Jewish Radical Feminism
Voices from the Women’s Liberation Movement

BY JOYCE ANTLER

Instructor’s Guide

Fifty years after the start of the women’s liberation movement, a book that at last illuminates the profound impact Jewishness and second-wave feminism had on each other.

Jewish women were undeniably instrumental in shaping the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Yet historians and participants themselves have overlooked their contributions as Jews. This has left many vital questions unasked and unanswered—until now. Delving into archival sources and conducting extensive interviews with these fierce pioneers, Joyce Antler has at last broken the silence about the confluence of feminism and Jewish identity.

Antler’s exhilarating new book features dozens of compelling biographical narratives that reveal the struggles and achievements of Jewish radical feminists in Chicago, New York and Boston, as well as those who participated in the later, self-consciously identified Jewish feminist movement that fought gender inequities in Jewish religious and secular life. Disproportionately represented in the movement, Jewish women’s liberationists helped to provide theories and models for radical action that were used throughout the United States and abroad. Their articles and books became classics of the movement and led to new initiatives in academia, politics, and grassroots organizing. Other Jewish-identified feminists brought the women’s movement to the Jewish mainstream and Jewish feminism to the Left. For many of these women, feminism in fact served as a “portal” into Judaism.

Recovering this deeply hidden history, Jewish Radical Feminism places Jewish women’s activism at the center of feminist and Jewish narratives. The stories of over forty women’s liberationists and identified Jewish feminists—from Shulamith Firestone and Susan Brownmiller to Rabbis Laura Geller and Rebecca Alpert—illustrate how women’s liberation and Jewish feminism unfolded over the course of the lives of an extraordinary cohort of women, profoundly influencing the social, political, and religious revolutions of our era.
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INTRODUCTION

Jewish women’s involvement in the women’s liberation movement has been hidden for several generations. The introduction explains reasons for this obscurity and the significance of Jewish women’s participation in the movement. Based on individual and group biographies derived from interviews with more than 40 women, the book examines both early women’s liberation and the self-consciously identified Jewish feminism of the 1970s and 1980s. Analysis of these groups offers a fuller picture of second-wave feminism and an enhanced understanding of the relationship of Jewish women’s liberationists and Jewish feminists to their non-Jewish counterparts. Their activism illuminates the influences of gender and ethnic inheritance on feminism and serves as a prototype for a reconsideration of American Jewish history.
CHAPTER 1

Chapter One highlights the story of the “Gang of Four”—Heather Booth, Amy Kesselman, Vivian Rothstein, and Naomi Weisstein—who were in the vanguard of women’s liberation in Chicago in the late 1960s. At the time of their involvement with the West Side Group, the first women’s liberation group in the country, and then the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, none of the women recognized themselves as specifically Jewish feminists. But in conversations with the author they belatedly recognized that Jewish influences significantly shaped their activism. The story of Marilyn Webb, who left Chicago to form DC Women’s Liberation, follows a similar pattern. Ignored in favor of the universalistic goals of sisterhood, Jewishness nonetheless motivated these radical feminists’ lives.

Naomi Weisstein (second from left), with the Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band, 1971. Courtesy Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band and Virginia Blaisdell.
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the reasons for the formation of the first women’s liberation groups in Chicago. What was distinctive about the Chicago movement? What relationship did the early Chicago women’s liberationists have with men of the New Left? Why did Naomi Weisstein feel that the West Side Group was “ready to turn the world upside down”?

2. Describe the educational and Jewish backgrounds and careers of the “Gang of Four.” What Jewish factors were significant in their upbringing? In what ways do you see their Jewish backgrounds playing a role in their activities in the women’s movement?

3. Choose and explain a quotation from one of the women discussed in the chapter that offers evidence for the view that Jewish identity influenced Chicago women’s activism.

4. Naomi Weisstein observed that the families of Jewish women’s movement activists never talked about the Jewish values that permeated their lives. What reasons might explain the silences that Weisstein describes?

5. How did the views of the Chicago Jewish women’s liberationists evoke the conflict between particularism and universalism? Consider the “antipathy to tribalism” mentioned by Amy Kesselman and the vision of “interfaith and interracial solidarity” raised by Vivian Rothstein.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES


• Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts observed that “when I asked how to get organized, I was told two words. Heather Booth.” Read more regarding the documentary about Booth (Heather Booth: Changing the World, heatherbooththefilm.com) and discuss Senator Warren’s comment.

• Investigate the subsequent careers, scholarship, and organizing activities of the “Gang of Four.”

