BET DEBORA BERLIN

בית דבורה ברלין

JOURNAL

Conference of
European Women Rabbis,
Cantors, Rabbinically
Educated and Interested
Jewish Women and Men

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JOURNAL 1

Conference of European Women Rabbis, Cantors, Rabbinically Educated and Interested Jewish Women and Men

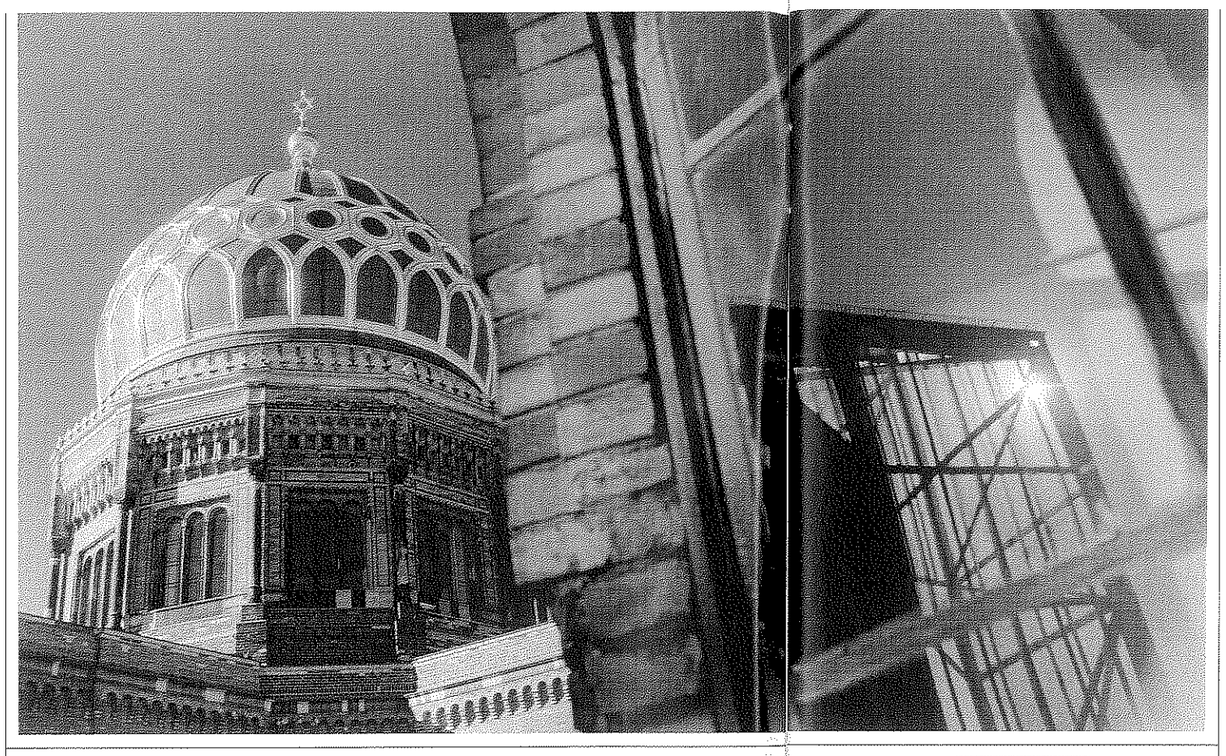
13–16 May, 1999

»The roads were abandoned; travellers took to winding paths. Village life in Israel ceased, ceased until you, Debora, arose.« (Jud. 5,6)

»Debora will be all right« – she was a judge, she was a prophetess, she was a military leader – but do we consider ourselves her »daughters« or her »sisters?« Rachel had just suggested that we name our conference »Debora's Daughters.« But why are women so inclined to define themselves in biological terms? Isn't our issue much more comprehensive? Isn't it about the spirit – »disciples« – a school – a place we intend to create? Something like the School of Hillel? – »Bet Debora!« Rachel exclaimed, and that was it: a »Bet«, a house, a place of encounter and of learning. A spiritual centre that will transmit new ideas to the outside world.

Three women, sitting at a big table buried under piles of paper, we were pondering the future features of a forum for European »rabbinically educated and interested Jewish women.« When we spoke about confining ourselves to Europe, a number of people objected: »Well, you will hardly find any women rabbis, maybe a couple of them in England and then, in Oldenburg, Bea Wyler. You should invite lecturers from America and Israel.« But that was definitely what we did not want to do. We did not want to model ourselves yet again on situations abroad and we did not want to be lectured by Jews from the USA or Israel about what our Judaism was to look like. Haven't we set up our own structures long ago? And not only us, but also many other Jewish women and men in Europe too?

We are three women living in Germany, in the country which nobody imagined would give rise to an authentic Jewish life again. We grew up conscious of this. In spite of all the different experiences the three of us brought along, there was a deeply-felt unanimity in one thing: We were tired of being told time and again about what was lacking in this place, what was assumed to be impossible in this place because we had lost knowledge of our tradition. We were tired of



Bet Debora took place in the former New Synagogue of Berlin

The initiators:
Rachel Monika Herweg,
Elisa Klapheck, Lara Dämmig

pitying ourselves. We wanted to do something. Each of us had learned, had acquired Jewish knowledge, each had tackled her own fragmentary Jewish family history; a painful task, leading, however, to one result: Here we are and here we will stay for good. And here we live our lives as women committed to feminism.

What about our conceptions of Bet Debora? No hierarchy, no competition, no majority decisions! Everyone has something to give. That is how we had experienced our preparatory team-work: each of us had the chance to contribute her style, her knowledge and her wishes. We benefited and learned from each other. That was our wish for »Bet Debora,« too. So we invited European women rabbis, cantors, rabbinical scholars and Jewish women and men with interest in rabbinical matters for a first conference in Berlin. For four days in May 1999, the historical site of the former »New Synagogue« in Oranienburger Strasse would bear the hallmarks of a new era.

The articles in this journal give examples of the diversity and vivacity of our conference, which was attended by 200 women and men. The journal is being issued in three languages, German, English and Russian. It is more than just a report of the conference proceedings. Apart from excerpts from the speeches and descriptions of the workshops, there are essays, reflections and interviews. It meant a lot to us that the participants also have their say. We were overwhelmed by the number of texts we received. Unfortunately, printing space is limited. We were compelled to abridge almost all articles in order to be able to include them. The complete versions, along with everything we will receive in addition, will be found on our Bet Debora homepage in the Net (http://www.hagalil.com/bet-debora).

So, Bet Debora will go on! Besides our homepage and this first journal, we are taking measures to found our own library with an integrated archive. We are collecting any written testimony, either in print or hand-written, in order to provide evidence of the lives and work of Jewish women. We have a dream of establishing our own Bet Hamidrash, combined with a publishing house. In any case, we want to contribute to the creation of a European Jewish women's network.

We are planning another big meeting in the spring of 2001, where we are going to raise the question »Family?« from a women's point of view: Is the family still the foundation of Jewish life and who belongs to it? What about singles, lesbian couples, children of Jewish fathers or single parents? In which way will the present-day diversity of life-styles change Judaism and its further development? We are looking forward to receiving all kinds of suggestions, via mail, phone, e-mail or fax.

Comments to this journal are welcome too, we anticipate that these will lead to further discussions. We should like to thank the Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, especially Anna-Gertraude Schmidt and Gudrun Dölling, for financing the publication of this journal. We should like to thank Gabi Burde and Judith Kessler for their unflagging efforts with regard to the layout. We should like to thank all authors for their articles and all translators for the great job they have done in an impossibly short space of time. Last but not least, we should like to thank all our friends, women and men, for their encouragement and their spiritual support. ■

Translated from German by
Gloria Kraft-Sullivan

Lara Dämmig
Rachel Monika Herweg
Elisa Klapheck

ONE CAN'T TRUST HISTORY

BY SYBIL SHERIDAN

One day in October 1993, my life changed. Dr Hermann Simon, director of the Centrum Judaicum here in Berlin, came to the Leo Baeck College in London and presented a gift: a photograph and the ordination certificate of Rabbi Regina Jonas, ordained in Germany in 1935.

I learnt three things that day. We gathered, around forty people, in a conference room at the Sternberg Centre where, Rabbi Professor Jonathan Magonet, the principal of the Leo Baeck College, gave a speech. Then the artifacts were presented and passed around the room. When I saw the picture of Rabbi Jonas standing in her formal robes I had the strangest sensation. I saw myself. My parents came to England from Germany as refugees. Had there been no Shoah, my life, my upbringing, my education would have been German. Had there been no Shoah, Rabbi Jonas would probably have still been alive when I was born and in the nearly forty years that separated her ordination and mine, there would undoubtedly have been other women in the rabbinate. Instead of finding myself a reluctant pioneer, one of only a few, an outsider to mainstream Judaism and to the mainstream rabbinate – I could have taken my place in what would have by now become the most natural thing – to have women as rabbis. And reflect. Had there been no Shoah, and had there been women rabbis in the Progressive Jewish movements of Europe for the last sixty years – how different would Judaism be today? That hiatus, the changing of everything Jewish that happened because of the Shoah, went beyond the loss of life and loss of culture, it threw Judaism back a century – a century from which we are only now emerging. That was the first lesson.

As a lecturer at the Leo Baeck College and as one of the first women to be ordained there, I had been asked to accept the presentation by Dr. Simon and to give a speech of thanks. I worked very hard on that speech because I sensed that this was indeed a momentous occasion. Dr. Simon said a few words, turned to Rabbi Professor Magonet and gave him the ordination certificate. Rabbi Professor Magonet thanked him and they both sat down. They had forgotten about me. There was one further speech and then the meeting broke up. There was no way I could say anything without it looking completely absurd, but as it was, the whole thing was pretty absurd. Here we were, in an audience primarily made up of women, celebrating the first woman rabbi, with speeches and a presentation entirely by men. After the ceremony I confronted Rabbi Magonet, who told me he was far too busy to think about it because that evening was also going to be the presentation of the first honorary doctorate by the Leo Baeck College and he had so much to arrange.

The Rabbi Regina Jonas presentation took place in a modern seminar room: We simply sat in a circle, in a very informal atmosphere. Half an hour later, the presentation of the doctorate took place in a large elaborate hall. The lecturers of the college walked solemnly in, in full academic dress, to the sounds of a string quartet which played periodically through the evening. Speeches by the gentleman who received the doctorate had been published in a booklet and were given to each person in the packed audience present. It was a grand occasion. What I don't understand is, why the two ceremonies were not combined? Without detracting from the honorary doctor's undoubted merits it does seem to me that the presentation by Dr. Simon was of far greater significance. So what I learned was this. Despite the large number of women who have been ordained and despite the alleged championing of egalitarian causes by the Leo Baeck College, women had not yet broken through into the mainstream.

Third lesson. After the presentation, Hans Hirschberg, a London resident who had discovered that the ordination certificate of Rabbi Regina Jonas still existed in Berlin, gave a very hard hitting speech addressed specifically to the women rabbis present. Why were they not interested? Why had no one bothered to follow up the leads regarding Regina Jonas' life and death? A stunned audience replied with one voice: »We did not know about her.«

Fifty years is no great amount of time. How is it possible that a figure so close to us, so significant in Judaism's modern development, could be forgotten? Questions must be asked.

First, what of her contemporaries? Though Rabbi Regina Jonas died in Auschwitz, her teacher Rabbi Dr. Leo Baeck and many other colleagues escaped or survived Nazi oppression and found homes in England, the United States, Australia. Why did they never mention her? Or if they did, why was no note taken?

Possibly one reason is that her ordination was not recognised. Her private Semicha in Offenbach by Rabbi Max Dienemann, himself on the very liberal end of the Reform movement, would invite rejection not only by those opposed to women rabbis, but also by those opposed to him and his views. Another is simply circumstances. Why should the survivors talk about her? So many great teachers and leaders were lost in the Shoah. Those making sense of a new life in a new country in a new world order can be forgiven if their former colleagues did not loom largely in their minds.

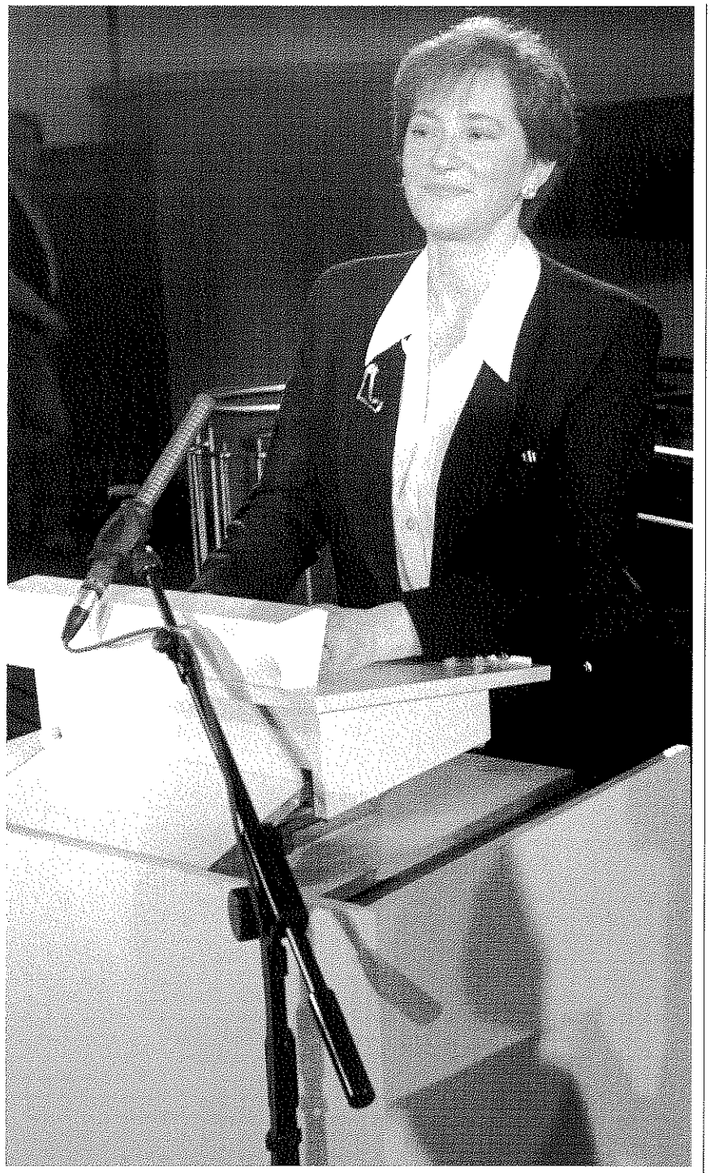
But there were others, involved in the issues surrounding the ordination of women as rabbis in England and in the United States, who must have known about her. It appears that these people – opponents of ordaining women – purposefully kept silent. To mention a precedent would have undermined their own position.

But these are not the only guilty ones in forgetting Rabbi Regina Jonas. I personally had heard about her. I greeted the information, as did other women who were students at the time, with monumental indifference. In the plea today for suitable role models for women in the rabbinate it seems extraordinary that we showed not the slightest interest in finding out more about »that woman in Germany who studied to be a rabbi.«

Nor were we in England alone in forgetting her. Rabbi Sally Priesand, the first woman rabbi in the United States, wrote about her in her rabbinic thesis and in her book »Judaism and the New Woman.« Remarking on her discovery of Regina Jonas' life she admitted that she – Priesand – »was not the first woman rabbi.« »I was actually the second woman rabbi, then, although I was the first to be ordained by a theological seminary.« Yet, when in 1994 she celebrated twenty years in the rabbinate, all tributes to her claimed her as the first. Not one reference was made to Rabbi Jonas. in the States, as in England, she had been forgotten.

How could this be? I can only think that our indifference in the 1970s grew out of an attempt to be like men. As we struggled to gain recognition and respect in the Jewish world, we thought that to reclaim the inheritance of another woman – a woman who was not universally recognised as a rabbi – would only serve to marginalise us and emphasise our differences from our male colleagues.

And so I learnt that one cannot trust history – that what is forgotten may be more significant than what is remembered. I only hope that our recent »discovery« of Rabbi Regina Jonas will indeed be the last. ■



Women Rabbis *In her opening speech, Daniela Thau described herself as a »rabbi on the margin«. This feeling of being marginalised was shared by several participants. Are women rabbis and learned Jewish women nothing but a fringe group? Is their existence and their appearance just tolerated by the male dominated society and nothing more than a concession to political correctness? And will, in the end, the old structures remain unbroken whenever they are at stake?*

Sybil Sheridan was born in Lancashire and studied theology at Cambridge University before training for the rabbinate at Leo Baeck College, London. She currently lectures at the Leo Baeck College in Life Cycle, Festivals and Introduction to Bible. She is Minister to the Thames Valley Progressive Jewish Community, in Reading, Berkshire, author of, among others, »Stories from the Jewish World« (Macdonald, reprinted 1998) and editor of »Hear our Voice. Women in the British Rabbinate« (SCM 1994). Rabbi Sheridan is married to Rabbi Jonathan Romain and has four children.

REGINA JONAS' TREATISE

BY ELISA KLAPHECK

In 1930, Regina Jonas turned in a Halachic treatise at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (College for the Science of Judaism). It was titled, »Can a Woman be a Rabbi?« Jonas was conservative and lived strictly according to the Halachah. For her, achieving equality for Jewish women by liberalizing religious laws as Reform Jews had done was out of the question. Instead, she wanted to prove that Halachah said women could be rabbis. In an 88-page treatment, she intensively analyzed clauses in the Torah, Talmud, Mishneh Torah (Maimonides), Shulchan Aruch (Josef Karo) and other rabbinical commentaries.

She also included outstanding women in Jewish history in her argument. Although the women were not rabbis, they exercised rabbinical functions in that they made Halachic decisions that were recognized by rabbis. In addition to famous biblical protagonists, Jonas also analyzed the stories of Talmudic personalities like Beruria, Yalta, the Hasmonean queen Salome Alexandra and, later, the women around Rashi, his daughters and granddaughters, who were involved in interpreting the Halachah and whose influence was apparent in the writings of their husbands.

Jonas showed that the question of whether women were allowed to wear a Tallit had already been addressed in the Middle Ages, when Brune of Mainz caused a small scandal by wearing a Tallit Katan. A rabbi who was asked for advice responded that Brune was allowed to wear it. Jonas also juxtaposed the Talmud's profemale and anti-female clauses. In addition, she also cited »anti-male« stories which described the »weaknesses« of high ranking rabbis. Jonas also drew distinctions between Halachic rules and the opinions of individual rabbis. For her, the decisive factor was not that a prohibition existed, but the reason for its existence. One example is Jonas' handling of the question: »May women teach?« Traditionally, the rabbi is primarily a teacher (rabbi = my teacher). The Talmud clearly forbids women to teach children. But the Talmudic justification for this is not that

women are too stupid or for some other reason incapable of teaching. Instead, the rabbis in those days feared that the appearance of a woman in the public profession of teacher could endanger observance of the commandment of »Tsniut,« which required reticence and chastity. If a father was picking up his child at school and a woman teacher happened to be alone with him in the room, it was possible that a compromising situation could arise.

