knowledge of self through an understanding of the ways in which our mothers and grandmothers have contributed to our identities as American Jewish women; and (2) integrating this new awareness into our lives today by exploring what we may want to retrieve from our personal and collective Jewish pasts and what we may need to modify.

Historical Perspective

The first two sessions of the group were devoted to deepening the members' awareness of their Jewish legacy. This was achieved by focusing on the characteristics these women carry with them from their own Jewish predecessors, their mothers and grandmothers. Those same characteristics were then examined in a broader, cultural context. That is, what do first generation American Jewish women have in common? The same question was asked of second and third generation women.

Participants were asked to close their eyes and to develop a mental picture of their mothers and maternal grandmothers. What were they like? How did they spend their time? Those who did not know their maternal grandmothers were asked to develop a picture based on images conceived through stories. The group was asked to write down their characterizations of their grandmothers and mothers and then to describe themselves.

The stories flowed. Said twenty-six-year old Amy:

My mother was . . . well, simply a Jewish mother . . . but my grandmother was different! Of all the stories I know about her, the one that stands out is that she came to this country alone at the age of fourteen. To me, she was the essence of a strong woman. I always admired her independence . . . it's she that I most identify with.

A similar story from another woman in her twenties:

I recently found out that my grandmother wanted to work when she got married, but my grandfather said 'No, Rachel, in America a wife stays home.' She wasn't used to such protectiveness. As the oldest of eleven, she was used to helping out. It came as a tremendous relief to me to hear her frustration because I always knew that my grandmother was an industrious woman with a lot of drive. My mother is quite the opposite. She would love to be rich enough to be a lady of leisure—to stay home, play Mah Jong, and read McCall's magazine.

The remembrances were personal, the women described very different, yet these mothers and grandmothers all represented similar virtues to their daughters and granddaughters living comfortably in suburban America in 1980: virtues like strength, independence, heart, faith, virtues hard to come by in the technological, dehumanized age.

During the second week, the discussion was broadened beyond the personal to a consideration of the cultural context in which these women lived. The characteristics of first, second, and third generation American Jewish women were viewed with an eye toward discovering the traits that were necessary to survive and/or adapt to the larger culture in which they lived. The most significant finding which emerged from that exploration was this: although some say Judaism and feminism are polar opposites in their perception of women's roles, there is a long tradition, particularly among Eastern European Jewish families, of women functioning as strong, capable, and aggressive leaders responsible not only for the management of the home but also for the financial support of their families. Since in Eastern Europe the ideal Jewish man was a scholar, it was often the wife whose shrewdness and business acumen earned the family its livelihood.² The resourcefulness of Eastern European women emerged over and over again in the group members' descriptions of their first-generation mothers and grandmothers. These women were depicted as: "tough, energetic, shrewd, a *balebosteh*, a breadwinner, an organizer, and a manager." Why manager? One woman explained: "When I say manager, I'm speaking of a situation in which resistance was useless. I'm talking about a super-successful manager. I'm talking about my grandmother." Yet some of these women

managed more than their own home life: they organized unions and championed social causes. One woman recently learned that when her grandmother came to this country, she was instrumental in creating a cooperative day care center so that she and other neighborhood women could go to work.

There was, however, one characteristic that never appeared in the group members' descriptions of their first-generation predecessors: that of vanity. In contrast, "short" and "plump" appear over and over again. A distinct change becomes evident with second-generation American-born Jewish women. Looking over those lists of characteristics, one can discern a strong emphasis on physical beauty. There, the word "vain" appears many times. Consider this description by a group member of her American-born mother: "My mother really wanted to get away from the European ways of living. She had her hair bobbed and really seemed intent on shocking her mother. I remember her saying 'If my mother ever found out I bought red leather gloves and black stockings . . . Oh boy! What she would say!!' "

As group members compared the characteristics associated with the two generations, it became apparent that those qualities now touted by feminists, such as toughness and aggressiveness, which were ever present among the first-generation women, were markedly absent from the descriptions of second-generation women. What might account for this change? In the stories told by group members, it became apparent that those qualities which were necessary to survive in Eastern European culture were of little import to the daughters of immigrant women. They were anxious to take on the ideal of the

² Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America*. New York: New American Library, 1975, pp. 67-8.