• Read more about the phenomenon of “trashing.” See, for example, Jo Freeman’s “Tyranny of Structurelessness.”
CHAPTER 2

Chapter Two profiles the attitudes of leading New York radical feminists regarding Jewishness. Shulamith Firestone, the “prime minister” of women’s liberation, penned the incendiary 1970 treatise, The Dialectic of Sex. Rebelling against the Orthodoxy of her childhood, Firestone hoped to usher in a feminist “Messianic Age.” Cultural critic Ellen Willis, with whom Firestone created Redstockings, wrote about her Jewish identity in an acclaimed, three-part Rolling Stone article. Alix Kates Shulman, author of Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen, came to New York from the Midwest, having experienced anti-Semitism growing up. Susan Brownmiller, who wrote Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape, recognized in hindsight that her views on violence toward women had been deeply influenced by the victimization of Jews in the Holocaust.

Susan Brownmiller at Women Against Pornography march, New York City, October 1979. Photo by Janie Eisenberg.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The four women in this chapter are responsible for some of the most significant writings of the early women’s liberation movement. Discuss their most influential contributions. How have these ideas held up over the ensuing decades?

2. Shulamith Firestone and Ellen Willis struggled with Orthodox Judaism. How did this confrontation affect their lives and work?

3. Discuss Ellen Willis’ analysis of anti-Semitism. How does she characterize “The
Myth of the Powerful Jew”? How did she regard anti-Jewish bias on the Left?

4. How does Alix Kates Shulman describe the religious backgrounds of Redstockings members? What explanations does she provide for the lack of the group’s ethnic and religious identity, and her own?

5. What is the connection between Susan Brownmiller’s Jewish consciousness and the analysis of systematic sexual violence in Against Our Will?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

• Read Shulamith Firestone’s The Dialectic of Sex, radical feminism’s most famous “demon text.”

• Explore consciousness-raising as a form of political action and give examples of its use today. For more on consciousness raising, read Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political,” and Janet Freedman, Reclaiming the Feminist Vision: Consciousness Raising and Small Group Practice.

• Read Ellen Willis’ “Next Year in Jerusalem,” in Rolling Stone. Willis’ daughter, Nona Willis Aronowitz, wrote about the 50th anniversary of the 1969 New York Abortion Speak Out organized by Redstockings.

• Read Alix Kates Shulman’s Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen, the first women’s liberation novel. For information about Shulman’s other writings, see Shulman’s website, http://www.alixkshulman.com/.

• Read Susan Brownmiller’s Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape, and see Sascha Cohen, “How a Book Changed the Way We Talk About Rape,” in Time. For more of Brownmiller’s work, click here.
CHAPTER 3

Chapter Three examines Jewish influences on Collective #1 of Boston’s Bread and Roses, the first social feminist union in the US. Eight of its eleven members were Jewish. Profiles of Meredith Tax, Linda Gordon, Marya Levenson, Michele Clark, Grey Osterud, and Diane Balser present class, geographic, educational and religious backgrounds, with Jewish factors emerging as significant influences. Parents’ liberal or radical political views, which were associated with Jewish ethical values, were key factors in the women’s political socialization. The Holocaust, Jewish religion, camps and schools, anti-Semitism and experiences as outsiders were also significant in motivating these women’s revolutionary ideals and activism.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did Bread and Roses’ organizational structure reflect its vision of socialist feminism? How did it distinguish itself from male New Left organizations?

2. What are the key factors in the demographic profile of Bread and Roses members? How did family backgrounds influence their activist trajectories? Discuss social science findings about the roles family members play in guiding political choices.

3. Discuss the influences of McCarthyism, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust on Linda Gordon, Meredith Tax, Michele Clark, Marya Levenson, Grey Osterud and
4. What contradictions did Meredith Tax and Linda Gordon experience growing up Jewish? Discuss these contradictions and the validation provided by the women’s movement.

5. Discuss the difference that Marya Levenson notes between being religiously Jewish, which she described as “particularist,” and being “culturally Jewish.” Also discuss the distinction Diane Balser makes between “minimalist” and “maximalist” Jews, and being “just Jewish.”

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES**

- Research the early women’s labor movement, including the immigrant workers’ 1912 strike, Bread and Roses. Explore the exhibition [here](https://www.meredithtax.org/).