Regina Jonas used another example from a related area to advance her argument. She said the rabbis no longer upheld a ban on women being involved in trade because the justification for it had become obsolete. According to the Talmud, woman were not allowed to be vendors on marketplaces. The »payment of money into another's hand« could lead to compromising contact and undermine the »Tsniut« commandment. But one rabbi wrote an opinion that stated the times of economic prosperity in which Jewish women did not need to work were over. He said at the time that there were so many women working in the markets that seeing a woman would not be anything special, so woman could be allowed to work as vendors. Jonas extended this justification to the question of allowing women to teach.

The ideal of »Tsniut« played a key role in Regina Jonas' thought. Jonas expected women themselves would renew Jewish values like modesty, reticence and chastity in the face of modern immorality. In her opinion, a woman rabbi had to remain unmarried. Nevertheless, she believed a woman could freely decide whether she wanted to spend her life as a wife and mother or pursuing a career that corresponded to her talents. She wrote that women were well-suited to the rabbinical office because feminine characteristics like pity, social empathy, psychological intuition and better access to youth were significant requirements for the job. She went as far as to write that women rabbis were therefore a »cultural necessity.«

Jonas' treatise was given the grade »good.« The college nevertheless would not ordain her as a rabbi, conferring on her only a diploma as an »academically qualified teacher of religion.« It was not until five years later, in 1935, that the liberal Rabbi Max Dienemann issued a rabbinical diploma to Jonas in Offenbach. After that, she had only a few years to work as a rabbi in Berlin. She was deported to Theresienstadt in 1942 and murdered in Auschwitz in 1944. ■

Translated from German by Taryn Toro

Literature: »Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas – Kann die Frau das rabbinische Amt bekleiden?« Eine Streitschrift von Regina Jonas, ediert, kommentiert, eingeleitet von Elisa Klapheck (»Miss Rabbi Jonas – Can a Woman be a Rabbi?« A Treatise by Regina Jonas, Edited, with Commentary and Introduction by Elisa Klapheck, Teetz 1999)

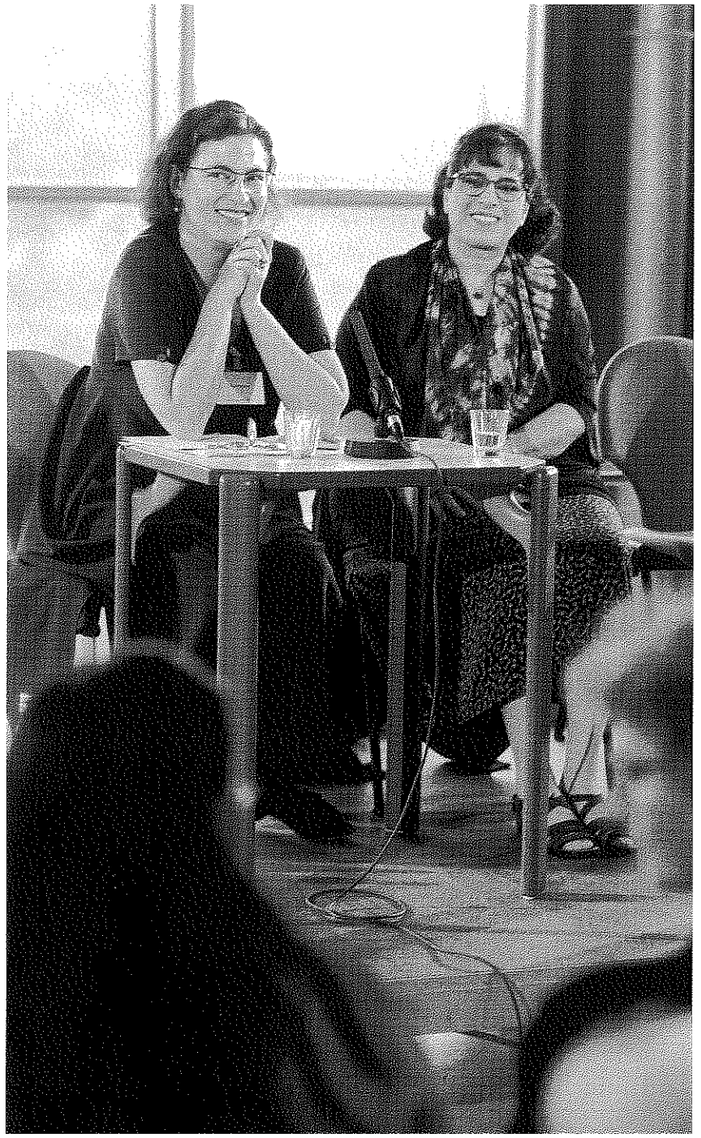
Regina Jonas (1902–1944), Archive ›Stiftung Neue Synagoge – Centrum Judaicum‹ right: Elisa Klapheck and Daniela Thau

RABBI ON THE MARGIN

BY DANIELA THAU

Emotionally, it was not easy for me to sit and write down the reasons why I chose to become a rabbi in the first place and particularly why I no longer work as one at present. In 1976 I met Sybil Sheridan who then was just starting her rabbinical studies at Leo Baeck College. She, Pnina Navè Levinson z'l and her husband Rabbi Nathan Peter Levinson as well as Rabbi Albert Friedlander helped me on my »road to Damascus,« if I may borrow yet again an image from another religion. With the encouragement of these women and men this whole idea of studying for the rabbinate became clear to me. I had always dreamed of studying to become a rabbi, especially in the wake of the knowledge of Regina Jonas through other sources and through Pnina Navè Levinson z'l, but never thought it possible to put this dream into reality because my Jewish socialisation was German-minded and in Germany for a woman to do something like that was not only impossible but totally outrageous even to consider.

I didn't feel that I had any problems at the college as a woman. I didn't feel the male students got better or worse jobs in their student placements than I did. No, there I really didn't feel any discrimination. The problem arose from a different area – it was my socialisation. The fact that I wasn't born and bred English. The language wasn't a problem, I spoke English well enough, grammatically more correct sometimes than the English. No, the problem was that I didn't know the English ways and there was also nobody to teach me. I was just again the odd one out. I was on the margin yet again. It wasn't so much in the non-Jewish English society that I was Jewish, it was more that in the Jewish society I was not an English Jewess. But a post war German Jewess…? Was nicht sein kann, nicht sein darf! (What can't be must not be!)



In July 1983 I got S'micha and in October of that year I married. My husband and I settled in Bedford, a county town 80 kilometres north of London. In a town like Bedford, where there are officially only half a dozen Jewish families, that is, families who actually are members of a synagogue somewhere in Britain, I have met in the last 16 years at least another dozen Jewish families who for all intents and purposes have lost contact with all things Jewish. In the little street alone with 18 houses where my husband and I live, I have already found two families who were totally disconnected from Judaism although fully Jewish. These are all Jews who live on the margins of Judaism and for one reason or another feel or felt threatened by organised religion. I as a marginalised professional Jew could very much relate to that. It made me realise that I am also really at loggerheads with organised religion and that I am a free, lateral thinker who never tows the line and has always lived right on the brink of Judaism. I can very much sympathise with these marginal Jews and wherever possible do what I can to help them to re-enter Judaism one way or another.

What is somehow in the back of my mind, but which I can't really express, is that I feel that not by design or choice but through force of circumstance I became a rabbi for the Jews on the margin. I am not a paid outreach rabbi but I

share with those people who I find on my journey through life my personal private Judaism. I invite them to my own home observances, like Shabbatot, Sedarim, sitting in the Sukkah, Chanukkah candles, etc. I have to admit that it does upset me that week after week I get letters from Jewish educational institutions telling me that there aren't enough Jewish professionals around and asking me to contribute financially to the training of more rabbis and teachers while I who am trained get ignored and am denied any opportunity to use my skills in the non-orthodox Jewish world. I am not the only one in this situation. But the last thing I want to do is to blame others for my plight or make them responsible for it or criticise them in any way. Although if anyone were to ask me, am I hurt or do I feel that my talents are wasted I would have to say, yes. I got hurt but never did it shake my belief in G'd or Judaism. I love G'd and Judaism with every fibre of my being. I know that I was born a Jewess for a reason and I know that I have a message to pass on. But how should I do this? Quietly and gently in the privacy of my home, with a few stragglers here and there? Or loud and clear from a Bimah, like the blast of a Shofar?
Since force of circumstance has resulted in my being a rabbi on the margin, I find myself asking this question: Should I compromise my integrity and identity just to serve the larger, more established community? It's a question to which I am still seeking the answer. ■

Excerpt of Daniela Thau's lecture at Bet Debora

Daniela Thau was born as a child of Jewish emigrants in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1952. Her family moved back to Germany in the late fifties. She was the first woman from Germany, after Regina Jonas, to become a rabbi. She started her rabbinic studies in 1978 and was ordained at Leo Baeck College in 1983. She has lived in Britain, Switzerland and India. After Bet Debora Daniela Thau was invited to Vienna by the Progressive Community »Or Chadash« and to Berlin by the Synagogue Oranienburger Strasse. She officiated during the High Holidays of 5760 (1999) as a rabbi in Berlin together with the cantors Mimi Sheffer and Avitall Gerstetter. It was the first time after the Shoah that women led High Holidays services in Berlin.

The auditorium

Normer Drimmer, in charge of the cultural affairs of the Berlin Jewish Community, at the reception

right: Albert Friedlaender, the former director of the Leo Baeck College in London, in conversation with, among others, Pamela Rothmann-Sawyer

Early Jewish reformers (small 'r') in Western Europe, in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Emancipation, were struggling to incorporate into their religious belief the concepts of the rights and obligations of the individual, the reassertion of the role of the intellect and their new relationship with the political, social and religious world of which they now were so much more a part. Almost 200 years later, the entire Jewish world, orthodox and nonorthodox alike, continues to grapple with these issues. The modern Liberal/ Reform/ Progressive position is succinctly and unequivocally stated by Jonathan Romain, an English Reform rabbi, in his book »Faith and Practice« (The Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, 1991, p. 245): »Reform believes that laws should be intelligible, prayer should be comprehensible, rituals should be meaningful, women should be equal, and our neighbors should be loved as ourselves.« This paper concerns itself with one aspect of that position, that of women and their place/role in the life of that heterogeneous religious community which I shall refer to simply as Progressive, given that all of the above-mentioned movements are joined together in the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ). To what extent is this concept of equality of the sexes reflected in the real world? Let us look at a few specific issues.

RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS ▩ Abolishing the Mehitzah was a symbolic gesture which eventually made it possible to count women in the Minyan. Only recently have all Progressive congregations done so. While women feel more at home and welcome in the Progressive service, the question still remains as to how ready they are to take an active part in the service: Aliyot and other honors, leading services, reading from the Torah and Haftarah. Lack of confidence, cultural norms, inertia, early orthodox training/ memories as well as male opposition, remain obstacles.

Professional Leadership n The first women rabbis were ordained at Hebrew Union College, USA (1972), Jerusalem (1981); at Leo Baeck College, London (1975); female cantors, in the same period, in New York. (The private ordination of Regina Jonas in Germany, 1935 was a singular event.) The special edition of the CCAR (The Central Conference of American [Reform] Rabbis) Journal on »Women in the Rabbinate« (Summer, 1997) highlights their successes and the special contributions which the women, qua women, have already made to the profession but also points out many areas in which they continue to suffer from lack of acceptance/aversion/discrimination on the part of colleagues and lay leaders, as well as clarifying their own special needs which are only now being recognized. Women early entered the field of education, an area in which they flourished and in which they were granted great responsibility by the community. In both America and Europe, the annals of American Reform record outstanding female preachers and teachers in the late 19th and early 20th century, while England´s Lily Montagu (first half of the 20th century) was an unparalleled preacher and educator.

LITURGY ▩ As a general rule, Progressive communities tend to produce their own local prayer books, in Hebrew (amount varying considerably from place to place) with parallel prayers in the local vernacular. The latter is where most of the »modernization« of the traditional text takes place.
The English Reform Siddur includes the traditional Prayer for the Community, after the Torah reading, in which reference is made in Hebrew to »them (masculine), their wives, children etc.« implying that the prayer community is only men. The »correction« appears in the English text. Most of these prayerbooks include an anthology of new, alternative readings. Women writers do not appear to be highly represented. As female images are grossly underrepresented in the traditional liturgy, this has become an important area for creative innovation, e.g. female God language, the naming of Sarah, Rebecca, etc. alongside Abraham, Isaac, etc. in the Amidah; a liturgical poem addressed to the Shechinah as a substitute/addition to »Avinu Malkenu« on the High Holidays; to name but a few.
European communities have been slower than their American counterparts to adopt such innovations. Women do appear in the latter, carrying a negative symbolism: unfaithful, ungrateful, or worse, as in Hosea, Isaiah (Chap.1), etc. Many Progressive congregations take the liberty of adapting the readings to their own needs, some more, some less. It is curious that an early change, made in Berlin in 1845 and maintained in many

Progressive liturgies to this day, i.e. the replacing of the story of Hagar (Gen. 21) and the Binding of Isaac (Gen. 22) with that of the creation (Gen.1) on Rosh Hashanah, as well as the »Hannah« Haftarah, for ethical or ideological reasons, effectively removes a strong female presence from the holiest of days.

RITUALS ▩ The earliest European reformers identified the existing Bar Mitzvah ceremony as irrelevant/negative, in so far as the boy learned whatever he learned by rote and was in any case too young to accept communal/religious responsibility (as implied in the ceremony). They replaced Bar Mitzvah with Confirmation, at a somewhat later age, based upon learning and accepting the principles of Judaism, rather than preparing a section of the Torah reading and mouthing an obscure »Drashah«. In principle, girls were to be included, in reality, they generally were not.

Times and attitudes have changed: most of the Progressive communities have brought Bar Mitvah back, and have also created a Bat Mitzvah ceremony for girls, almost without exception, parallel to that of the boys and following the same proscribed course of study. The Brit Milah ceremony is clearly more difficult to adapt but the current position is that a meaningful covenant-acceptance ceremony is the right not only of a boy but also of a girl.

While the principle of female equality in the synagogue, and in Jewish life in general, was of concern to the 19th century modernists, in reality it was only one of the many issues needing urgent attention.

Attracting Jews back to the synagogue, liturgical reform, education of children and raising the general level of Jewish knowledge and Jewish selfesteem, in the face of previously unknown levels of exposure to the Christian world around them, were all of higher priority, That issues relating to women (e. g. doing away with the Mehitzah) were acknowledged at all is to be commended. In point of fact, it took more than a century for the re-examination of the female role to begin in earnest. And the outcome, to date, is a widely divergent spectrum of attitudes and practice within the Progressive world. ■

Adina Ben-Chorin was born in the USA in 1939. She was educated at the Akiba Hebrew Academy, Philadelphia, the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, and the University of Cincinnati, Ohio, where she received an MA in Community Planning. She made Aliyah in 1965, and is married to Tovia Ben-Chorin, the current rabbi of the Zurich Progressive Community »Or Chadash.« She is mother of two sons, and grandmother. She works as a translator and teaches Judaism with emphasis on practical aspects and issues relating to women.

RECONSTRUCTION WORK

BY BEA WYLER

I am a rabbi not because I want to make a feminist statement, but because I was at Sinai and received the Torah there. The Torah belongs to me as much as anybody else, and I feel that it is my calling to spread the word of the Torah by teaching and study as a rabbi.

Age and gender are no obstacles in our congregation when it comes to praying in public. The grandmother who learns to »lein« on her sixtieth birthday is just as welcome as the Bar Mitzvah who wants to give a short Dvar Torah on Yom Kippur. The primary focus of my rabbinate is the Talmud Torah. It is a matter of great concern to me that we don't just pay lip service to our tradition, but that we study and analyse it, that we tussle with it and in so doing live a modern life in accordance with Jewish precepts. We regularly have twenty or more people taking part in our weekly Torah study evenings – in Oldenburg Wednesdays are nearly as sacred as the Shabbat! We also prepare pamphlets on different topics such as »Mezusah« or »Shabbat at Home.«

Our children know by now that they have the right to receive a blessing on the Shabbat, and we have had a case where a child asked us to help convince her parents to learn this blessing. We have achieved our goal when our congregants perceive their Jewishness as a phenomenon with an identity of its own, not something artificially imposed on them, when they explore and test their own religion, when they derive pleasure from tradition ensconcing itself in their hearts and homes. I am especially touched and moved when one of my congregants speaks of »my« or »our« Torah instead of »the« Torah.

Whenever someone learns a part of the Torah, however small, he or she is encouraged to pass this learning on to someone else. An eight-year-old might end up teaching her father to read Hebrew, or an older member of the congregation might suddenly remember a long-forgotten melody which we then learn together. We have »privatised« the Pesach Seder because the communal Seder wasn't a success. Instead we offer a pre-Pesach workshop on four evenings where we instruct the participants in how they can celebrate at home: This includes sheet music, a cassette with songs and a sheet of recipes. Only the Matzot and the kosher wine are ordered centrally. This year at least a dozen Sedarim took place in Oldenburg, some of them quite large events. This achieved the aim of decentralising Judaism, getting it out of the synagogue and community centre and into private households. Once a year we organise a weekend seminar where members of other congregations come to learn from us. Our target group is lay people who are eager to apply what they have learnt in their own community as soon as possible. A by-product of these seminars is a network of connections and acquaintanceships which quickly dispels the feeling of insularity.

NOT A MEMBER OF THE RABBINICAL CONFERENCE ▩ I don't believe that the experiences I have described here are that profoundly different from those of my male colleagues. It is true that I am not a member of the German Rabbinical Conference, but that is at least in part due to the fact that I have never taken the trouble to apply for membership in this illustrious body. I believe that my frustrating experiences in the rabbinate and the hostility I have encountered have little to do with my gender, but are to a large extent experienced by any rabbi in a community that is engaged in a process of reconstruction after a catastrophe of immeasurable proportions.

We are in the process of redefining ourselves. Of course there will be both more progressive and more conservative versions of this re-orientation. The danger does not lie in diversity, but in the lack of communication that has opened up between the two sides. It is here that the »Einheitsgemeinde« (Unified Community) has an enormously important task to carry out. As the Jewish umbrella organisation with a political mandate it must first and foremost concentrate its energies on guaranteeing the unity of Klal Yisrael. Narrow definition of suitability for membership leads to lack of identification and to breakaway activities outside the main structure.

Only a more generous definition that emphasises the common features, possibly located in a small place, will be able to keep Klal Yisrael alive. Any attempts to force beliefs and behaviour into line are counterproductive; pluralism is the only means of survival.

I would like to make my contribution to Tikun Olam because I see a future for Jewish tradition in Europe, especially in Germany – and I would like to play an active part in shaping this future. ■

Bea Wyler

Translated from German by Dorothy Gordon

Excerpt of Bea Wyler's lecture at Bet Debora and quotations of the discussion

Bea Wyler grew up in Switzerland. After working as an agronomist and as a journalist, she decided to study rabbinics. She was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York in 1995.