³ Sonya Michel, "Mothers and Daughters in American Jewish Literature: The Rotted Cord," in Elizabeth Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman; New Perspectives*. New York: Schocken Books, 1976, pp. 272-81.

American "lady," and the tough, aggressive qualities they saw in their mothers were viewed as inappropriate and even crude.³ For these immigrants' daughters, achieving the ideal of the American lady—genteel, feminine, cultured—signified a major rung up the ladder marked "American."

The dilemma of the second-generation daughter, caught between the strong Jewish traditions of the old country and the pull to become a modern American lady, was reflected in a story told by one group member. Helen's son was bringing a group of friends home for the weekend from his Ivy League college. The night before, in a phone conversation, the son, a bit sheepishly, told Helen how he described her to his friends: "I told them you keep a kosher home but that you're not pudgy and don't speak with a Yiddish accent . . . that you're modern, have a good sense of humor but to remember that you do keep a kosher home." As Helen recalled that conversation, she began to recognize her own image of herself mirrored in her son's eyes. As was true for many second-generation women, there was a self-consciousness about identifying too strongly with one's Jewishness.

That kind of tentativeness about one's Jewishness diminishes with the third generation. In its place arises a hunger to connect with one's Jewish past. Young women of the third generation find themselves reading books like *Evergreen* and *Leah's Journey*, books that allow them to retrieve a legacy that their mothers shunned as they grew up. Looking at the lists of characteristics the third generation women in the group attributed to themselves, we discovered a re-emergence of first-generation traits. Qualities such as independence and decisiveness which were missing in second-generation women were once again making an appearance. Sociologist Marcus Hansen has theorized that by the third generation most immigrant groups feel secure enough within American society to

begin to redeem some of the ethnicity the second generation rejected, so that "what the son wished to forget, the grandson wishes to remember."⁴ Hansen's law was confirmed for us when one third-generation woman stated: "My generation can relate better to our grandmothers than our mothers. My mother led a very conventional life. It was my grandmother who took the big bold steps."

Judaism and Feminism

After examining the evolution of the American Jewish woman through three generations, we arrived at what we considered the core task of this group: working toward an integration of Judaism and feminism. We would begin this next phase by sorting out what's distinctive about Jewish women and then look at the forms Judaism takes in one's current definition of oneself. The following question was posed to the members: What makes your being a Jewish woman different from any other woman? The first responses to that question were the expected ones: rituals, traditions, and a common heritage. Those answers elicited thoughts of what their parents taught them about being Jewish: the crucial need to survive and perpetuate Judaism; pride in our people; a strong commitment to family; the importance of education; and *tzedakah*, giving of oneself to the fullest. We looked around and wondered aloud whether we had really answered the question. There was a short silence, and then Elaine spoke: "My answer is very different from the others. I think more is expected both of Jewish men and women, but especially of Jewish women. Jewish women are real superwomen. They are more likely to be educated and to use that education. If you look among any list of successful women in the arts, sciences, or in business, you will find that many of them are Jewish. As if that isn't enough, on top of all this, Jewish women are also expected to be successful wives, mothers, cooks, and interior decorators, and to emerge from all

⁴ Baum, Hyman, Michel, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

these endeavors beautifully dressed at the same time. Jewish women cannot settle for average. Their expectations of themselves are exceedingly high."

Elaine's hypothesis was tested in an exercise which we developed. Its purpose was to give the women the chance to rank themselves on a self-concept scale, with one end representing the most traditional view of women, as defined Halachically, and the opposite end expressing a more radical and feminist-oriented viewpoint. We developed the scale by drawing upon Talmudic definitions of women and statements made by numerous Jewish women at different points in time. In the end, we came up with four quotes and asked the women to rank these quotes according to their applicability to their own lives. We told them to view the quotes as a reflection of their total lives, looking back and forward as well as at their present life situation. We did not identify the source of the quotes when we gave out the exercise, but we have included them below:

A. I see myself ideally as a good wife and mother. I am patient, hardworking, and devoted to my children. My own well-being is of less importance than those around me. I am the mother, the key figure in my family's constellation.⁵ (based on the *Woman of Valor*)