- Read Meredith Tax’s historical novels, *Rivington Street* and *Union Maid*, and some of her works about contemporary politics—e.g., *Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State*, and *Double Bind: The Muslim Right, the Anglo-American Left, and Universal Human Rights*. Additional writings are on Tax’s website, [https://www.meredithtax.org/](https://www.meredithtax.org/).

- Read Linda Gordon’s works on women’s history, social policy, and biography, among them: *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction; Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*; and *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. 
CHAPTER 4

Begun in 1969, the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective may be the most continuous women’s liberation group in the US. Its classic work, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, printed in 25 languages, is recognized as the bible of the women’s health movement. This chapter illuminates the diverse Jewish backgrounds of six of its original founders—Esther Rome, an observant Jew; Paula Doress-Worters, who went to Orthodox day school; Vilunya Diskin, a child Holocaust survivor; Miriam Hawley and Joan Diskin, from Red-Diaper backgrounds, and Jane Pincus, secular and assimilated. Profiles of three non-Jewish founders—Judy Norsigian, Wendy Sanford and Norma Swenson—illuminate how Jewishness served to strengthen community within the collective.


QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Compare the table of contents from the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (OBOS) with those of other editions, and to the most recent edition. What has changed over the decades?

2. Describe the spectrum of Jewish backgrounds that characterize the original
founders of OBOS. How did religious Orthodoxy, the Holocaust, and political radicalism shape Paula Doress-Worters, Vilunya Diskin, and Nancy Miriam Hawley respectively? What other Jewish factors can you identify in the biographies in this chapter?

3. How did Esther Rome’s open expression of Judaism affect the group? Why does Norma Swenson believe that Rome’s work “belongs in the Smithsonian”? Discuss Swenson’s idea that a penchant for “challenging and questioning” represents a “combination of Jewish and feminist style.”

4. As a child Holocaust survivor, Vilunya Diskin’s experience within the women’s liberation movement was unusual. How did her encounters with Judaism change over the course of her lifetime and connect to her work as an activist?

5. According to Joan Ditzion, how did Jewish attitudes about the family shape OBOS?

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES**

- Read OBOS’ story, as told on its webpage. Find out more about its global projects, [https://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/global-projects/](https://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/global-projects/).

- See Mary Dore’s 2014 documentary film about second-wave feminism, *She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry*, which features the OBOS collective. For further information, see [http://www.shesbeautifulwhenshesangry.com/](http://www.shesbeautifulwhenshesangry.com/).

- Read Paula Doress-Worters’ collection of the works of early women’s rights pioneer Ernestine Rose, a Jewish feminist socialist; *Mistress of Herself: Speeches and Letters of Ernestine R. Rose, Early Women’s Rights Leader*. 
CHAPTER 5

Inspired by secular feminism’s attacks against patriarchy, Jewish women recognized themselves explicitly as Jews and carried on the fight against sexism within Jewish religion and community life. Martha Ackelsberg and Arlene Agus were among the dozen founders of Ezrat Nashim, a women’s study group created in New York City in 1971 to challenge patriarchy within Jewish religion. Others profiled in the chapter—feminist theologian Judith Plaskow, Rabbis Laura Geller and Rebecca Alpert, and Orthodox leader, Blu Greenberg—were also directly influenced by women’s liberationists. Although their efforts to meld feminist ideas with Jewish identity entailed considerable struggle, religious feminists challenged the hierarchical base of Jewish tradition and revitalized religious practice.

The first meeting of B’n’ot Esh, 1981. Source: Courtesy of Martha Ackelsberg.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. As seen through the biography of Martha Ackelsberg, what were the “click” moments that led to the emergence of Ezrat Nashim? Describe its influence on Jewish women’s religious lives.

2. What did Judith Plaskow mean by the statement: “We will not let ourselves be defined as Jewish women in ways in which we cannot let ourselves be defined as women”? How was this view expressed in Plaskow’s Standing Again at Sinai?

3. To what extent have key changes that Plaskow called for in this work been realized?

4. What evidence can you cite for Rabbi Laura Geller’s belief that when women became rabbis “everything changed”? Why did Rebecca Alpert believe differently?
5. Why was the first National Conference of Jewish Women a “watershed experience” for Blu Greenberg? Why did Greenberg believe that feminism became a “portal into Judaism”? 

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES**

- Explore Rosh Chodesh as a woman’s holiday. See, for example, *Moonbeams: A Hadassah Rosh Hodesh Guide*, edited by Carol Diament.

- Read Judith Plaskow’s *Standing Again at Sinai*, and Blu Greenberg’s *On Women and Judaism: The View from Tradition*, both classics of Jewish religious feminism. Consider the similarities and differences in the authors’ views of patriarchal Judaism.