Currently she is working as the first woman rabbi in Germany after Regina Jonas and is responsible for the congregations of Oldenburg, Braunschweig and Delmenhorst.

COMMUNITY-ACTIVISTS

BY LARA DÄMMIG

Our conference venue, the New Synagogue, was not only a place of prayer. Beneath its golden dome, the Council of Representatives of the Jewish Community of Berlin used to meet; here, the guidelines of community policy were being laid down – by men. Not until 1926, eight years after universal suffrage for women was introduced in Germany, did the Jewish Community of Berlin grant the women the franchise and eligibility to fully participate. One of the first women to be a member of the Council of Representatives was Bertha Falkenberg (1876– 1946). In the minutes of this body, there are only a few notes of requests to speak made by her and her colleagues and only scant evidence of their activities is to be found. Did they have nothing to say? Were their activities not important? That can hardly be true, because Bertha Falkenberg was nominated among the top candidates of her party for the upcoming election in 1930. At the end of her first term, she uttered her disappointment with her male colleagues' work: they had rather used the discussions as a stage for debating party policies, she said. »Their understanding of community work was out of place, distorted and turned upside down.« She refused to take part in their »tournaments of words« and she demanded that the Community refocussed its essential tasks.

An elected representative of the Jewish Community and as chairwoman of the Berlin section of the Jewish Women's League, she did important basic work in the fields of welfare, pedagogy and education, all of which she considered woman's natural spheres. Like her, full of energy and zeal, thousands of Jewish women in Berlin ran orphanages, founded counselling centres, looked after the sick or arranged courses for the young jobless at any of the more than twenty Jewish Women's Associations or at other Jewish organisations. Most of them were housewives who did competent and professional work as volunteers. However, hardly any attention was paid to them, let alone honour. »Still, the work of women seems to be marginal, still, women are not officially acknowledged as a help,« Ernestine Eschelbacher (1858– 1931), the chairwoman of the Bnei-Brit sorority, one of the most important Jewish women's associations in Germany, complained. She, too, was a member of the Council of Representatives. For years, she had been fighting for the work of the sorority to be acknowledged. In this sorority, the wives of the lodge members were united. But in spite of the women's achievements, they were still denied membership in the lodges. Nevertheless, by fulfilling their tasks, Ernestine Eschelbacher, Bertha Falkenberg and their companions had won a significant position within the Jewish Community and had introduced women's issues into community work. In 1928, Lily Montagu (1874–1963), the founder of the Jewish Liberal Movement in England, became the first woman in Germany to give a sermon from a synagogue pulpit in Berlin. She was very impressed by the achievements of Jewish women: »In no other country in the world have women achieved more than here in Germany, especially in the fields of study and social work. Why should this highly developed women's force not also help in improving synagogal life?... It is high time women came down from the synagogue galleries and interfered with the very life of the synagogues.« In those days, however, it was only the next generation which reacted to her plea. Three women of this generation were guests at Bet Debora. ■

History – Present *No generation begins out of nothing. Each one has predecessors upon which its accomplishments are built. That is why three honoured guests were invited to take part in a »Historical Discussion Group« – women who were actively involved in Jewish life in Berlin during the twenties and thirties: Shoshana Ronen (née Elbogen) and Ilse Perman (née Selier) studied at the »Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums« (College for the Science of Judaism). Hannah Hochmann led the youth services for the Liberale Synagoge Norden (Liberal Synagogue Berlin North).*

Translated from German by Gloria Kraft-Sullivan

Lara Dämmig, born in 1964, studied library science and was the editor of a librarians' periodical. Even back in times of the GDR, she was a committed member of the Jewish Community of East Berlin. She contributed considerably to the foundation of a Rosh-Chodesh-Group and an Egalitarian Minyan. Currently she is working for the Lauder Jüdisches Lehrhaus, does research on the lives of Jewish women in Berlin and is one of the initiators of »Bet Debora«. Publication, among others: »Bertha Falkenberg, Eine Spurensuche« (in: »Mit der Erinnerung leben«, Berlin 1996).

A YOUNG LAY PREACHER

BY IRIS WEISS

One of the most impressive meetings I had at Bet Debora was my meeting with Hanna Hochmann, who had travelled all the way from Petach Tikvah. I was impressed by her energy, her briskness and her sense of humour. In the »Historical Discussion Group,« she told us that her family had taken Jewish tradition in its liberal form very seriously. For a long time, Hanna's father had been a member of the council of the Liberal Synagogue Berlin North. For her Bat Mitzvah, she wrote a speech that in length outlined Rabbi Hillel's saying, »If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what kind of person am I? If not now, when?« This saying, she said, has been her companion throughout her life.

Early on in the thirties, Hanna Hochmann held a service for young people in the Liberal Synagogue Berlin North. She tried to make it as vivid as possible. Therefore, she read aloud a Chassidic story by Martin Buber.

While still in Berlin, she had received an educational training at the Seminary for Women Leaders of Youth Groups. Jews were increasingly being marginalised by the Nazi regime. Hanna met lots of children and adolescents, who, despite their estrangement from Jewish tradition, were more and more strongly reminded by the outside world of their being Jewish. She deeply wished to help these children and youths with their difficult situation and she tried to show them ways to gain a positive understanding of their Jewish identity.

For Hanna Hochmann it was, as she said, mainly a question of conveying the substance of Jewish tradition. She initiated services for the youth which, in accordance with their respective age, responded to the children's situation in many ways. Short time later, she fled from Nazi-Germany to Palestine and became a kibbutz member. Even after her emigration, children and young people continued to play a central role in Hanna Hochmann's life. She brought a poster full of photographs along to show at the conference. It reflected her work of many years as well as the development of the state of Israel. Hanna Hochmann had opened various approaches to creativity for the children in her custody as well as for their parents. In doing so, she considered it a challenge rather than a problem when money was tight.

One of the few books she had managed to take with her when emigrating to Palestine and which she had now brought along to Bet Debora, was a liberal prayer book, published by the Liberal Synagogue Berlin North. In Palestine, later on Israel, however, religion took a secondary place in her life. Now, her commitment to the building up of the country prevailed. At Bet Debora, she criticised the conference. The liberal Jews of Berlin, she said, had been »progressive« and had wanted reform and a revival. She felt that the religiousness of today's younger generation was »regressive« and »folkloristic.« ■

Translated from German by Gloria Kraft-Sullivan

Iris Weiss, born in 1958 in Munich, has been living in Berlin since 1991. She does urban research and offers city sightseeing walks showing Jewish life in Berlin. She is responsible for the Bet Debora Homepage at »HaGalil,« the most important German-Jewish online service (http://www.hagalil.com/bet-debora).

above: Hanna Hochmann and Rachel Herweg

In the footsteps of Jewish women: walking tour with Iris Weiss

WE DIDN'T ASPIRE TO THE RABBINATE

BY SHOSHANA RONEN

In 1872 the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums was opened. The College was a free place where research could be done in order to preserve, further education and spread Judaism. The religious orientation of the professors was not the decisive factor. What needs to be recognized is that all of the College lecturers had always lived within the Jewish tradition and all had mastered Hebrew.

The College was never dependent on any other religious or public organization, party or profession. That is why the College Board always had to find money, patrons and contributors for College positions and scholarships.

The College took a long time to develop. In the beginning there were 12 students, among them four women. In 1921 there were 63 fully enrolled students and 45 auditors. At that time many of the students came from Eastern European countries. Most of them were graduates of Yeshivot or students of Tarbut Schools. As a result these students were at a higher level than the students who wanted to return to their Jewish roots and came from assimilated German-Jewish families. These students were passionately interested in Judaism, but had practically no knowledge or language skills. As a result, they had to take prep courses at the College in order to first familiarize themselves with the extensive sources of Judaism. They were obliged to take on an intensive study of Hebrew, as anything that had to do with a Jewish past was recorded in Hebrew and even the discourses that were written in German quoted sources in Hebrew. It was impossible to occupy yourself with Bible studies, the Talmud or Midrash without having learned Hebrew. For many, even the prayer book was a completely new experience.

In 1932 the College could proudly celebrate its 60th anniversary. There were 155 students, among them 27 women and many auditors who enthusiastically studied Judaism – be it Talmud, Midrash, Halachah, Hebrew, Jewish philosophy or history. Those who wanted to become rabbis had to take part in the homiletic lectures at Leo Baeck College.

Not one of us women aspired to become a rabbi. We wanted to become academic religious teachers or, like myself, work in the Jewish academic sector. Regina Jonas had long since finished her studies and was working as a teacher and fighting in order to reach the »Smicha« as a woman rabbi. The College was never prepared to take this step.

In the years from 1930–33, the College was the center of Jewish spiritual life. Christian theologians met with scientists from the College once a month to discuss biblical and historical topics. The Monday evening lectures were very popular and dealt with general cultural questions seen from the Jewish perspective. From the middle of 1933 the College slowly began to lose ground. Many lecturers and students were leaving the country. Young rabbis found jobs on far off continents bringing the cultural heritage of the College to the entire world. Even though the College was degraded to »Lehranstalt« (educational establishment) by the Nazis in 1934, it tried to maintain its students. In 1935 it was expanded to being a study group for general scientific lectures. »Non-Aryan« lecturers and students who didn't have work met here. In 1938, the year of »Crystal Night« everything was more or less destroyed through emigration, imprisonment in concentration camps or deportations. Even then Leo Baeck tried once more to bring together a study group in 1938. But in 1942 everything definitively fell apart.

As a former student of the College I was kindly invited by Bet Debora. The conference took place very close to the former College building in Tucholsky Street. It was not only nostalgia that moved me to come here, but rather I asked myself if I could find within the confines of Bet Debora and its endeavors a continuation of what the College had strived for.

To my delight I found a deep knowledge on the part of many participants, and among them many who were not involved with Judaism on a full time basis. But what was missing was the Judaism of daily life. Learning and knowledge are not enough to build a community and keep alive in a non-Jewish environment.

An egalitarian Minyan is good as long as it paves the way for active participation for women. But not when they isolate themselves from Klal Yisrael, the community from the Ukraine to Toronto, with their own special rituals. The power of Judaism consists of working together daily and of supporting one another, be it for the community or the individual. The whole of Israel is based on this: »Kol Yisrael Arevim – Se La' Se.« ■

Translated from German by Hannah Zinn

Shoshana Ronen studied as Susie Elbogen from 1931–33 at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, Berlin. She emigrated via England to Palestine/Israel in 1937, where she worked as an English teacher and then in a kindergarten. Since 1952 she is engaged in »publicity.«

Shoshana Ronen in the round of conference participants

STUDENT DURING THE NAZI ERA

BY ILSE PERLMAN

For me the Friedenstempel (Synagogue Fasanenstrasse), even before 1933, was a spiritual and very special Jewish place. Rabbi Joachim Prinz was a spokesperson for Berlin Jews and a propagandist for Zionism. He had an unbelievable influence over the liberal young Jews in Berlin. Amongst the other Temple activities a youth group was formed, which I immediately joined. I became an active Zionist! In the meantime I had completed my »Abitur« (senior exam) and wanted to know more about Judaism. I remember that I myself discovered and enrolled in the »Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums« (»Educational Establishment for the Science of Judaism«; as of 1934 the name »College« had been downgraded to »Educational Establishment,« the ed.). A long time before I had joined the Zionist youth group Makkabi Hazair. They were looking for leaders and I became the group leader of 13 to 14 year old girls. We called our group »Hineni« (»Here I am!«) and began to write a group book that I still enjoy reading today. Some of the youth groups in Berlin that I became more and more familiar with were »very left« like Shomer Hazair, and very different from Makkabi that was more »middle of the road.« I mostly felt drawn to the »Werkleute.« Many of the members went after academic careers and later immigrated to Palestine. I had also hoped to immigrate to Israel. However, this never became a reality.

Now it is difficult to imagine how I had enough time to arrange all my various interests. I took Hebrew lessons from Dr. Kaleko in Meinekestreet, as well as private Hebrew lessons, I went to seminars, meetings, sang in a synagogue choir, lead my »group« and had half a year of Greek lessons with Dr. Grumach from Koenigsberg who had come to the »Lehranstalt,« where I was studying myself. My parents complained that I was never at home! Our studies began with prep courses in which there were about ten of us students, three of them girls, that had finished their senior exams and began reading Tanach and Talmud. I am pleased to say that after a half year we were in a position to follow the »real« lectures that were held at the »Lehranstalt.« My most adored professor was Ismar Elbogen who taught Jewish History and whose »History of the Jews in Germany« is still available in Jewish bookstores in Berlin. He was the darling of the »Lehranstalt.«

All students were naturally interested in the services in Berlin. On Saturdays we frequently went in groups to the liberal synagogues in the West in order to hear the sermons of the various rabbis. Afterwards we often went to the Elbogens' home where his wife treated us with welcoming hospitality and he himself gave us the wonderful opportunity to take part in »scholarly« conversations about Jewish topics that interested us.

In spite of the rather unathletic leaning of our students, I was able to organize a group outing – only once – on the outskirts of Berlin. In the middle of the woods we even davened – with Tallesim and T'fillen!

The possibility of being able to study at the »Lehranstalt« was a wonderful experience. We were introduced into the study of subjects such as History, Talmud, Homiletics and Classical Hebrew by the best rabbis and professors and all thoroughly enjoyed our learning experience. Because we were a relatively small group, we all knew each other and made life-long friendships.

It is hard to believe that this was all still possible in 1934–37. We were all conscious of the fact that we lived under a barbaric regime. But we had the most unbelievably wonderful experience within us: Our mutual studies with like-minded individuals who were interested in making Judaism the center of their lives.

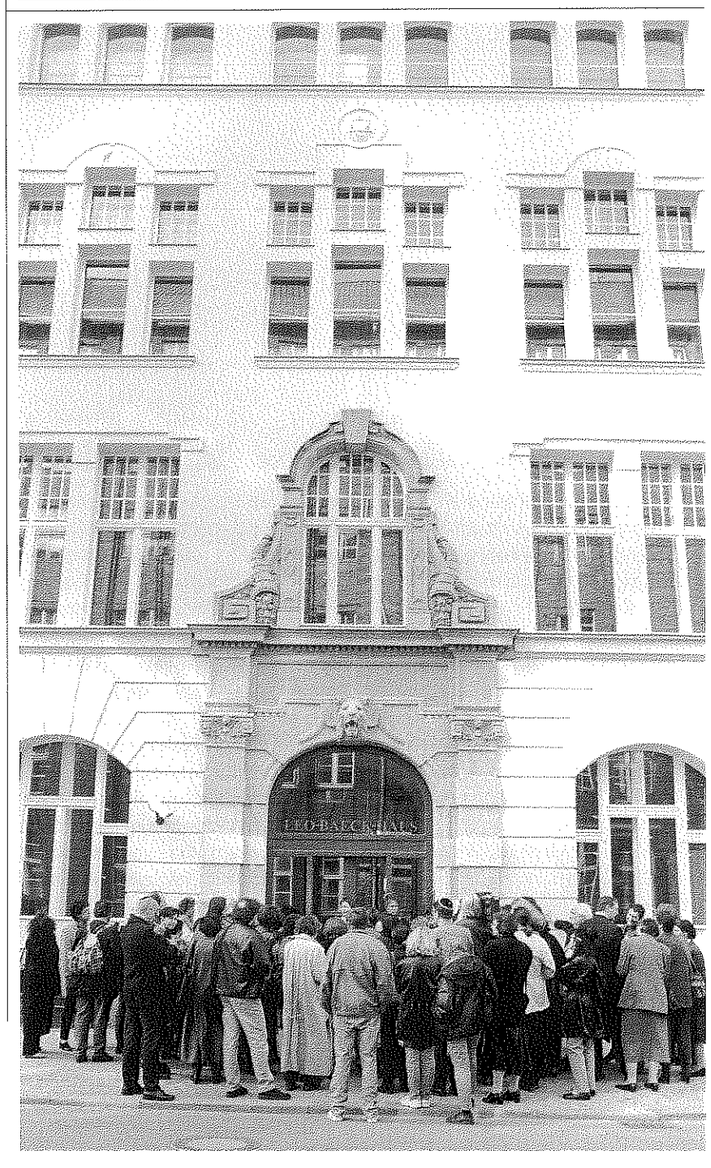
Two generations: Ilse Perlman and Bea Wyler

I have had a difficult time in my »later life« to explain to my sons and American friends that, despite all the difficulties of survival during the Nazi era, we were still able to experience some joy in life and from our studies. The fact that we lived in Berlin, and in most cases were not physically threatened (which was the case in smaller towns), allowed us to find and maintain our purpose of life within our Jewish group. Especially as Zionists we had unbelievable high hopes – to build up Israel – to be facilitators – this gave us strength and determination in our lives. The question: »How could you not have thought about early emigration?« is another one. I myself wanted to make Aliyah as a youth – but many of us had ancestors that had lived for hundreds of years in Germany. A good number were very settled here and considered themselves – obvious mistakenly – as »belonging.« Many of them didn't realize the true position of their fellow citizens until it was too late. ■

Translated from German by Hannah Zinn

Ilse Perlman (née Selier) was born in Berlin in 1917. She studied at the »Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums« (Educational Establishment for the Science of Judaism) from 1934–39. At the same time she began studying physics at the Technical College in Berlin and completed her studies after she emigrated to the USA. She was involved in the first atom bomb test in Los Alamos and worked as a physicist for many years at the State University of New York.
She now lives in Bayport and is involved in various academic pursuits as well as being active in an egalitarian congregation.

To the »Historical Discussion Group« Ilse Perlman brought a photo from the Library of the Lehranstalt that was taken in 1937 or 38. She is sitting in the first row on the far right hand side of the picture. The photo shows a good number of the female students at the Lehranstalt.



The former Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, today the Leo-Baeck-Haus and residence of the Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland

BY ESTHER SEIDEL

I have been a lecturer in Jewish Philosophy at Leo Baeck College in London since 1986. In my work I have time and again come up against the achievements of the »Wissenschaft des Judentums« (Science of Judaism) which in large part are still only available in German. The language barrier might be the reason why some of the work done by German Jewish scholars is barely accepted, if at all. The lack of recognition of the extraordinary performance of the German-speaking Jewish sector may have to do with the subsequent extremely painful fate of European Jewry.

The College for the Science of Judaism in Berlin (1872–1942) was a typical example of German-Jewish freedom in academic teaching and learning. It was the first educational institution for rabbis that was not only on par with a university but also allowed women to study. This led to one of these women, namely Regina Jonas, striving to take on the profession of rabbi. Even though she had to overcome many obstacles and her ordination was delayed, she nevertheless became the first woman rabbi in the world. She defended her final paper so successfully that there was not even a rabbinical argument that could hold back the ordination of a woman becoming a rabbi.