B. While the importance of family and home life is primary, I am concerned with the larger society as well. My commitment to organizational life is an expansion of my functions in the house—education, medical service, social service, moral service.⁶ (Henrietta Szold's vision of the ideal Jewish volunteer)

C. I admit that I cannot be satisfied to be just a wife and mother. I still feel young and want to learn and enjoy life. I am intent upon continuing my education.⁷ (taken from a letter to the *Forward* in the early 1900s)

D. My foremost purpose is to distinguish

myself in my career. I recognize that that kind of commitment will mean giving up some security as well as some of the pleasures of a conventional family environment. I lead a work-oriented, successful, satisfying life, rich with social activities tied to my professional work.⁸ (a depiction of Rose Schneiderman, a Polish-Jewish immigrant and labor movement organizer)

As might be expected, the majority of the younger women, three out of five, chose the last quotation (D) as most pertinent to their lives. The older women were represented in each of the categories; however, the largest number of them chose A as most relevant to them. The women were marked by a different letter, according to which quote they ranked as closest to their own self-concept. Then they were asked the following questions: What attracted you to this corner? Do you like being there? Would you rather be somewhere else?

Interestingly, all the women who chose A as most appropriate for them agreed that while being a good wife and mother is their first priority, it's still "only half the story." Each of them felt that at the time they married (1940s and 50s), A was the only legitimate choice. However now as their children grow older, they are becoming more involved in their own careers. One woman, who is now fifty-nine and the oldest member of our group, stated: "I feel as though I've come full circle. I was always very home-oriented, but when my youngest son went away to college a number of years ago, I knew it was time to find a career for myself. I became very involved with my work, but now that my husband is slowing down and getting ready to retire, I'm back to where I started. I find I want to spend a lot of time at home with him and with my grandchildren."

A rather lively dialogue emerged between the two women who chose B. One was twenty-four and single. The other was

⁵ Zborowski and Herzog, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-1.

⁶ Susan Dworkin, "Henrietta Szold—Liberated Woman," in *The Jewish Woman; New Perspectives*. *op. cit.*, p. 169.

⁷ Baum, Hyman, Michel, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-8.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 159.

in her forties and the mother of three daughters. The older woman could not understand why the younger woman would choose family as such a high priority. She stated: "If I were starting over again today, I would choose D." In response, the younger woman said: "I have a career, but it's not all I want. Frankly, I find being single is extremely difficult. I'd very much like to get married."

All of the younger women who chose D agreed that they enjoyed being there, that they relish the independence represented by involvement in their careers. However, like the women who chose A, those in the D corner agreed that it's not the whole story. The spokeswoman for the group stated: We're in agreement that someday we'd like to try C because of the family element. Sure, our careers are first in priority now, but we also would like at some future time to marry and have children."

This discussion at first appeared to give credence to Elaine's notion of Jewish women as superwomen. That is, rather than dropping any of their roles, these women seemed to be adding function upon function to their repertoire. Yet, upon closer scrutiny, we heard something else: different emphases at different times. As their childrearing responsibilities decreased, the older women were freed to invest themselves more in careers. Likewise, the younger women foresee slowing down their careers at some point to make room for family. This is what Blu Greenberg in her article on Judaism and feminism has referred to as the concept of "total life:" "rather than view homemaking, child-rearing, and career as competing activities—each demanding total commitment now—each can be pursued in turn, at different life stages."⁹ By maintaining different foci at different points in time, these women are thereby able to integrate

their sense of themselves as Jewish women, traditionally seen as the enablers of others in family life, with their more personal and career-oriented ambitions. What seems to have changed from one generation to the next is the sequence. For the older women, marriage and family went first. Only later came the realization that that was not enough. For the younger women, the sequence is reversed. They feel the need to firmly establish a sense of themselves, to first achieve their independence emotionally and economically before moving on to become wives and mothers.

Intergenerational Dialogue

The final sessions of the group were designed to enable the two generations of women to ask questions of one another. That kind of dialogue emerged spontaneously:

Helen (in her 50s): More and more women don't want to be superwomen. When I look back, I realize that I really was a superwoman. I don't know how I did it, and I tell you I wouldn't do it all over again.