- Research the accomplishments, presence, and status of women rabbis in the various denominations of Judaism. See the Jewish Women’s Archive timeline of women in the rabbinate, [https://jwa.org/rabbis/timeline](https://jwa.org/rabbis/timeline), and JWA’s stories of women who have transformed the rabbinate, [https://jwa.org/rabbis/narrators](https://jwa.org/rabbis/narrators).
CHAPTER 6

Chapter Six analyzes Jewish women’s rebellion against the male Jewish Left as well as their alienation from women’s liberationists who ignored or disparaged Jews. Targeting assimilation and anti-Jewish prejudice, secular feminist Jews were among the first to fight anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in the women’s movement and on the Left. Through profiles of Aviva Cantor, Susan Weidman Schneider, Cheryl Moch, Ruth Balser, Susan Schechter, and Maralee Gordon, the chapter explores secular Jewish feminism in the Jewish Student Network, the first national Jewish feminist conferences and the Jewish Feminist Organization, the Brooklyn Bridge and Chutzpah collectives, and Lilith magazine.

Amy Stone and Barbara Taff of Lilith magazine demonstrate for the Equal Rights Amendment, August 1977. Courtesy of the Robert D. Farber University Archives & Special Collections Department, Brandeis University.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What was the significance of the Jewish student conference at Zieglerville to the development of Jewish feminism? Discuss parallels to the origin moments of secular feminism.

2. What issues separated Aviva Cantor and radical Zionists from radical feminists? Discuss Cantor’s conflict with the RAT collective.

3. Why did Susan Weidman Schneider and other Jewish feminists create Lilith as an alternative to secular feminist magazines?

4. What issues did Cheryl Moch and the women of the collective Brooklyn Bridge identify as causing their “oppression as Jewish women”?
5. Why did Susan Schechter describe Jewish women as “scared” at the National Conference on Socialist Feminism? Why did Schechter and Maralee Gordon believe that their Jewish identity put them in a “double bind”?

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES**

- Examine the founding issue of *Lilith* and catalogue some of the contents of its early issues.


- For further background on alternative Jewish culture, see Sharon Strassfeld and Michael Strassfeld, *The First Jewish Catalog* (1973), and Michael Strassfeld and Sharon Strassfeld, *The Second Jewish Catalog: Sources and Resources* (1976). Also see Michael Staub’s *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America*. 
CHAPTER 7

Lesbianism became a channel into a deepening Jewishness for women alienated from their Jewish identities and interested in exploring woman/woman relationships. The chapter focuses on Evelyn Torton Beck, Gloria Greenfield, Irena Klepfisz, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Adrienne Rich, all of whom contributed to Nice Jewish Girls, the lesbian anthology edited by Beck, and joined Di Vilde Chayes (the wild beasts) a collective created to strengthen Jewish lesbian identity and combat feminist anti-Semitism. Beck and Klepfisz were child Holocaust survivors; Greenfield a Zionist, and Kaye/Kantrowitz and Rich grew up as assimilated, secular Jews. The chapter also chronicles Di Vilde Chayes’ conflict with the anti-Zionist group, Women Against Imperialism, and Black-Jewish tensions in the women’s movement, reflected in Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism (1984).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What were the major Jewish and feminist influences on the women chronicled in this chapter? In what ways did lesbianism become a pathway to a deepening Jewishness for lesbian women?

2. Discuss the reasons for the founding of Di Vilde Chayes and the political vision of
the group.

3. Why were Jewish lesbians among the first feminists to recognize the problem of anti-Semitism within the feminist movement? How did both internal and external anti-Semitism impact Jewish lesbian participation in radical feminism? Discuss the insights of Evelyn Torton Beck, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, and Irena Klepfisz on these issues.

4. In her essay, “Split at the Root,” Adrienne Rich wrote about the difficulty of focusing on different oppressions at the same time. Describe this perspective and consider its commonalities with the contemporary feminist notion of intersectionality.

5. Discuss the conflict between Di Vilde Chayes and Women Against Imperialism over Israel/Palestine in the 1980s. How did this emerge as a feminist issue?