THE TRAINING OF WOMAN RABBIS ▩ Regina Jonas has become the model for an entire generation of young women rabbis who have been ordained during the last three decades at Leo Baeck College. This College was founded in London shortly before Leo Baeck's death in 1956 and was conceived as a kind of successor to the Berlin College. The ordination of women in the Reform and liberal Jewish tradition in England has long since become taken for granted. Those of us for whom the fight for women's right to self-discovery is a given, have in our enthusiasm for what Regina Jonas achieved often presumed that there must have been other women students at the College who had the desire to become rabbis and that it was only the tragic political circumstances that hindered them. It seems as if Regina Jonas was a special case. I will soon be presenting research with examples of personal encounters and interviews with former students from the College, but also a commemoration to those students who are no longer with us – to thematically examine their motivation and goals with regards to the College.
The first conference of women rabbis and Jewish academics on German soil brought up the question of the possibility of further developing the Science of Judaism, particularly because those women rabbis owe their ordination to the offshoots of liberal German-Jewish spiritual development. Some of the women rabbis from countries all over Europe who have come together in Berlin might still feel committed to a German-Jewish heritage because of the Science of Judaism and through the College, which had a decisive effect world-wide. For all of us here, this conference is a link and a new beginning at the same time. For those of you who, like myself – despite our foreign roots – see ourselves as inheritors of German Judaism, we can once again hope, ten years after German unification, due to the full participation of women, that Judaism will once again revive in Germany.

FORMER WOMEN STUDENTS ▩ At this conference, there was the beautiful opportunity to be directly linked to the past. Among the guests were two former students of the College: the daughter of the College Professor Ismar Elbogen Shoshana Ronen, and Ilse Perlman. The presence of both women and their presentations have shown in an impressive way that these former students were whittled out of a very precious wood! They studied the material out of the love of learning, and out of a deep respect for Judaism. Shoshana and Ilse force us through their presence in Berlin to once again connect with the German Judaism that came to a forced end, even if our own attempts are very modest in comparison to the high class performance of the thinkers back then. But even Leo Baeck said, after he survived the concentration camp in Theresienstadt, that even if German Judaism no longer lived on German soil, it did not have to come to an end because »those that have lived there, who are still alive and strewn over many lands, have been given something that should not be allowed to become lost: a longing for spirituality, for what is humane and messianic, for all that is big, beautiful and brings harmony. To honour these qualities is the world-wide task of all Jews.« (L. Baker, »Days of Sorrow and Pain. Leo Baeck and Berlin Jews,« 1978, p. 323) ■

Translated from German by Hannah Zinn

Esther Seidel was born in Duesseldorf in 1952. She teaches Jewish Philosophy at the Leo Baeck College and has published among others: » ›Jewish Philosophy‹ in non-Jewish and Jewish Philosophical Historiography« (Frankfurt, 1984) and »Is there a German-Jewish Legacy?« in: European Judaism« 1994/2. At present she is working on »Ruth Liebrecht (née Capell) and other Women Students at the College for the Science of Judaism in Berlin.«

THE MARGIN IS THE CENTRE

BY JESSICA JACOBY & LARA DAMMIG

The following conversation took place in Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah's workshop »On Being a Lesbian Rabbi.« She started by telling us about her professional development and how she integrated different strands of her identity as a woman, Jew, lesbian and rabbi. Than she asked us to get together and share our views on these aspects of ourselves. Do they complement each other or is there friction? How do we bring our complex identities into the Jewish community?

Lara: Both of us were raised in a Jewish context, you in West Berlin, I in the eastern part of the city. Being Jewish marked our childhood and youth. Feminist and lesbian orientations developed later on.
Jessica: Well, none of us was »raised« to be lesbian. That was our own choice. I also chose to withdraw from the Jewish »scene« for some time, because my commitment to Jewish women had exhausted and frustrated me quite a bit. But I see that you and other women have picked up the thread and spun it further – I discover a fascinating diversity which intrigues me.
Lara: My impression is that a lot is happening in Berlin. I find it interesting that the impetus for change comes from women, and also from men, who are on the margins of the Jewish community, but who nevertheless are taking the responsibility to invigorate Jewish life at large.
Jessica: And conditions to do this are so much more favourable now than they were ten years ago. In the eighties I struggled to find a place within the gentile women's movement as a Jew. To be accepted as a lesbian in the Jewish community was unthinkable. My feeling is that today, with the change of generation in the upper echelons, the Jewish community is more open towards the gentile society and its discourse on issues like women's equality or gay and lesbian marriages.
Lara: Yet prejudices still exist. I remember that the egalitarian Minyan, in which I was active for many years, was labelled »lesbian« in the more mainstream part of the Jewish Community, despite the fact that this group was composed of both women and men, some of whom were lesbian or gay. Our aim was not to be an opposition, but rather to create a Jewish environment in which we could feel at home. We were on the margins but – as far as I'm concerned – made an important impact on the centre. The community now sponsors a synagogue, where women and men can participate equally in the service.
Jessica: What I miss a little is the visibility of lesbian contribution to this development. The Jewish women's movement in Germany prior to 1933 also changed a lot in the communities, but the leaders never ceased to complain that their contribution was not acknowledged. They had resigned themselves to this, due to the disinterest and resistance of men, but also because of political developments since 1933. After 1945 these women were practically forgotten. Incidentally, I find it quite astonishing how selflessly they worked for their cause. I would only make a commitment when and where it's also enjoyable.
Lara: And where I can do something with interesting people. Jewish life requires community, even more so for those of us who live by ourselves. Such a community is something like a chosen family, in which we have a place just as we are. ■

Translated from German by Jessica Jacoby

Jessica Ellen Jacoby, born in 1954 in Frankfurt/Main, grew up in West Berlin. She founded the Lesbian Feminist Shabbes Circle in 1985. She was one of the editors of »Nach der Schoah geboren. Jüdische Frauen in Deutschland« (Born after the Shoah. Jewish women in Germany, Berlin 1994).

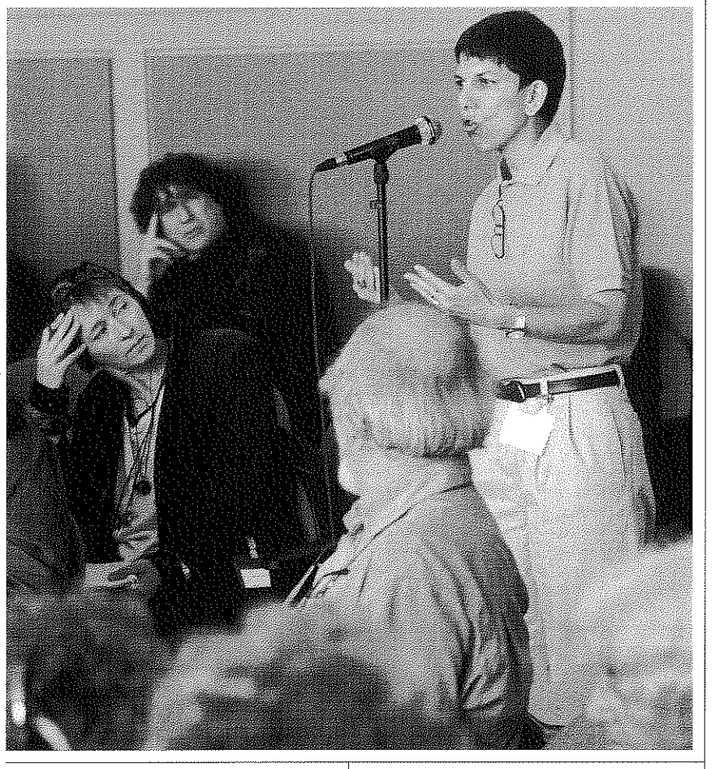
Rachel Herweg, Jessica Jacoby and Daniela Thau

KEVA AND KAVVANAH

BY ELIZABETH TIKVAH SARAH

Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah

Service and Liturgy *In the course of the conference, four services were held by several rabbis and cantors respectively: ✡ Shacharit-service with Rabbi Katalin Kelemen (Budapest) and Katka Novotna (Prague); ✡ Kabbalat Shabbat with Rabbi Nelly Kogan (Minsk) and Cantor Pamela Rothmann-Sawyer (Alameda); ✡ Shabbat Morning-service »British Style« with Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild (Orpington), Rabbi Sybil Sheridan (London), Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah (London) and Rabbi Daniela Thau (Bedford); ✡ Rosh Chodesh-service with Rabbi Bea Wyler (Oldenburg) and Rabbi Jane Kanarek (Moscow).*
A great number of participants were deeply moved by the services. Some, however, had mixed feelings about them.



Communal prayer can be uplifting and inspirational; it can also be stifling and inhibiting. The fact that only about ten percent of the members of any Jewish congregation participate in its religious services suggests that most of these fall into the latter category. And yet there are signs of change: Jewish women – women rabbis, in particular – have been transforming prayer over the past two decades, so that it is becoming a more dynamic, inclusive and spiritual experience. But that doesn't mean that we are engaged in changing everything. Every Jewish service of prayer has a framework, a fixed structure. The word for prayerbook in Hebrew is Siddur, meaning »Order.« And yet, while there are three daily prayer services – Ma'ariv (evening), Shacharit (morning), Minchah (afternoon) and an »Additional« service – Musaf – after the morning prayer on Shabbat and festivals – and each service is characterised by a set »order,« prayer is also Avodat Halev, »Service of the Heart,« requiring Kavvanah, »intention,« and »inner direction« on the part of the individual.
While some Jewish scholars have seen a problematic tension between the »fixed« (Keva) liturgy – fixed in terms of the set times of prayer, the order of the liturgy and the content of the prayers – and the need for Kavvanah, the individual's spontaneous urge to pray (see especially »Understanding Jewish Prayer« by Jakob J. Petukowski, New York, 1972), I, and many other women rabbis like me, feel that Keva and Kavvanah are complimentary aspects of prayer – and that both are essential.
But for prayer to combine both Keva and Kavvanah, it is vital that we don't over-fix the liturgy. In the days of the first rabbinic sages responsible for creating Jewish liturgy in place of the sacrificial cult of the Temple (which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E.), the framework and times of the services were fixed and so were the themes of the prayers – but the words of the prayers were not. In the spirit of their approach, every service I am involved in facilitating, integrates the fixed framework of the prayer with creative texts, prayers and poems – as well as opportunities for private meditation – which enliven and renew the »set« service, encouraging participants to pray their own prayers, to express their own needs and blessings, to respond to the moment and to release the breath of God within them.
My part in the Bet Debora Shabbat morning service encompassed leading the prayer from the Barechu, the »Call« to community prayer, through to the end of the Amidah, the »Standing Prayer,« regarded by the sages of old simply as

HaTefillah, »The Prayer,« the central component of Jewish services. My preparation involved thinking about the setting in which the Shabbat morning service was taking place – it was to be part of Bet Debora, a celebratory conference of Jewish women in Berlin.

And yet my sense of joyous anticipation was tempered by the history associated with Berlin – the impact of the Shoah on Jewish life in Germany. But that was not all – a particular aspect of Berlin's Shoah past had particular resonance for me as a woman rabbi: Berlin is the place where the first woman rabbi, Regina Jonas (1902–1944) studied – at the »Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums« – and later worked as a rabbi. Because Regina Jonas, ordained by Max Dienemann of Offenbach in December 1935, worked in Berlin during the Nazi period she became one of its victims. She was deported to Theresienstadt in November 1942, and to Auschwitz in October 1944. Perhaps if the Shoah had not annihilated the greater part of European Jewry, it would not have taken until the early seventies for the phenomenon of women rabbis to emerge.... So, there was the setting. And in addition to that context, my sense of being part of a new link in the chain – the link of active Jewish women – connecting the past with the future. Both these realities influenced my choice of prayers, poems, meditations, melodies and songs.

In the section of the service known as Shema U'virchoteha, »The Shema and Her Blessings,« which opens with the Barechu, I chose to insert new texts connected to the themes of the blessings which precede and follow the Shema, namely the themes of Creation, Revelation and Liberation.

For the Creation theme, I chose a meditation included in the Erev Shabbat Siddur of the Jewish Lesbian and Gay Group in London, which I helped to create. That meditation focuses on the individual as part of God's Creation. It begins, »As time is a tapestry of day and night, / Our lives are a weaving of light and dark.« Following the meditation, I chose to sing the words of Hannah Szenes, beginning, Eili, Eili, »My God, my God,« which expresses our response of wonder to the world – what Abraham Heschel referred to as our human capacity for »radical amazement.« Interestingly, Heschel also saw no conflict between Keva and Kavvanah. He regarded the set order of prayer as providing »definite moments« for apprehending God and praying our own prayer (see »Quest for God,« New York, 1982).

For the Revelation theme, I chose another meditation from the lesbian and gay Siddur – also very relevant for a congregation of women: »You gave us your Torah out of love, / a Torah of life. / But some of the words of the Torah / do not give us life.« The struggle of engagement with Torah as a woman is a continual one. Through our struggle we are making Torah speak in our own terms out of our own experiences.

For the Liberation theme, where the traditional prayer recalls the Exodus from Egypt and the Israelites crossing the Sea of Reeds, I chose a poem by Ruth Sohn, which envisages Miriam at the shore of the sea, preparing to leap into freedom (»Kol Haneshamah. Shabbat Vehagim,« Wyncote, Pennsylvania 1994): »To take the first step – / To sing a new song – / Is to close one's eyes / and dive / into unknown waters...« Of all the female biblical characters, it is Miriam, HaNevi'ah, »the Prophet,« who led the women in song and dance with timbrels, who remains my inspiration as I move forward into the unknown.

Turning to the Amidah, I chose Marge Piercy's poetic version of the Amidah as a stimulus for the period of private prayer prior to the public recitation of the text we were using for the service (»The Art of Blessing the Day. Poems on Jewish Themes,« Nottingham 1998).

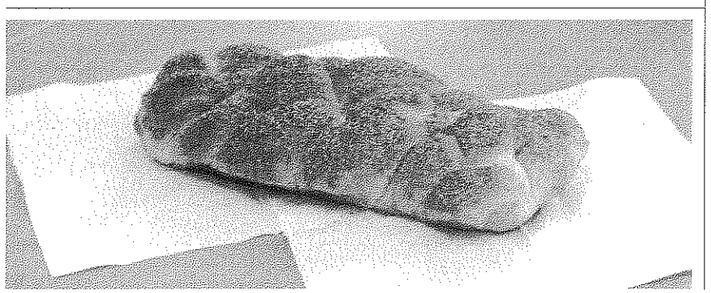
I also opted for an inclusive version of the first paragraph of the Amidah for our collective prayer in place of the set text – a version taken from the British liberal prayerbook, »Siddur Lev Chadash« (Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, London 1995) – which includes our foremothers, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah (as well as our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). I chose to sing both that »renewed« blessing and the rest of the Amidah to a succession of well-known 19th century tunes and Chassidic melodies, for the sheer joy of hearing the voices of women lifted in song in an otherwise »traditional« mode of prayer. The purpose of reading Marge Piercy's poem beforehand was to provide a frame for this experience – to remind us not only of the importance of our collective inheritance, but also of the gift of our own personal memories and of the demands of the present: »Holy is the hand that works for peace and justice, / holy is the mouth that speaks for goodness / holy is the foot that walks towards mercy. / Let us lift each other on our shoulders and carry each other along.«

It is hard to select a quotation from Marge Piercy's poem because it is – all of it – a beautifully crafted, profound expression of the power and terrors of life and the choices before us. However, that line – »Let us lift each other on our shoulders and carry each other along« – encapsulates for me the experience not only of collective prayer, but of all collective endeavour, of the task of Bet Debora, of the responsibility of each and every one of us to support and nurture one another, to repair the world and to make our lives a blessing. ■

Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah is a happily married lesbian without children and a committed feminist for as long as she can remember. After she studied rabbinics at the Leo Baeck College, she received Semichah (ordination) in 1989. Having worked as a full time congregational rabbi and Director of Programmes for the Reform movement in Britain, she now works freelance.

She is rabbi of Leicester Progressive Jewish Congregation and of the Jewish Lesbian and Gay Group in London as well as a teacher at the Leo Baeck College and co-editor of Hochmah. Currently she is writing a book entitled »Teasing Texts and Telling Tales. A Jewish Feminist Exploration of Torah« (SCM Press).

Schacharit with Katka Novotna and Katalin Kelemen



CREATION

You form light and create darkness

As time is a tapestry
of day and night,
Our lives are a weaving
of light and dark.
Like a slow dawn
we discover who we are,
Like twilight we linger
in doubt and anxiety;
We endure nights of rejection
by others – and ourselves,
And bright days of acceptance
And joy in who we are.

You make peace and create everything.

We look around and see a world
Of endless change and diversity
As we rejoice in the variety of creation
We come to accept
our own uniqueness
We appreciate all human diversity
And live at peace
with ourselves and with all creation.

REVELATION

You gave us your Torah out of love,
a Torah of life.
But some of the words of the Torah
do not give us life.
Perhaps you did not say
those words
and they were put into
your mouth
by unwise men;
or perhaps they simply do not mean
what men have said they mean.
Your love is deeper
than words,
stronger
than laws –
help us hold fast to your love
and the words of life in your Torah.

(Friday Evening Service, Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group, London, 1993)

CREATING NEW RITUALS

BY SYLVIA ROTHSCHILD

The first thing I was asked to do when I began my first rabbinic job, was to visit the mother of a baby who had been born at nine months gestation, perfect in every detail except one – he was not breathing. The mother asked me if I would bury her son properly, and I agreed. It was the morning of Erev Yom Kippur, all my more experienced colleagues were busy preparing for the 25 hours of the most solemn day of the year, and I never thought of the difficulties that were to follow. The Jewish undertakers were sensitive and sympathetic, but like the cemetery staff they were surprised that I would be doing a full burial service. I was surprised at their surprise – I myself had a six month old baby, and I understood viscerally what the mother and father of that baby wanted and needed, a proper Jewish ritual with which they could lay their baby to rest. I assumed that there was such a thing. So I organised the funeral for the morning after Yom Kippur, arranged for a tiny plot in what later became the »baby cemetery« but which was then an unused part of the cemetery, and turned my mind to the more immediate work of Yom Kippur.

Arriving home after the marathon services, I sat down to look at how to do a funeral service for a still-born child, and found that there was no such guidance. Children who die within 30 days of birth were considered as »one who has not fully entered the world,« they were not accorded the full funeral and mourning rites but they would be buried without a ceremony and the parents expected to move on from the experience. I knew the 30-day law, but it had never crossed my mind that the result would be such a bleak interment, such an emptiness for the family. While the custom may have emerged as a way to deal with high infant mortality by exempting the family from prolonged mourning, there was no reason not to give a much wanted child a proper ceremony and help the parents come to terms with what had happened. I sat down at my dining room table and on my battered old portable typewriter I created a service for the next day. Using the standard funeral service and psalms as a template, I added poetry and snatches from the books of psalms and Job, the text of the death of the baby of King David and Bathsheba, anything I could think of that would speak to the pain of the family involved, that would engage them Jewishly with what was happening. The next morning I photocopied this little service and took it with me to the cemetery where we buried the baby together, with dignity and sorrow. The very orthodox cemetery superintendent had seen nothing like it, and asked to keep a copy of the service. That was when I knew I had to get into the business of creating liturgy.