Anne (Co-leader): What would you do differently?

Helen: I would have finished my education, travelled, and gotten a good job. I would've had fun and done all the things I wanted to do before I settled down. I would've married at twenty-nine instead of nineteen.

Anne: Is being young and single as rosey as Helen paints it?

Susan (in her 20s): It is and it isn't. I don't have the money to move outside my parents' home, but I love the independence.

Lynn: I for one don't enjoy being single anymore. I just don't enjoy the pressure of knowing what I want yet not being able to find it. I've been brought up to reach for the stars and don't know if I could ever settle for less.

Joyce (in her 40s): It's true, all the rules are changing. When our daughters were little, we watched them playing dolls and thought about them being mothers someday. That seemed to be enough. Now, we want our daughters to be economists, not to follow other people's expectations. We want them to have security, comfort, individuality, and to believe in them-

⁹ Blu Greenberg, "Judaism and Feminism," in *The Jewish Woman; New Perspectives*. op. cit., p. 186.

selves. We want them to achieve independence, financially, socially, emotionally, before they marry. And when they marry, not to marry just to get married—to have supportive husbands.

And so, we heard women in their forties and fifties looking back and wondering what they might have done differently if they were in their twenties today and women in their twenties looking realistically ahead at the choices they must make. We also heard women in their forties and fifties talking about their dreams for their daughters. One doesn't have to listen very hard to hear in those dreams for their daughters their own unrealized longings and ambitions for themselves. Similarly, we heard in the daughters, behind the very real statements of independence and need for achievement, a yearning for some of the certainties and lack of questioning which characterized their mother's lives. These third and fourth-generation daughters have been left a legacy—a puzzling and sometimes contradictory array of expectations that they are only now beginning to unravel.

Evaluation and Summary

During the last session, we asked the members to evaluate the group both orally and in writing. We were interested primarily in what the women's expectations were when they signed up for the group and whether or not those expectations were fulfilled. Most came to the group with the hope of better defining their Jewishness. One young woman stated "I felt Judaism had a strong influence on me, but I couldn't pinpoint exactly what." Others put their expectations in terms of a need to understand the connection between their Jewish heritage and their sense of themselves as women of today. Most of the women, according to the evaluations, came away from the group with a clearer understanding of that connection. One woman wrote: "I think I have improved my understanding of the influence Judaism

plays on my identity. I can actually define some elements and, more importantly, I think I have a starting point to continue questioning and learning." If our goal was to raise consciousness, that aim was fulfilled in two ways: one, those women who entered the group already at home with their Judaism but less at home with feminism left the group not as willing to accept the restrictions Judaism places on women; and two, those women who entered the group more at home with feminism but less comfortable with the Jewish world left the group with a more positive identification with their Judaism. As an example of the first, during the course of the group, one woman in her late fifties announced that her daughter-in-law just gave birth to a baby girl: "I told my husband that I wanted to go with him to the baby-naming ceremony. He responded I'll ask the Rabbi, but if you go, I'm sure you'll be the only woman there." I said, "So what. If it's O.K. with the Rabbi, it's O.K. with me." Before this group, I would never have had the *chutzpah* to even ask." As an example of the reverse trend, one woman, an active feminist, stated that her expectations were foggy when she entered the group. She came with "axes to grind." In her evaluation she wrote, "My axes disappeared, The group provided and fulfilled new and much better expectations. I learned quite a bit about being a Jewish woman in the historical perspective. It was extremely enlightening, and I actually felt myself mesh much closer into this perspective."

All of the women enjoyed the inter-generational aspect of the group. One of the younger women stated, "Because of this group, I have a much better understanding of my mom. I can now listen to her and really hear what she means behind the words she's speaking." Another woman in her twenties, talking for the other single women, stated: "This group really gave us the chance to act out our conflicts with our

mothers without having to worry about hurting them . . . only to discover that if we were to say what's on our minds, they probably wouldn't be half as taken aback as we imagine they would be."

Perhaps because of the double bond of being women and being Jewish, members displayed an unusual candor. They formed

connections quickly and easily opened up with one another. One woman stated, "We could really sort out our conflicts—as women and Jews, as mothers and daughters. People said things here that they might never have acknowledged elsewhere."