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES**


- Discuss the notion of conflicting, multiple identities in Adrienne Rich’s “Split at the Root: An Essay in Jewish Identity.”
CHAPTER 8

Reacting to United Nations Women’s Decade Conferences in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), and Nairobi (1985), which put forth the notion of “Zionism-is-racism,” Jewish women’s liberationists turned from local to global issues. The chapter examines the conferences’ effect on feminist pioneer Betty Friedan, Marcia Freedman and Galia Golan, American-born leaders of the Israeli feminist and peace movements, and on E.M. Broner, Phyllis Chesler, and Letty Cottin Pogrebin of the New York women’s seder group. In response to the conferences, Pogrebin wrote a much-commented upon article in Ms. Magazine on anti-Semitism in the women movement. Radicalizing many American women as Jews, the conferences also stimulated U.S. and Israeli feminist collaborations, including the First International Jewish Feminist Conference in Jerusalem, and other feminist initiatives.

New York women’s seder: Esther Broner, center; to her left, Letty Cottin Pogrebin and Martha Ackelsberg; to her right, Edith Isaac-Rose and Adrienne Cooper. Photo by Joan L. Roth.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the Zionism-is-racism resolution at the Mexico City U.N. Women’s Conference. What effect did anti-Zionism at the conference have on American feminists like Friedan?

2. Pogrebin, Broner, and Chesler were shocked by the Zionism-is-racism formulation at the Copenhagen U.N. Women’s Conference. Discuss the issues that troubled them and the lessons they learned from Copenhagen. Did the reactions of Israeli
feminists Marcia Freedman and Naomi Chazan differ from those of American feminists?

3. The U.N. Women’s Conference at Nairobi was also a “firestorm,” in Diane Balser’s view. What conflicts erupted there, and why, in the end, did the women present “rise above the world’s nasty squabbles”?

4. What were the goals of the 1988 International Jewish Feminist Conference for the Empowerment of Jewish Women?

5. What were some additional examples of collaborations between American and Israeli feminists in the late 1980s? Discuss the work of Women of the Wall (WOW) and its global arm, the International Committee for the Women of the Wall (ICWOW).

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES**

- Find accounts of the U.N. Women’s Decade Conferences and investigate commentary about the Israel/Palestine issue.
- Read the fiction and memoirs of feminists discussed in the chapter. A partial list of their writings includes:
  - Marcia Freedman, *Exile in the Promised Land*.
  - Letty Cottin Pogrebin: *Deborah, Golda, and Me*; *Three Daughters*; *Single Jewish Male Seeking Soul Mate*; *Getting Over Getting Older*; *How to be A Friend to Friend Who’s Sick*. 
CONCLUSION

Jewish women brought together the Jewish and feminist aspects of their experiences in multiple ways. Jewish women’s liberationists were gender universalists who did not prioritize their ethnic origins, coming to a recognition of the Jewish backgrounds that shaped their activism only belatedly. More identified Jewish feminists brought feminism to the Jewish mainstream and Jewish feminism to the Left. The two groups shared important characteristics: being “outsiders”; outspokenness and the willingness to challenge authority; critical thinking; holding social justice perspectives derived from religious and secular Jewish sources. Women in both groups were also deeply impacted by the Holocaust and concerned with anti-Semitism. The chapter argues that the women’s complex identities and their activism should be recognized as essential components of the history of feminism and Judaism.
EPILOGUE

Because of the contributions of women’s liberationists and Jewish feminists, the next generations’ efforts to integrate diverse aspects of gender, religion, and ethnicity became less fraught. Profiles of the six women in this section suggest these evolving patterns of activism and identity construction. The first three stories, from Tamara Cohen, Judith Rosenbaum, and Jaclyn Friedman, emerge from women born in the early 1970s. The last three stories, those of Nona Willis Aronowitz, Collier Meyerson, and Irin Carmon, come from women born in the mid-1980s. Each woman benefited from Jewish feminist role models. Their call to pluralism, inclusion, and diversity stands as an emblem of what younger generations want from a feminism that is integrated with Jewishness in the contemporary world.
PORTRAIT GALLERY

Martha Ackelsberg
Rebecca Alpert
Diane Balser
Ruth Balser
Ros Baxandall
Evelyn Torton Beck
Heather Booth
Esther Broner
Susan Brownmiller
Aviva Cantor
Phyllis Chesler
Michele Clark
Joan Ditzion
Paula Doress-Worters
Vilunya Dsikin
Shulamith Firestone
Marcia Freedman
Laura Geller
Galia Golan
Linda Gordon
Maralee Gordon
Blu Greenberg
Gloria Greenfield
Miriam Hawley
This is the Jewish Radical Feminism portrait gallery. You can find more information on Joyce Antler's website: www.joyceantler.com.