I've learned a lot since that exhausting night between finishing the public services of Yom Kippur and privately interring the body of this still-born child. I've learned a lot about creating liturgy that flows and that brings the prayer along with it, about using biblical verses creatively so that they come fresh and new yet still carrying the patina of traditional meaning. But one of the things I learned at that time is that the saying, »Words from the heart pierce the heart,« is absolutely true, and a necessary ingredient of creating liturgy – four sides of paper typed on an ancient typewriter with the marks of the quite literal cutting and pasting of other text and some hand-written Hebrew and English became a service to God, a real Jewish prayer.

Katka Novotna at the Bimah

PROCESS OF WRITING LITURGY ▩ In the workshop at Bet Debora we looked at some liturgy I've produced since – a Simchat Bat service for a daughter, to parallel the Brit Milah celebration; the funeral service for a baby; some work in progress on a series of prayers for a woman having an abortion; and a series for a woman facing and coming to terms with mastectomy. These are to be published soon in a book of liturgies by English women rabbis (»Taking Up The Timbrel,« ed. by Sylvia Rothschild and Sybil Sheridan, SCM Press) and can be seen there, and used or adapted as the need arises. We talked in the workshop about the process of creating liturgy. This can be spurred by an immediate event, as described above, or can take a long time to gestate inside the mind of the writer. The liturgy for a woman facing abortion, for instance, grew out of a regular request from colleagues for such a liturgy, and my total inability to know how to do such a thing. But every time the Haftarah for »Machar Chodesh« (1. Sam. 20) was read, something in me knew that this passage had the necessary ingredients, and each time I heard it another piece fell into place. It had the idea of the new moon, a particularly special time for Jewish women, and one which hinted at the menstrual cycle as well. It had the idea of a »Rodef« – a pursuer, of there being only one step between the individual and death, of someone who would be missed as their seat would always be vacant at family events, of being alone and isolated. I looked too at biblical women's experience of pregnancy – the recorded stories around the matriarchs in the book of Genesis, of Hannah's prayers both before and after giving birth. I looked at the father's experience, in particular that of David who mourned for his sons more than once, at how he comforted Bathsheba, and noted the text telling us of the child they later had together. For sadness and frustration and struggle and hope, I looked at Jeremiah and at stories about Elijah and Jonah. The structure for a liturgy then slowly came together in my head: to begin with the terror of the decision-making, with a piece using the idea of the Rodef, the one who pursues you for your life, with the themes of anger and reconciliation with God and of empowerment too. That was to be followed with prayers for afterwards, addressing the guilt and pain, the fear for the future, and an element of reconciliation and reassurance. Then a period of mourning – maybe marking 7 days and then 30 days, to be followed with texts from »Machar Chodesh,« a meal, Bensching Gomel (prayer after recovery), and ending with a Mikveh on the next Rosh Chodesh, the new beginning of the cycle.

NO RITUALS FOR MANY EXPERIENCES

▩ It was a challenge, but it began to feel right – a way of bringing Judaism even into the most awful of places, of helping a woman to feel a little less alone at what must surely be one of the most lonely decisions one can make. A way to address real life with religious eyes, even to create a religious response. Our prayer book has no rituals or liturgies for a huge variety of life experiences – no prayers for leaving the parental home or for leaving the marital one. For donating organs or for facing depression; for losing a child or for acknowledging infertility; for menarche or for menopause – the list is endless. Generally it is my feeling that women rabbis are beginning to write liturgies mainly for women's experience, and that this is the single most important innovation, triggering more general new liturgies to be created by men as well as women, as we realise that we can do this, and, even more important, that we need to do this.

Twelve years after that first terrible funeral for a baby, there are all sorts of services now available and one can tailor the liturgy to the particular need. All of these services differ, but each does the same thing: they bring Judaism into the domain of real lived experience, and through helping us to live with what is happening, they revitalise our Jewish religion. ■

Sylvia Rothschild was born in Bradford West Yorkshire in 1957. She studied psychology and worked as a psychiatric social worker before training for the rabbinate at Leo Baeck College London, where she was ordained in 1987. Since then she works as the rabbi of Bromley and District Reform Synagogue. Currently she is co-chair of The Reform Synagogues of Great Britain Assembly of Rabbis. She published on Jewish ethics, Jewish attitudes towards death and dying, new liturgies. Sylvia Rothschild is married and mother of a son and a daughter.

AND WHAT IF THE TORAH SHOULD FALL?

BY PETRA KUNIK

I was still a little sleepy from the Kabbalat Shabbat festivities as I sat in the overfilled auditorium at the Centrum Judaicum, the same space which originally was the women's gallery of the Neue Synagoge. I was quietly moved as I looked around at the former gathering of over a hundred women, and found it amusing to pick out the few men, many of them with Kippah and Tallit. At first glance, there is nothing irregular about a gathering of women. Or maybe there is: a replete assembly of Jewish women praying and not just kibitzing away, very untypical…! I have to shake my head when I think how the orthodox and conservative dare to accuse Reform Jews of only being interested in what is convenient. I have to say ever since I have been going to the egalitarian services and the Shiur evenings, especially when I took active part, that I learned more and lived my Judaism more intensely, than after fifty years of being up in the women's gallery in the Westend Synagogue in Frankfurt.

SPECIAL PROTECTION ▩ Five years. They make me think of the comment from Eva Nickel in the plenum about sowing and harvesting Torah and Talmud: Newly planted trees need special protection for four years, and should not be harvested. The fruit from the fourth year is sacred to the Eternal One. It is not until five years have passed that the planter can freely cull the fruit. I can't remember the exact connection to Eva's speech. The note I made read, »For four years we were actively involved in the egalitarian Minyan in the Frankfurt Einheitsgemeinde (Unified Community). In the first two years our small group was laughed at and ridiculed. Our every move was watched. However, from year to year the acceptance grew. After four years we were offered a room. After five years the Community paid for us to have a rabbi for the High Holidays.«

Preparations for Shabbat: Miriam Rosengarten, Gabbait in Berlin, and Rina Otterbach

FIRST ALIYAH ▩ Consequently, I sat in the Shabbat services feeling responsive and full of expectation as the different portions were led by the various women rabbis, cantors and participants. I became somewhat nostalgic as I thought of the women's gallery when I was a teenager… until an uneasiness pulled me back to Bet Debora. The Torah Scroll was not being carried through the room, but being passed from person to person in each row. It flashed through my mind: »-What will happen if it falls?« And the story of the Torah Scroll that slipped out of the hands of the congregation member who had the honour of carrying it to the Ark on Yom Kippur in the year 5347 in the Old-New Synagogue in Prague. »It fell to the floor with a pained slow dying, sighing bang. That was a bad omen! The congregation froze. Everyone in the synagogue was gripped with fear. The women began to sob. Even the High Rabbi Loew was put into a state of extreme agitation…« (Quotation from my book.) No, I don't want the Torah Scroll! And there it was in my arms and I carefully passed it on. A vivid emotion rose up in me. That warm happy feeling overcame me, as I carried my two-year-old grandson singing and dancing on Simchat Torah like my own Torah Scroll in procession. Just then the Torah Scroll was safe and soundly laid down on the provisional Bet Debora Bimah, and I tried hard to bring my emotional world into check, when the older women among us were called up for the first Aliyah. Now here they were around the pulpit, amongst them the former Berliners Shoshana Ronen and Ilse Perlman, while a Ba'alat Kore was reciting the first Torah portion.

FIRST NAMES ▩ For the next two Torah portions women were called up to the Bimah who had never had an Aliyah. While I was thinking how this must have been like the mass Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations before the Shoah here in Germany, a friend from Frankfurt nudged me, »Now have confidence in yourself…« No – I had always pulled back from going up to the Torah in my Frankfurt group… – but a woman was wrapping a Tallit around me. I already had on my big black velvet Synagogue hat. I hesitantly took the five steps to the Bimah. When they asked me for my Hebrew name, I answered that I didn't have one. My mother had explained it to me like this: »After the Nazis forced the name Sara on me, I was adamant that my children should only receive a common first name.« At my mother's burial I realised that she, Gertrud, didn't have a Hebrew first name either.

My own enquiries showed that Reform Jews in Germany didn't give their children Hebrew first names which was considered by Jewish parents up until 1933 to be an emancipatory measure.

I surprised myself as I recited the blessing before and after my/our Torah portion. This was the result of the services, that thanks to the lifting of woman's roles, I have been able to experience first hand. When I returned to my seat I accepted the congratulations with uncertainty. What had I accomplished?

In the Talmud we can read: »Journey to the place where the Torah is familiar. Don't believe that it will come to you. Only by dealing with fellow learners will it come into your possession. Don't depend on your own astuteness.« The reason I came to Berlin was in order to learn how to have an exchange with Jewish like-minded women – that means to experience a coming together of the traditional and modern. On Kabbalat Shabbat and at the Shabbat service I was again and again drawn by the cheerful singing of a woman from Poland. A Chassid in our group – a sentimental women's solidarity spread through me. How shocked I was, that she was the one who had sadness to express. She said she was hurt, that her essential religiosity was not observed or honoured. However this courageous young woman did not leave the hall slamming doors behind her, but rather made an appeal to us, for the next gathering, that we should watch out for each other a little better, so that every Jewish woman can feel that she is represented.

Yes, I am looking forward to the next Bet Debora conference. ▩

Translated from German by Hannah Zinn

Petra Kunik was born in Magdeburg in 1945 and lives as a writer in Frankfurt/Main. Her family origins were in Prague, Vienna and Halberstadt. Her Mameloshn is Yiddish, her kindergarten language was the German of Frankfurt. Trained as an actress, she wrote theatre plays and children's books, i.e. »Grossmutter erzählt vom Hohen Rabbi Löw und seinem Golem« (1998). Recently she published »Mutige jüdische Frauen gestern und heute.«

DO WOMEN PRAY DIFFERENTLY?

BY RACHEL HERWEG

»...My heart rejoiceth in the Eternal One, mine horn is exalted in the Eternal One: my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation.[There is] none holy as the Eternal One: for [there is] none beside thee: neither [is there] any rock like our God.« (1. Sam. 2:1, 2:2)

With these words Hannah begins her powerful, self-assured song of thanksgiving, which we read as a Haftarah at Rosh Hashanah. Hannah is a role model for women at prayer. She prays aloud and happily, caroling out her joy – and she prays, as revealed earlier in the text, quietly, weeping.

Now Hannah, she spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard (1. Sam. 1:13)

Do women pray differently from men? Unlike their male counterparts, Jewish women are not obliged by tradition to recite set prayers at set times. Instead we are lucky to have the freedom to pray whenever we have the need, in the way we want and using words that express the way we feel at the time.

Many participants at Bet Debora said that the shared worship, particularly the Shabbat morning service, was a completely new experience for them. There was a spirit, a special spirituality and atmosphere; there was a sense of belonging and that others cared for one's well-being, of closeness and solidarity. Some felt a sense of »inner release,« others were euphoric, some cried, other hugged each other spontaneously or danced. Others felt confused, and there were worshippers who felt uncomfortable, »in the wrong place,« that their religious needs were being disregarded, that boundaries had been violated.

Jacqueline Rothschild, Lilith Schlesinger (p. 46) and Yaacov Ben-Chanan (p. 59), who all live in Berlin, spontaneously declared their willingness to commit to paper their personal thoughts and feelings on the services at Bet Debora.

A CONVERSATION WITH JACQUELINE ROTHSCHILD ■ Jacqueline was born in 1952 in a small Dutch town. She is a film editor and family planning counsellor with over ten years' experience of group work. She is also a rebbetzin. Jacqueline has put up a photograph from Bet Debora in her living room that was taken at the service on the first (Friday) morning of the conference. It shows herself and two women rabbis, her sister-in-law Sylvia Rothschild and Sybil Sheridan, standing next to each other deep in prayer.

Rachel: What does this picture mean to you – today, now – in retrospect?

Jacqueline: It was wonderful meeting up with old friends again. There were some women there whom I hadn't seen for three years. What meant most to me on a personal and emotional level were the services. They all had a special spirituality – due to the fact that basically only women took part.

Rachel: What is special for you about women praying together?

Jacqueline: It's hard to describe.

Rachel: Has it to do with intimacy?

Jacqueline: Not intimacy with the prayers, because many women have little knowledge of the prayers. But they feel at home with other women, more secure, because they don't have to pretend to know more than they do…I think also it has something to do with the fact that daily prayer is not a duty and a routine for women, that because it is not merely a duty, it happens with more Ruach, comes more from inside, from the heart. When women pray together, I see more solidarity between them and a greater closeness to God as well. I actually enjoyed the first service more than the big Shabbat morning service, which I found too complicated. There were too many people and it was too chaotic for my liking. For many women there were too many new elements, too many experiments – although I found that this service was the best structured, because the structure was most familiar to me (the English Reform service)…Some women will have panicked, thinking, »What sort of place is this? Is this even allowed?« Or perhaps, »What would he or she think of me now?« But because so many other women were behaving as if this was the most normal thing in the world, their panic was allayed…I clearly remember thinking how marvelous it is that the conference can take place in Berlin. Women in prayer shawls – and here we come back to the photo again – praying publicly in the middle of the week, praying by and for themselves and as part of a group. I'm so grateful this could happen! Do you know, before we came to Germany, my rabbi asked me how come you're going to Berlin, do you really believe you'll be able to pray in a Tallit there? I can, which is simply wonderful, and it is wonderful that in Berlin we have the opportunity to decide where we would like to pray. For me having the freedom of choice is the most important thing about an Einheitsgemeinde (Unified Jewish Community).

Rachel: Praying in a Tallit seems to be very important to you.

Jacqueline: Yes, but I do recognise that in my position as a rebbetzin here in Berlin I have to make compromises.

Rachel: Many women ask themselves whether we need »male symbols« and regard the Tallit as a typically male piece of clothing. What do you think?

Jacqueline: As far as I'm concerned, a Tallit is not a male piece of clothing per se, but when I was choosing one for myself, I didn't want a white one with black stripes. I chose a white one with white stripes which I felt was more feminine. There was a large choice of coloured, silk and patterned Tallitot, but I wanted a classical, traditional Tallit, and not a work of art. That would distract me too much.

Rachel: From what?

Jacqueline: From the functions that a Tallit has, i.e. concentrating on the Mitzvot, time dedicated to religion – time out. And not: »Look at me, I'm wearing a Tallit, I'm emancipated,« which is the message I got a lot in England. It has to be simple and practical for me. That's all, really.

Rachel: Let me summarise: Women are expressing their religious and spiritual needs with great vigour. They exude greater energy and seem to have a greater will to change and develop than men. We believe that we women are in the process of relieving men from their traditional roles. We don't have to insist on Halachah or Minhag ha-Makom – and we can't hide behind it – but must look for new, genuine forms of expression. Halachah is a very male principle. We are looking for God and spirit over and above the Halachah. I am asking what it is all about – God or the Halachah, form or spirit? ■

Translated from German by Dorothy Gordon

Rachel Monika Herweg, born in 1960, is a Jewish scholar, educator and practising family therapist. She ran the youth department of the Jewish Community of Berlin, she was an assistant professor at the »Freie Universität« (»Free Univerity«) and the manager of the »Deutsche Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft« (»German Association for Educational Science«). She is one of the founders of Bet Debora, author of, among others, »Die jüdische Mutter. Das verborgene Matriarchat« (»The Jewish Mother. The Hidden Matriarchy,« Darmstadt 1994) and editor of the CD-Rom »Tour durch die Bibel« (ORT Germany inc. 1999).

DO WE NEED LITURGY?

BY ELISA KLAPHECK

Elisa Klapheck and Lara Dämmig

Two questions were not discussed during Bet Debora, although the first one under the title »Is the Synagogue the right place for emancipation?« was listed in the programme, and the second, »Do we need liturgy?« was given careful thought to while we were preparing for the conference. Many questions cannot be answered immediately, they have to be »lived through.« I now look back on several years' experience of egalitarian synagogue services, in a Minyan where women and men have equal rights and where they experiment with the liturgy, as well as trying out new Brachot, which refer not only to God, King and Father but also to »Her«, the »Blessed« and the »Source of Life«. New liturgical elements have been added, such as the »Coming out Prayer« for lesbians and gays, poems, and also prayers written by the participants themselves. As regards community politics, the other activists and I can say that we have been successful. Two years ago the Council of Representatives – the Berlin Jewish Community Parliament – voted in favour of placing the Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue at the disposal of the »Egalitarian Prayer Groups«. On the High Holidays we now have a congregation of about two hundred people.

But is this kind of religiousness the kind that we are really searching for, in our heart of hearts? Was it the real reason for our commitment? More precisely, do synagogue services and liturgy offer women the right context in which to express themselves – bearing in mind that most of us come from a non-religious family background and have only recently become involved with religious Judaism? Have we only fallen back out of sheer necessity on a form which has been handed down to us, picking up this particular thread, because we could not imagine any other kind of form which would enable us to put into practice our own conception of Judaism?

I myself must admit that I have reached a certain limit, and with regard to the synagogue I have mixed feelings. A large part of my élan was probably due to the joy of discovery. If I am really honest, I must admit that I often don't want to go to the synagogue at all, I have problems with psalms which praise God and with the blessings, and when I do recite them I no longer feel really genuine. Sometimes I catch myself feeling that I am pretending to something with which I cannot identify. Prayers in which God is invoked as female instead of male do not make things any better for me. On the contrary – my feeling or remoteness from the prayers, my right to a self-determined existence as a woman, suddenly come into conflict. Outwardly I go along with it all, inwardly I shrink away.

THE INTELLECTUAL ASPECT ▩ Interestingly enough, I have never yet regretted making the effort to get up and go to the synagogue. The readings from the Torah and Haftarah cast a spell on me every time; I learn new things, my mind is stretched, I feel a kind of inspiration which will absorb and fill me for the coming week. I have nothing against the social norms expressed in the biblical narrative, even when they have nothing in common with my own. I love the Torah, just as I also love to translate Hebrew psalms. But reading the psalms has a different effect on me when I learn than when I pray. When I learn, I read a psalm as a work composed by David, the work of an »other,« who tried to formulate in his own way what I should perhaps like to be able to formulate in my way. But when I pray, the psalm becomes part of my own language, and here I reach a limit.

YISRAEL ▩ My ambivalent relationship to the synagogue and liturgy even disturbed me during the services of Bet Debora. Certain aspects touched a raw nerve. During the very first of the morning services I felt a kind of stab, followed by a pain and a suppressed, unresolved longing suddenly came breaking through. Unexpectedly I lost my self control, I was relieved to be able to hide my face in my Tallit and give way to my tears unhindered. During the service for Kabbalat Shabbat I found the place in the liturgy which had so unexpectedly awakened this painful longing. It was the phrase in the Kaddisch »Hu ja'asse shalom alenu we al kol Yisrael.« »Yisrael,« from then on this sound hammered away in my head during and after every Kaddish. As a former political science student, the two worlds, which I could never previously reconcile with one another, suddenly united for the first time in the word »Yisrael« – the society in which I live, with its political norms and ideals, and the »chosen people,« who are to carry God's sacred name into the present. All these women and men who were here because they were searching for something of their own constituted »Yisrael,« a »Yisrael« rising again, coming back to life, a self-assured »Yisrael« in which women can define themselves, here in Berlin and here in Europe.

A PRODUCT OF MODERNITY ▩ Before we began with Bet Debora I used to think, like many others, that liberal Judaism in the United States and Great Britain was »far more advanced« and that here on the European continent, as a result of the Shoah, we had learned no living Judaism and only had to catch up on and repeat what had long since been practised in these other places.

When I met Anglo Saxon liberal rabbis, male and female, this view was gradually modified. Of course, in puncto creative liturgy and shaping the services, we can learn a great deal from them. But these purely ritual aspects do not – in my opinion – touch the heart of the essential problem of why Judaism should still be needed in contemporary society today. We should remember that a rabbi as the one who is chiefly responsible for conducting the service is a product of modernity – in conformity with the Christian confessions, in which the clergy function primarily as preachers and pastors. The responsibility for conducting the synagogue service before the French Revolution was not left to the rabbi. The Chazan had a greater share of responsibility, and the rabbi was not even obliged to turn up at the service at all. His position was primarily that of a legal and biblical scholar. Only when the life of many Jews was no longer ruled by the Halachah did the duties of a rabbi start to focus on the ceremonial aspects of religious worship, liturgy and ritual.

WOMEN RABBINIC SCHOLARS ▩ When we drafted the programme for the conference we drew up a list, not only of the women rabbis and cantors, but also of all those »rabbinically educated and interested Jewish women and men.« We were referring to the large number of people who, as a result of their own studies throughout the past years, now partly fulfil rabbinic functions, even if they have not yet attained a rabbinic title. After the conference, Bea Wyler reproached us – the three initiators – for casual disregard and a lack of respect in the way we treated the visiting rabbis. I do not wish to disprove or deny her criticism, I can only conclude that there are obviously different points of view. As far as I am concerned, I should like to see a less hierarchical rabbinic office and a return to an ancient Jewish principle – that of learning, not in order to become a nation of priests, but preferably a people of scholars who will be ably to apply the fruits of their learning outside the synagogue as well. That would mean that in the future women and men rabbis would have to be less active in the traditional spheres of religious practice and far more active in a broader public spectrum. Perhaps even the former historically necessary separation of religion from politics will not, in the long run, prove to be constructive. I do not believe that Judaism should remain confined to the narrow precincts of religious practice. I think that we should express our opinions publicly on all questions of contemporary modern life, as seen from a Jewish perspective – whether on abortion, genetic engineering, bio-ethics, or social policy, civil society, gender research or war operations – and in this way carry God's name into the present.

Do we need liturgy? And is the synagogue the appropriate place for an emancipatory spirit to develop? These are certainly necessary starting-points, but we shouldn't limit ourselves to them permanently. ■

Translated from German by Ruth Fruchtman

Elisa Klapheck was born in Düsseldorf in 1962. A graduate in Political Science, she worked as a journalist in Berlin. In her spare time she studied Tanach and Talmud, partly by herself, partly with teachers. In 1998 she was appointed Press Officer in the Jewish Community, Berlin. She is an initiator of »Bet Debora.« Recently she published »Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas – Kann eine Frau das rabbinische Amt bekleiden?« (»Miss Rabbi Jonas – Can a Woman be a Rabbi?«, Hentrich & Hentrich, Teetz 1999)

THE VOLUNTARY JEW
BY DIANA PINTO

The concept of the »voluntary Jew« is particularly apt to describe the renewal of Jewish life in Europe today and the role Jewish women are playing in this renaissance. For the term covers all aspects of »being Jewish,« from the most religious to the most terrestrial. Even though one can ask whether the first Jew, Abraham, was »voluntary,« i.e, whether it was he who »chose« God or God who chose him, we, his descendants, in our post-Shoah democratic and tolerant societies, are all voluntary Jews – at last. This is true for external but also increasingly internal Jewish reasons.

NEW EUROPEAN JEWRY ▩ In the terrestrial realm, we have become »voluntary Jews« in post-1989 Europe for a combination of historical, geographic, political and cultural reasons that can be traced back to the fall of the Berlin Wall. In historical terms, voluntary Jews came into being in 1989 when all the captive Jews in the Soviet bloc were finally allowed to travel freely and to make Aliyah to Israel on their own terms. Those who chose to remain in their respective countries after 1989 did so willingly and thus became »voluntary Jews«. Together with their Western European cousins now constitute the nucleus of a new European Jewry. In geographic terms, Europe's »voluntary Jews« are also those who have chosen to settle in the lands responsible for the expulsion of Sephardic Jewry (-Spain and Portugal) and in the land responsible for the Shoah (Germany). These Jews who chose to move to Spain from Morocco and Argentina, to Portugal from Brazil and the former colonies of the Portuguese empire, and the Jews of the former Soviet Union who moved to Germany are all voluntary Jews since they have moved while retaining and even reinforcing their Jewish identities.

In political terms the concept of the »voluntary Jew« takes on major importance. For Jews are voluntary only when their Jewishness is no longer defined by their respective states. In democracies, states do not determine who is a Jew nor do they compel Jews to be members of Jewish communities. Joining should be a private, individual choice with no consequences for how Jews are perceived as citizens. This pan-European political conquest also dates back to 1989 with the end of state sponsored anti-Semitism or discrimination, or simple official registering of Jews in identity documents. Voluntary Jews define their Jewish identity within civil society as a matter of choice. Finally in cultural terms, Jewishness itself is not defined. One can choose the kind of Jew one wants to be without external societal pressure to conform to a preset model. Many different types of Jewish identity can coexist. One can only hope that in a context of voluntary Jews, one historical type of Jew will finally be able to disappear: the self-hating Jew who carried his Jewish identity as a prisoner's iron ball. Such a person is now free to vanish into our increasingly anonymous individualistic societies. Similarly, Sartre's classic definition of a Jew as someone who is so considered by others, should also disappear. We now live in countries that are no longer interested in the »Jew« as a structural category within their own definition of state power and social organization.

Europe *As far as Jewish feminism and women's active participation in services are concerned, the attention of the public is no longer turned towards the USA and Israel exclusively. In recent years Jewish congregations and groups with a liberal orientation have been founded in many places in Eastern as well as Western Europe, groups where women take centre stage. Lecturers and participants from 16 countries attended Bet Debora. The Shoah is no longer the one and crucial element of Jewish identity; even so, many persons would not consider their work detached from their pain.*

THE QUESTION »WHO IS A JEW« ▩ Paradoxically, the concept of the »voluntary Jew« is most problematic within the Jewish world itself. We have already alluded to the question of origins: whether Abraham was a voluntary Jew when he turned to God or whether he was chosen by God. One can argue that the relationship was symbiotic and that Abraham was »voluntary« because he could have refused God's injunction to leave Ur of Chaldea.

The issue becomes infinitely more complex when one leaves the realm of the religious covenant to enter that of organized Jewish communities. Can one really be a voluntary Jew in the context of today's wars over the »who is a Jew« question? If someone feels Jewish and wants to live as a Jew but is not accepted within a small and monolithic community because he or she is not »halachically« Jewish and conversion is virtually impossible, can one really speak of voluntary Jewishness? This is the Jewish stake and battle for the coming century, for it defines all the challenges Jews will have to face as they live their lives both inside wider democratic societies and in their respective communities. To meet this challenge, new internal definitions of voluntary Jewishness are emerging.

1. The Jew who returns to Judaism from total assimilation and deprived of all traditions and who becomes a voluntary Jew through learning and community. This vision is acceptable not just in the ranks of Reform Judaism but is quite common even in the ranks of orthodoxy and ultra orthodoxy. It is applicable to Jews and non-Jews alike.

2. The Jew who believes that the Torah and the Talmud must be constantly reinterpreted to meet present day challenges, that there is no fixed and rigid answer »for all time«, but a complex interplay between past wisdom, present needs, and individual vision. Traditionally attributed to Reform Judaism, this stance is gaining ground in orthodox circles as women increasingly reread the tradition with their own feminist perspective to find new meaning for the present.

3. The »half-Jew,« the child of a Jewish father, who shuns the idea of conversion. He or she claims Jewishness voluntarily by refusing to be »admitted« into a people to which he or she claims already to belong. A struggle against an internally denied identity, in the name of democratic individualism and differently construed blood ties.

4. The Jew who believes that Judaism is an active affirmation of an identity and not just passive holding of synagogue seats for the High Holidays. The Jew who takes Judaism, however defined, seriously with major commitment and not just as passive allegiance against possible external dangers. The ultimate »voluntary Jew« would in all the above contexts, be the woman rabbi within the former Soviet Union or recently settled in Germany, who chooses to practice conservative or perhaps one day orthodox Judaism with a modern and feminist bent. Such a woman seeks to transform the Jewish fortress rather than merely going off into (equally valid) alternative routes of Jewish belonging. But in the end, all Jews today are voluntary because they have the alternative of totally assimilating.

THE OUTSIDE WORLD ▩ There is still a third dimension to the concept of the voluntary Jew, the one that interconnects external and internal parameters around two interrelated themes: Jewish links to the »other« and Jewish links to the universal standards and values that have become predominant in our Western societies.

1. The voluntary Jew and the »chosen people.« Ethical responsibility without superiority. How to reconcile Jewish and universal belonging in an age of pluralist ideals. The difficult conjugation of Judaism and democracy implies that the voluntary Jew is also part of the »other« with whom he or she interacts in a pluralist continuum that ranges from the Jew to the citizen and back.

2. Pluralist Jews: One voluntary identity among possible compatible others. Openness to the world while keeping the Torah. A continuum of belonging without living in a citadel. This is particularly true for Jewish women, orthodox Judaism's »other« in increasingly egalitarian societies.

3. Jews and the Jewish Space: regardless of their religious intensity, voluntary Jews interact with a larger world, thus bringing the Jewish Space with its cultural creativity, memory, and identity in close contact with the rest of society. Jewishness is identified as participating actively in humanity as a whole. Personal choice and action stemming from an internal Jewish choice and the will to occupy Jewishly part of the public space.

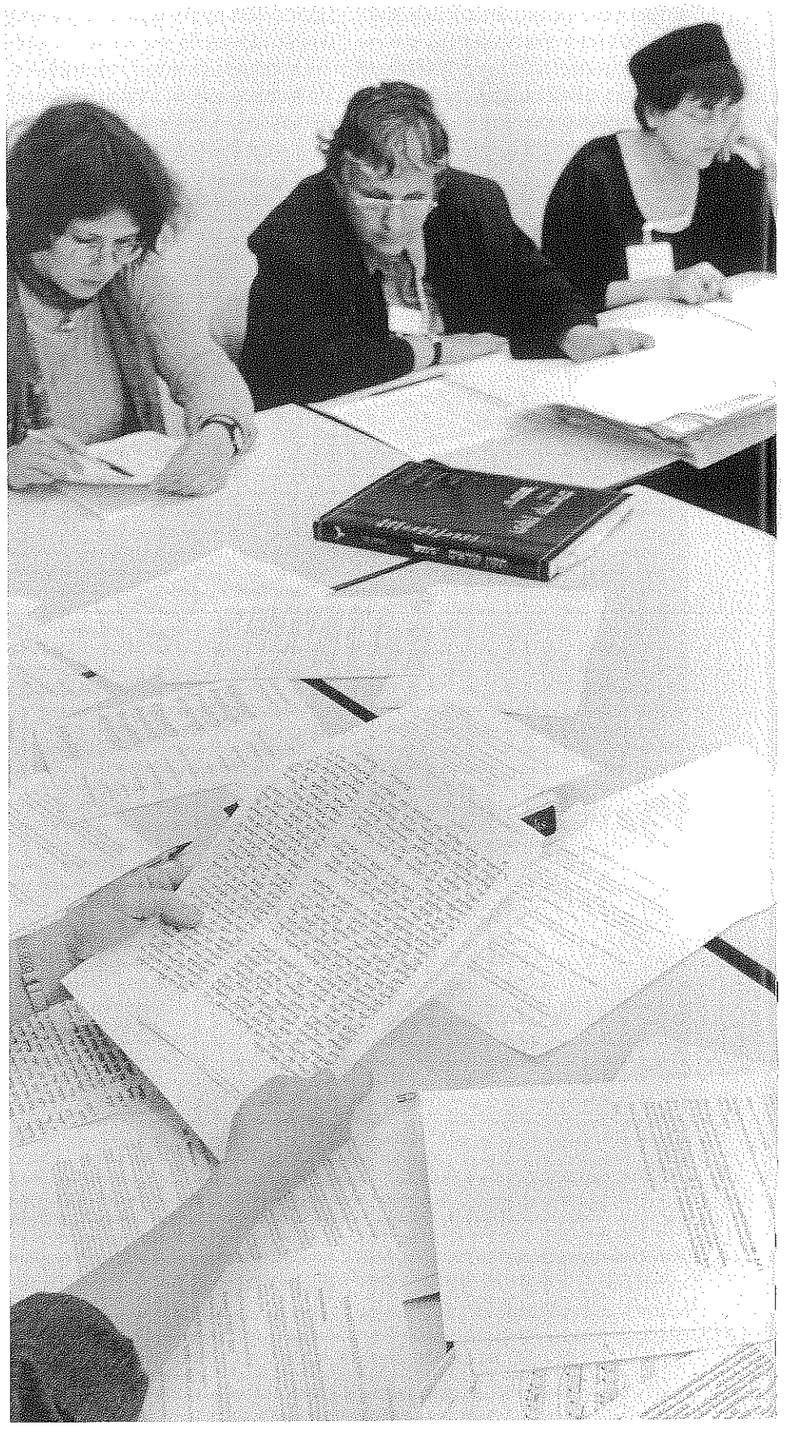
The voluntary Jew thus stands at the crossroads between religious and man made communities not unlike a prophet charging into the unknown. ■

This article is based on the speech delivered at Bet Debora

Diana Pinto is an historian and writer living in Paris. She is a consultant to the Political Directorate of the Council of Europe.
She is completing a book on »Europe and ›its‹ Jews: the Challenges for the 21st Century«.

Voluntarily taking up the tradition – »Leining«-Workshop at Bet Debora

Egalitarian Communities in Eastern and Western Europe – Discussion with Pamela Rothmann-Sawyer, Hadass Golandsky, Lara Dämmig, Nelly Kogan, Katalin Kelemen and Susanna Keval



DEBORA IN EASTERN EUROPE

BY RUTH FRUCHTMAN

At Bet Debora Rabbi Katalin Kelemen from Budapest told the following story: »Mr. Kohn from Tel Aviv, arrives in Budapest at the Western Station. He is looking for the Jews of Budapest. Where are they all? He turns to someone he sees on the street and asks him. The man replies: Actually, they're quite near here. Do you see that building over there? Mr. Kovacs lives there, on the third floor. (Kovacs is the Hungarian equivalent of Kohn.) Oh great, says Mr. Kohn, I'll go and call on him right away. Okay, says the man, but you must be very, very careful when you speak to him. *We* know that he's a Jew. But *he* doesn't know.« And that's the same for us, said Katalin Kelemen. That is also our story, my story, the story of our Jewish identity and the history of a whole generation. Katalin Kelemen, daughter of an assimilated Jewish communist family, found her way to religious Judaism only after she had met members of the English Jewish Reform Movement at the end of the 1980's. In a moving sermon she described her road to Judaism, the difficulty of learning Hebrew, her uncertainty and the first steps, and finally her decision to become a rabbi, her ordination after her study at the Leo Baeck College. The Progressive Reform Congregation »Szim Salom« (»Give us Peace«) was founded in 1992 in Budapest. The members chose the name out of their need to find peace. »And because of a very traumatised and confused identity, or lack of identity,« said Rabbi Kelemen, »we really wanted to have some sort of peace with our Jewish identity, peace with the outside world – particularly after the big political changes of 1989 – peace with the other Jewish groups in Hungary and peace with ourselves.« The intellectual challenge of Judaism – the study of Talmud and Torah – caused the members few problems. Relating to prayer and to the liturgy, to the language of prayer proved to be much harder for them; it meant breaking with their communist orientated education, which had made prayer and religious worship taboo. Rabbi Kelemen told the story of a man who, forty years after the death of his mother, wanted to say Kaddish for her; together with the members of Szim Salom he managed for the first time to say prayers in the synagogue.

ACADEMIC RIGOUR ▩ For many East European Jews Judaism is a journey of discovery, said Jane Kanarek, who studied for the Rabbinate and was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. As part of the Project Judaica she has spent a year as a rabbi and lecturer at Moscow University. »Jewish journeys« – arrival at the destination, the length and intensity of stay are uncertain. »There's a lot of extremism,« she said, »at least that's what tends to happen in Moscow, because it was outside the Pale of Settlement, so there's no history of Jewish culture there, unlike in some other parts of Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union. That is why people often tend to grab on to a very extreme form of Judaism and see it as the authentic thing, because they have no traditions in their own families and they then become very extreme in their observance.« Jane Kanarek teaches Jewish and non-Jewish students and gives courses in Biblical Literature, introduction to Judaism, Halachah and Midrash. »They can study with academic rigour, but at the same time they see that it's a living tradition, they know

that I'm a rabbi, they know that I practise the tradition, they know that I live as a Jew. Aside from that I do simple things like invite all the students for a Shabbat dinner, celebrate Purim together, have a Chanukka party. Shavuot is coming this week, and there's the custom of a Tikkun Shavuot, of staying up all night and studying; I've invited them to come, but instead of my teaching them I've invited them to be the teachers – the students are required to write a year-paper, so I've asked those who'd like to, to teach on their year-paper.«

ACTIVE WOMEN ▩ Usually it is the women who play a leading role in the new communities and congregations. In Minsk, at the beginning, up to ninety percent of the members were women; now the proportions are about sixty percent female to forty percent male. »One of the main principles of our work is that of equality between men and women,« said Nelly Kogan, »both at prayer and in all our other activities.« In Budapest women are also in the majority, confirmed Katalin Kelemen. The men are relatively emancipated and openminded, but there is also rivalry.

GALLERY OR MEHITZAH? ▩ What about Poland? The Jewish community in Warsaw is orthodox and democratic, said Agnieska Ziatek. The new rabbi is a young man but the president of the community is a woman, Helena Datner. She is modern and progressive and has learned to assert herself. »All Jews in Poland are voluntary Jews,« said Agnieskza. She cannot imagine any other kind of Jew. During the 1980's, even before the Wall was opened, there was a growing interest in Jewish customs and their observance, a »Jewish renaissance«. Katarzyna Jutkiewicz wrote about the views and attitudes of Jewish women in Warsaw in the journal Midrasz (No. 7–8, 1997). Should women remain upstairs in the gallery or hang the Mehitzah – the dividing curtain – downstairs? According to her article, the attitude of many women still seems to be characterised by a rather classical, traditional view of life. Women should display their creativity in the home and family, and when in the outside world, then particularly in those areas of society which have long since been assigned to them. Agnieszka Ziatek pleaded for the participation of orthodox Jewish women in Bet Debora and expressed fears of their exclusion. »The differences between us as Jews are our strength,« she emphasised, »all women can create something new and good. In every country there are openminded, freethinking people, even among the Chassidic.« She does not advocate aggressive feminist policies; women should hold services and pray together but preferably in a separate group, rather than sit together with the men and be called up with them to the Torah. She does not, for instance, share the views of Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah, that over the course of centuries, due to wicked, misogynist ways of thinking, the Torah could have been changed and certain passages deleted or re-written. She is convinced that the texts have always been faithfully copied and passed on for thousands of years. Why should one want to change them now? »These clever women!« she fumed. She does not want to pronounce the names of the mothers – Sarah, Leah, Rebecca and Rachel – together with those of the fathers – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The ancient texts are sacred; they were preserved and have been good enough for the past three thousand years. Perhaps she is right, who knows? The news that for Kabbalat Shabbat not every woman taking part at Bet Debora would be able to light and bless her own candles – mainly due to the fire regulations – moved Agnieszka almost to tears – tears of anger and disappointment. »Are you very disappointed in me?«, Agnieszka Ziatek asked me on the way to the station, on Sunday evening after the conference. We carried her hold-all between us with one or two books on Practical Everyday Kabbalah, which she had found on the shelves of my flat. Why do you ask me? I exclaimed, astonished. »Because I'm not the revolutionary you were perhaps hoping for,« she answered. ■

Translated from German by the author

left: Katalin Kelemen from Budapest and Katka Novotna from Prag
right: Sylvia Rothschild and Sybil Sheridan

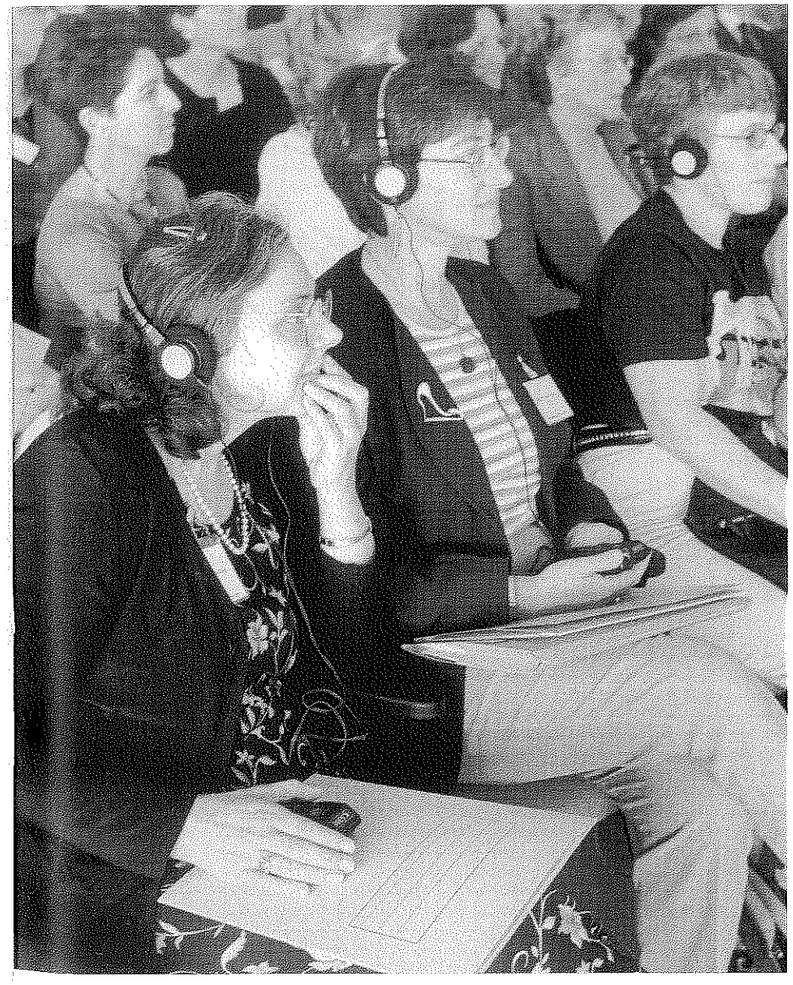
Ruth Fruchtman, born in London, is a writer and journalist. She has lived in Germany since 1976 and since 1986 in Berlin. She publishes in literary journals and anthologies (»Litfass,« »Neue Sirene,« »WIR,« »neue deutsche literatur«) and writes documentary features for the German Radio (incl. »Zwei auserwählte Völker, Juden und Polen,« Two Chosen Peoples, Jews and Poles, SFB, 1997)

SZIM SALOM IN BUDAPEST

BY ANDREA DUNAI

In March 1999 the Hungarian news agency ticker MTI spread the news that Katalin Kelemen had taken up office as the first woman rabbi in eastern Central Europe. The disapproval of the Hungarian rabbinate resulted in the ceremony being led by an Australian, Rabbi Fred Morgan. Contrary to original plans, the ceremony could not be held in King's Hotel, where Hungary's only kosher hotel restaurant is to be found, but had to be moved to the Danube Palace, formerly the Ministry of the Interior. Representatives of many Jewish organisations did not attend, for reasons unspecified. Hungary now has a female rabbi whose congregation does not have a synagogue and who does not even merit an entry in »The Jewish Face of Budapest.«

In the mid-eighties I got to know two informal Jewish groups in Budapest, both of which had been set up by women. A certain »Auntie« Mária, Mrs. Antalfi, threw open her house every Friday evening after the lighting of the candles to Jews of both sexes for uncensored discussion. On many occasions young guests were present from abroad and told of the concerns they faced in the West, above all the problem of assimilation. However, I had the impression that these meetings served a »higher« purpose and that our hostess, Auntie Mária, liked to think of herself as something of a matchmaker. The meetings took place from 1982 until 1986, when they were banned by the police on suspicion of a »Zionist plot.« The other society was of a more academic bent. Rabbinical texts in Hebrew, English and Ancient Greek were read aloud, analysed and translated into Hungarian. The hostess was a very talented archaeologist, Madga Szelanu, who was proficient in all of these languages. She wanted to share her newly discovered Jewishness with a group of close, primarily female friends. For her and her guests it was a matter of course to recite prayers like the Kaddish or to celebrate Jewish festivals without the presence of men. They were not seeking religious legitimation, but wanted to study comprehensible commentaries and Jewish laws purely out of cultural and linguistic interest.



A MENORAH ON THE SHELF ▩ In the 1980s most Jews in Hungary, the second largest Jewish community in Europe, were conscious of their origins, but perceived this as a cultural rather than a religious identity. There was also a small orthodox minority. The children of these families went to the only Jewish gymnasium, »Anna Frank.« Another important institution was the »Neolog« (liberal-conservative) rabbinical seminary. Most of the Jews attended synagogue only on the High Holy Days. They may have listened to the news broadcast of the Hungarian language station Kol Israel in the evening, placed great value on teaching their children as early as possible about their religion and the fate of the Jewish people and inculcating in them certain rules of behaviour. A little Menorah without candle stubs would stand on the bookshelf as a reminder of their Judaism. Each of these families had lost relatives in the Holocaust. If they were members of a congregation they would unfailingly make a donation to the Central Synagogue every year. Nearly every Jewish family had relatives who had emigrated to the USA or Israel and who supplied the

people back home with information and books which were then passed on from hand to hand.

The demise of Communism in 1989 saw Jewish life moving out of four walls and into newly created institutions. These days one needs a map to orient oneself amongst the plethora of organisations: there is the Maimonides Circle, the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association, the Bálint Jewish Community Centre, Lauder Foundation schools and those of other foreign foundations, the B'nai B'rith Lodge, the Oneg Shabbat Club, the Rosh Chodesh Women's Circle, the representations of Joint, Sochnut and the World Jewish Congress. These provide ample opportunity for people to discover and develop their Jewish identity. Dozens of kosher restaurants and Jewish bookshops have opened. Apart from the newspaper »New Life« which functions as a mouthpiece for the Community there is the monthly »Saturday« and the quarterly magazine »Past and Future,« aimed at an intellectual readership. Orthodox and Neolog (Liberal), Zionist and (Chabad-)Lubavich – almost the whole spectrum of Jewry is represented in Hungary today.

Among the groups set up in 1992 was the Szim Salom (»Give Peace«) Society, which to this day has not been granted membership of the Association of Jewish Communities in Hungary. As an organisation of Progressive Jews which accords women the same rights as men, it is not recognised by the new Jewish establishment. It is a member of the World Union of Progressive Judaism and is dependent on financial support from this source. Katalin Kelemen took over as rabbi of Szim Salom in March 1999. »We base ourselves on the teachings of the Torah dating back thousands of years,« she summarises. »Like the founders of the Neolog movement we are open to all questions on the practice of faith or the interpretation of the teachings.«

I met Katalin Kelemen for the first time this year in Berlin in May, where she was attending Bet Debora. She appeared self-assured and enthusiastic. She was inspired by the area around the Oranienburger Strasse [where the Berlin Jewish Community is headquartered] and by the women with whom she shares a common destiny. At the time she was very worried about the future of her Budapest congregation, consisting of about fifty people. They were looking for a new domicile, since they had been given notice on the two room flat where they had been meeting and had to move out by the end of the year.

left: Break at Bet Debora
right: View from the auditorium

CATHARTIC EXPERIENCE ■ For a long time Katalin Kelemen defined her Jewishness only from the perspective of the Shoah. She describes the first Seder she took part in 1979 as »cathartic«, as she could deeply identify with the liberation of her forefathers from Egyptian slavery. That was the moment when she became conscious of her Jewish identity. A second important thing happened to her in the second half of the eighties: she got to know young intellectual English Reform Jews, who all – male and female alike – wore jeans but still led an authentic Jewish life. This glimpse into the free world confirmed to her that Jewishness does not have to be defined exclusively via memories of the Shoah. She soon discovered her love of singing and praying in a group. »It took decades before I discovered I could express my personal feelings through traditional prayer,« she recalls. »Only about seven years ago did I first feel able to say Kaddish for my father, who had died at an early age. I stood in the synagogue in Weybridge, a small English town, and Rabbi Fred Morgan called me to the Torah, using the name I had chosen – Sarah –, so that I could become a Bat Mitzvah, a daughter of the law, on my first reading in public.«

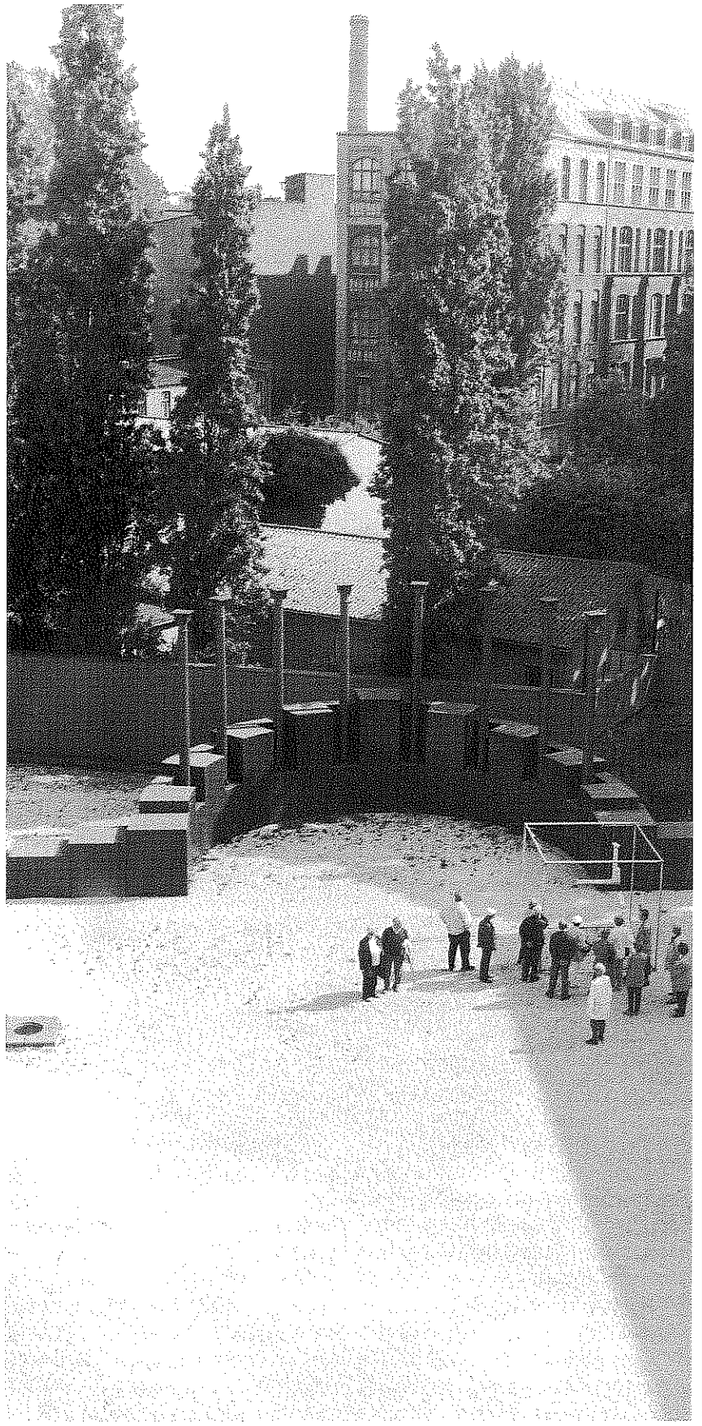
Katalin Kelemen read Slavonic and German studies at Budapest University in the seventies, then taught these subjects for many years. After co-founding »Szim Salom«, she applied to Leo Baeck College in London, where she completed a four year course of rabbinical studies. She returned from London with a status not acknowledged by her native tongue – Hungarian, normally a very inventive language, does not yet have term to express the concept of a female rabbi. ■

Translated from German by Dorothy Gordon

Andrea Dunai was born in Budapest in 1964 and has been living in Berlin since 1988. She is currently working as a freelance journalist for various publications, including the German language Budapest Newspaper, published in Hungary.

RABBI IN MINSK

BY RUTH FRUCHTMAN



As in all larger cities in White Russia, the Reform Community of Minsk has a synagogue, a Cheder, and a kindergarten called Simcha. There are summer camps and excursions. The Jewish communities receive no financial support from the State, they depend on the Jewish Diaspora and on their own resources.

Ruth Fruchtman: How many Jews are there now in White Russia? How many of them are Progressive-Reform Jews?

Nelly Kogan: In the whole of Belarussia there are about 70,000 Jews. We have twelve Progressive congregations in the country, in practically every major city, so altogether the number of people who are involved in the Progressive Movement is about 7,000. About four hundred people belong to our community.

Ruth: Could you tell me about yourself – your biography?

Nelly: I was born in St. Petersburg, and my father was born in St. Petersburg as well. My mother was born in Tiflis, which is in Georgia, in the south. In 1987 when I was sixteen years old, in St. Petersburg people established the Society for Jewish Culture. It was entirely secular, just for Jewish culture and for lectures and workshops and discussions. The majority of people who did it are already in Israel and the United States.

So, I just went along there and after a while they asked if I would like to work for them and I said yes. I was still in high school, graduating from high school. I translated articles from western newspapers into Russian and things like that. So I wasn't involved in the Jewish movement, it was a cycle, I wasn't religious. And in 1990, when Lubavich came in and established a Yeshiva for boys and for girls, they did some kind of classes in the synagogue; I went to one because it was interesting and because I wanted to know more. Chabad Lubavich is an interesting organisation, so I got involved and I was involved for about eight months and I was going to the classes and I was studying in the university, at the normal secular university at the same time. But then I just left Chabad, because it wasn't my cup of tea.

And in the autumn of 1992 a friend of mine called to me and said, listen, would you like to come for Friday night, and I said, well, if it's an orthodox thing, no, I don't. And he said, no, it's not orthodox and I said, well, if it's not orthodox what is it? And he said, well you'll see what it is, and I said, well okay, I'll come and see… And it was interesting for me and also for the people who organised the Progressive Community, people like me, there were quite a few of us who had gone through an orthodox training beforehand. We were invaluable, because we did know how to read Hebrew, we did know the service and about the structure of the service and about holidays, things like that.

So that's how I got involved with the Progressive Movement. I was one of the fifty people who in the autumn of 1992 established the Progressive Congregation in St. Petersburg. I was a lay leader for about a year. I lived in St. Petersburg until 1993, and then somehow I landed up in the Leo Baeck College. I was asked if I wanted to go for an interview to study for the rabbinate.

Ruth: But you never dreamed that you'd be a rabbi? It seems to have happened quite by chance, from what you've just said…

Nelly: Well, not really by chance, because I knew that what I'm interested in is Jewish Studies, obviously and if I wouldn't become a rabbi I would become a historian, I'm a historian by training, I would become an academic.

So I've always loved working with people and I loved working in the Jewish Community, and I think it's a just a good marriage really between two sides of my personality.

Ruth: How was it that you came to Minsk?

Nelly: In Leo Baeck College you have to spend the last year doing practical rabbinic work.

You are still a student but essentially you are a rabbi, I mean you do a rabbinic job. You are given a congregation, usually in London or somewhere else in Great Britain, and if you are European you might go to Europe. Well, I was sitting and thinking that there are a lot of people who can work in Great Britain. Very few people can work in the former Soviet Union, because very few people speak Russian fluently, and I felt kind of, – not obliged, but I really felt that I would bring much – that I would really be much more useful in the former Soviet Union than I would be in Great Britain.

And people in the Progressive communities in the former Soviet Union, they do really require rabbinic impact or any kind of professional Jewish impact, whether it's educational or rabbinic or social work or whatever, because we are desperate for the Jewish professionals because we do not have very many of them. So I said, yes, I want to go to Minsk.

Ruth: To Minsk, to White Russia rather than to Russia?…

Nelly: Well you see, there wasn't an option for me to go to St. Petersburg because I am a woman…

Ruth: Because you're a woman?

Nelly: Yes, well because of the current political situation you know and because of the orthodox movement in the former Soviet Union. It's not politically correct right now to have a woman either in Moscow or in St. Petersburg.

Ruth: Why?

Nelly: Because they are high profile places, and you'd be constantly out and about in the public eye.

Ruth: There'd be more danger for a woman?

Nelly: No. It's not a danger, it's just that a Reform rabbi, if he's male, he's much more easily accepted by the orthodox establishment than a woman. So I don't mind really. I wouldn't want to have constant troubles with orthodoxy. And I understand why that is.

You know Moscow and St. Petersburg are the largest cities in the former Soviet Union and for the faith of the movement it's necessary to have a man there. That's fine.

Ruth: And in Minsk you're accepted by the orthodox?

Nelly: (sighing) We live by the motto: Live and let others live. I have my own audience, they have their own audience. We share the audiences because I know that people from my congregation go to the orthodox synagogue, people from the orthodox synagogue come to me, it doesn't really matter, because we are all one Gemeinde, one Community, and we have two orthodox rabbis in Minsk, you know, and neither of them has been making trouble for me and I haven't made trouble for them.

Ruth: And do you do Bar Mitzvah, Bat Mitzvah, Brit Milah?

Nelly: Well we haven't had a baby born in five years. Of either gender. We do Bar und Bat Mitzvah, Baruch Haschem, and if a baby boy should be born, I'm sure we'll arrange for a Brit Milah.

But we don't have any young couples. There's no one to produce babies really, unfortunately.

Ruth: You're attached to the Progressive Reform movement and you have these rules about Halachic Jews and non-Halachic Jews. Are you attached to the Progressive movement in England or in America?

Nelly: In the former Soviet Union we're more attached to the European and to the Israeli Progressive Movement than to the American Progressive Movement. Just one example: in America they also accept patrilineal Jews.

In Israel and Europe they don't and we also don't. So we won't have a Chupah you know for someone who's patrilineally Jewish, not Halachically Jewish… we would require a conversion beforehand.

Ruth: And what is the attitude of people? Do they want to be converted or not?

Nelly: They don't really see the problem, because they have a right to go to Israel anyway, under the Law of Return, and in the synagogue, in the congregation, they have all the honours, all this kind of thing. Since the majority of the people in my congregation are older than sixty, marriage is not really on the agenda for them right now. It only becomes a problem when somebody wants to get married who's not Halachic, but we didn't have any marriages in the last few years, we did have a few beforehand, but we haven't had any now for about two years. ■

JEWISH SALONS IN TBILISSI

BY MARINE SOLOMONISHVILI

The history of the Jews in Georgia goes back to antiquity. Today approximately 13,000 Jews remain in the country, which has a total population of about 5.5 million, following the emigration of some tens of thousands in the 80's and first half of the 90s. The Community consists of Sephardic (Georgian) and Ashkenazi (Russian) Jews. In 1997 Marine Solomonishvili founded a Jewish »Family Salon« and a »Women's Salon« in Tbilissi. From these the »Foundation of Jewish Women« and later the international foundation »LEA« developed.

More than 150 women belong to »LEA,« 20 of whom are actively building up the institution. The women work almost entirely on a voluntary basis. The money available for the implementation of programs – such as the women's club, the family club, the youth club and press studio – is limited. They do not have their own meeting rooms, the president's private apartment serves as the office. Technical facilities are insufficient, a factor which makes the work particularly difficult. Larger events sometimes take place in rented space.

Our foundation cooperates with the Jewish Community of Georgia, which is orthodox. The Community, in cooperation with other organizations, works very productively, particularly in regard to Hebrew and religious instruction. There is a Yeshiva and a Jewish middle school. It also carries out good youth work and provides support for retirees and handicapped people. There are regular cultural programs for those between 35 and 60 years of age in conjunction with the Jewish holidays; between two and five percent of community members participate in these programs. The majority of those in this age group, around 70 percent, are women. It is clear that for the development of an active Jewish life, and in order to keep the Jewish community together, women must play an important role.

In Georgia, and particularly within the Jewish Community, in spite of apparent gender equality, the traditional status of women is quite different from that of men. There is, consequently, a gender barrier. In order to overcome this, women continually attempt to contribute to the work of the Community, for example as leaders of women's groups. In this situation it is important for us to have an exchange of experiences at an international level. As a result of the political and social developments of recent years Georgia is experiencing an information vacuum. Therefore, for us as representatives of »LEA,« participation in international seminars and conferences, such as Bet Debora, where the contribution of women to Jewish life is discussed, is of great importance.

To increase the involvement of women in Community activities, we have established »Family Salons« which meet in private apartments and which are led by women. At present there are seven groups, to each of which ten to twelve families (20–35 people) belong. Each group celebrates the holidays together, has discussions of the principles of Jewish tradition and religion (to which the rabbi is regularly invited.) The particular problems of women, questions regarding egalitarianism and the role of the Jewish woman in Jewish society are frequent themes.

We dream of establishing a Women's Center for the Community and of expanding our network of family, women and youth salons beyond Tbilissi to other parts of Georgia where Jews live. We cannot do this all on our own; we need sponsors. ■

Translated from German by Joel J. Levy

EXOTIC FROM SWITZERLAND

BY VALERIE RHEIN

October 26, 1998. A memorable evening. The Jewish Community of Basel holds an extraordinary Community meeting. The only item on the agenda: to keep or eliminate paragraph 6, clause 1 of the by-laws: »Women members may not be chosen as president of Community, as president of Synagogue Commission or as president of Cemetery Commission.« During the previous four long years the subject »women as president« has been the focus of many heated discussions in the Community. Now, on the day of the vote more than 300 of 1300 Community members are present. The vote is preceded by several hours of rather stormy debate, dominated by the orthodox minority; they threaten to leave the Community, and nobody in the room challenges them.

Non-orthodox members of the Community hardly say anything, and the women are almost all silent. The plea of a liberal member, immediately before the final vote, to maintain peace in the Community, is the straw that breaks the camel's back. The controversial paragraph is retained by 160 to 150 votes.

On October 26, 1999 the active and involved members of the Einheitsgemeinde (Unified Jewish Community) of Basel – which for many years had been predominantly orthodox – have decided. The others simply didn't come or they failed to speak up for their views. Where were the 1000 other Community members? And how do they conduct their own Jewish lives? Is the alternative to orthodox Jewry non-practicing Jewry? Does the failure to show up or their indifference to Judaism damage Jewish life and Jewish identity? Or does the problem perhaps have more to do with antiquated restrictions which prevent the practice of non-orthodox forms of Judaism?

October 26,1999 gave birth to »Ofek« (Hebrew – broad horizon), a working group which offers a variety of classes in addition to those already offered by the community. Ofek is politically active, organizes monthly egalitarian Kabbalat Shabbat services (along the lines of the conservative movement) and deals with unpopular subjects such as the definition of the term »Einheitsgemeinde«. More than 150 women, men and children are associated with Ofek. Up to 70 people attend religious services, most of them members of the Jewish Community of Basel who otherwise very seldom go to synagogue. The Community does not offer space for the service because, according to the executive board and the rabbi, such a service is not allowed under Halachah.

HETEROGENEOUS STUDY GROUP

Shortly before I traveled to Berlin in May 1999 to attend the Bet Debora Conference, Ofek held its first egalitarian Minyan in Basel. Several months of preparation preceded the first service. How should we organize the service? What is possible and where are our limits with regard to tolerance and feasibility? What prayer texts would we use, should we say them in the original or in German translation, do we need a Chazan or could we conduct the service ourselves? Which roles do the women want to take and which can they take, what must we – almost all of us – learn, know and experience in order to be able to conduct and lead the service?

In Berlin something very important happened to me. Had I had any idea beforehand that Ofek would be and do something »exotic,« had I had any sense that we were part of a »movement« which already had deep roots in some parts of Europe!

At Bet Debora I met dozens of women and some men who were seeking the same thing as I, who had similar thoughts and were trying to work out the same problems. Ofek, the lone fighter, the exotic, was with one stroke suddenly part of a larger movement.

In Basel both men and women participated equally in the creation and running of Ofek. Also, in contrast to the Zurich Jewish Religious Community, two years ago ten women formed a study group. This group could hardly be more heterogeneous – orthodox and liberal women meet here and bring together very different approaches to Judaism. One thing, however, unites them. They want to study and discuss the basic principles of Judaism. The central point is that they are all dealing with the question of the Jewish woman; they look at women in the Bible, analyze prayers from a woman's point of view, test the possibilities of women actively conducting services and attempt to find a place for themselves as practicing Jewish women, a space which they can research and use. With success – one of the women, for example, said Kaddish for her mother for the entire week of Shiva.

And although ten of the women – six of whom participated in the Berlin Bet Debora Conference – see themselves as merely a private study group of people who happen to belong to the same community, they have set off a chain reaction within that community. Soon it became clear that many women would like to play a more active role in their communities and that they have needs about which they can negotiate. In the meantime a first step has been taken.

On Yom Kippur there was a Minchah service in the Jewish Community of Zurich, conducted according to Halachah, for women only. The room, which could accommodate 150, was filled to the last seat. ■

Translated from German by Joel J. Levy

Valérie Rhein, born in 1935 in Basel, studied German Studies and History. Her diploma research paper was on »Yiddish Literature for the Jewish Woman.« She was an editor for five years of »Jüdische Rundschau« in Basel and of the »Israelitisches Wochenblatt« in Zurich. She is a contributor to »Stories from the Women's Gallery. On The Trail of Jewish Women in Basel.« Among other things, she is currently working as a freelance journalist.

FIRST CLASS COMPARTMENT TO BERLIN

BY WANYA KRUYER

When I arrive, the Berlin Express is already standing at platform two. The weather is gloomy this Thursday, May 13. The clock at the rail station says it's five minutes to seven. I look around and see Anna, looking quite dignified. Renée hurries over from the other side of the platform. I hug her warmly. Anna also gets three kisses. Then I see Joyce as she comes up the escalator. Joyce comes toward us confidently. She's wearing a colorful ski jacket. Our party is complete. The train can start for Berlin.

We're reserved seats in first class in order to prepare ourselves for Bet Debora in comfort. We enter a roomy compartment for five people in an otherwise empty train. Noisy people won't disturb us during the trip, which takes six hours and forty minutes.

Renée is visibly tired. She's just finished shooting her film »I Use my Mink to Hide my Pain« (»Ich bedecke meinen Schmerz mit meinem Nerz«). The topic is German Jewish women who took refuge in the Netherlands, and the premiere is planned for November.

As children, Renée and I lived near the Beethovenstraat in Amsterdam South. We grew up surrounded by memories, repressed feelings and traces of sites »where it happened.« The headquarters of the Security Service (SD), where, starting in 1942, the Jews had to register for deportation, was in this area. Renée and I could still remember well the German Jewish women who survived the Shoah and fascinated us with their heavy perfumes and costly furs. The hid their true elegance behind thick layers of make up and always stared sternly and straight ahead. They were irritated by children, and demanding and fussy in the shops. Renée was in awe of the cosmopolitan bearing of these women. Even today, she still is not able to shake her fascination with pre-war Berlin. As we sit in the train compartment, we both discover we're still easily able to imitate their heavy German accents and their stiff mannerisms. I take eight letters out of a big file. They are the letters Beit Ha'Chidush has received up to now in response to a classified ad that had been run for guest rabbis. Anna, Joyce and I form the application committee, which is part of the »Flying Rabbis Program.« It has a good reputation among the guest rabbis from London and the United States. We are a young congregation and still radiate the elan of pioneers.

We got started by holding monthly Erev Shabbat services at the end of 1995. But since then, we've grown into a respectable congregation that celebrates the High Holidays, studies the Torah and would never let a Passover go by without celebrating a Seder. Naturally, women and men, homosexuals and heterosexuals all have the same rights in our congregation and the liturgy we use is as anti-patriarchal as possible. At the same time, we try to keep our services in conformity with European traditions and we strive to encourage all members to participate actively. That we lay »rabbis« from Beit Ha'Chidush conduct the search for guest rabbis and organize services is something that's unheard of in the Dutch Jewish community, where religious matters are usually exclusively the province of »the rabbis«. They really don't know how to classify us, but the community is tolerant.

They are aware that we, the members of the post-war generation, are not being reached by the existing congregations. Of the four of us, Renée was the only one who had a traditional religious upbringing. My mother was still ashamed of being Jewish, and Anna and Joyce come from families in which Jewishness was repressed. We'd all been down the same path through hills and valleys to capture our identity. It is only in Beit Ha'Chidush that we have the confidence to investigate and show our faith.

Anna is a psychotherapist. Two years ago, she came hesitantly to Beit Ha'Chidush with her non-Jewish husband. But since then, she's become more and more active. Her voice is marvelous and she regularly assists our cantor, Ken Gould. This year, Anna led the Seder for the first time. It was one of the high-points in the short history of Beit Ha'Chidush. More than 90 people were crowded around the Seder table in an old synagogue in the heart of Amsterdam, the area where the Jewish diamond cutters had once lived. It had been a long time since the building was renovated; all the wood had been removed from the synagogue during the war. It was used as fuel during that last cold winter before liberation. After the war the building was left for a ruin.

On Yom Kippur 1997 we consecrated the synagogue again. Rabbi Elizabeth Sarah of London led the Kol Nidre service. Joyce is one of our Shaliche Tsibburim. She studied Semitic languages at the University of Amsterdam and has complete mastery of Hebrew. I studied history and sociology and now work as a science journalist for, among others, the NIW (Nieuw Israelitisch Weekblad), a Jewish weekly in the Netherlands.

The first application that we consider is from a rabbi who has also sent a long list of publications. He recites poetry and has written fiction, and has published a great many rabbinical works and commentaries on interfaith dialogue. The second letter is from an older rabbi from New Jersey. It's a heartfelt letter with a picture of him shrouded in a Tallit enclosed. I want to invite him immediately, but both of my travelling companions curb my impulsiveness. They favor a letter that's been sent in two parts. One is the resume of a woman.

The second is an accompanying letter from the woman and her partner in which they declare they are a couple and would like to come to Amsterdam together.

I can already see the reports in the newspaper, »Lesbian Rabbis for Amsterdam.« But I know from experience that a lesbian in Amsterdam doesn't have any news value. Furthermore, both of the founders of Beit Ha'Chidush, the cantor Ken Gould and myself, have given interviews in which we say Jewish religious services are being held in Amsterdam's old center. We also say women have equal rights in the congregation and, primarily, that everyone is welcome, gentiles and jour-

nalists alike. We've long gotten over the shame that was so strongly felt by our parents.
We open a letter from Vermont that is addressed to the »Rabbinical Search Committee of Beit Ha'Chidush.« Puzzled, Joyce asks, »Is that us?« Anna and I nod in the affirmative and for a moment the three of us feel very important. It dawns on me that we've gotten so many letters because we've offered the applicants a week in Amsterdam in August, which is a quiet month for most rabbis. And for American rabbis it's also a small novelty

came into existence fifty years after the Shoah.« The lost generation in Europe seems ready now to pick up the tradition again with their own, contemporary momentum. That's why we're looking forward to Bet Debora. It's an opportunity to meet women who are contributing to Jewish renewal elsewhere on the continent.
When the train crosses the German border and stops at Bentheim, we closely inspect the letters of two applicants. One is from Philadelphia and the other from London. The train stands for a long time

more with the fourth person and the only man in our commission. We intend to propose to him not less than four guest rabbis. One for August. And we'd like to invite the lesbian couple for Chanukkah, and the man who wrote the beautiful personal letter for a longer period of time in the summer. Satisfied, I put the file containing the letters back in my bag.
A crowd boards the train in Hannover and we clear the fifth seat for a fellow traveler. For the first time, we've got to get used to the fact German is being spoken

from left to right:
Susanna Keval, Petra Kunik,
Rachel Herweg, Lara Dämmig, Malin Kundi

because the old continent isn't only steeped in Jewish history, it's a place where new Jewish life is beginning to bloom. Since we established the congregation, we've oriented towards the US because Jewish communities there continued to develop during a time when ours were licking the wounds inflicted by the great annihilation.
Suddenly I'm thinking out loud, »Maybe it's no coincidence that Beit Ha'Chidush

and we begin to wonder if we'll make the conference opening on time. But when we go through the last letter, the train starts rolling again in the direction of Osnabrück.
Renée has woken up and discovers our compartment has transformed itself into the office of the »Rabbinical Search Committee.« We review our list of preferred applicants for the last time. After we return from Berlin we'll discuss it once

around us. I was tired, because after all, we'd left very early in the morning. So I doze until I'm woken up as we approach Bahnhof Zoo, one of Berlin's main stations.
On the way through Charlottenburg we hastily clean the compartment and prepare ourselves to meet our hostess, who will bring us to Bet Debora. ■

Translated from German by Taryn Toro

BETWEEN TRADITION AND TRAUMA

BY SUSANNA KEVAL

As Jewish women of the »second« and »third generation« we stand on the edge of the Jewish traditions of our parents and grandparents.
At the same time, our conscious and unconscious experience of Jewish womanhood is shaped by the persecution our families have suffered in the past. In the working group I led at the conference I wanted to discuss the effect of the past on how we experience life and on the plans we make for our lives, and the meaning of religion, tradition, synagogues and other Jewish values and content in our Jewish identity fifty-five years after the Shoah.
The workshop – the only one not to have an expressly religious theme (?) was attended by about thirty participants. Apart from the target audience addressed in the title of the workshop, this included women of the »first generation« with first-hand experience of the Holocaust or emigration, and a few interested men.
The questions which arose in this context were, first, how to cope with the aftereffects of persecution on the family, and second, dealing with our parents' religious and political traditions and assessing how these can be incorporated into our own lives. The desire for and, simultaneously, the lack of positive links around which one could develop and orient a Jewish identity of one's own were expressed by many participants. The most important question put in this context was how we can define ourselves as modern Jewish women, and whether the Reform movement, as it is currently developing in Germany, offers women new role models or indeed chances to identify.
The working group also examined the concept of »voluntary Judaism« as outlined by Diana Pinto in her lecture, in historical, geographical, political and cultural terms.
Is it really so »voluntary« when a parent is Jewish and one is thus forced from childhood to develop a relationship with Judaism? An examination of or confrontation with one's own Jewish legacy with regard to its content, form and status in the community seems unavoidable. Diana Pinto has made this idea an essential part of her concept for a future European Jewry.
Then came the question of how much further than our own childhood experiences we can/should go, in order to find new religious forms and contents that satisfy our modern needs, for this would not only mean detaching ourselves from intra-family traditions, but also divorcing ourselves from the survival history of our parents, thus leading to intra-familial ruptures.

NOT AN EXPLICIT RELIGIOUS TOPIC

■ Another topic that arose was the question of motherliness. What expectations are bound up with having and raising children as a second generation woman post-Shoah? What norms and values should we pass on to our offspring? In discussing this we established that it is not only in Germany that many members of the »second generation« are unmarried and childless.
Another result to be noted is the fact that nearly a quarter of the conference participants attended a workshop on a topic that was not explicitly religious. The question that arises is whether religion, orthodox or liberal, facilitates the search for new content and understanding of our role in the world, or whether, in fact, the named theme of the conference touched upon the related, but seemingly latent, issue of the extent to which religion plays a role in the continued search for a Jewish identity, with all its implications and needs.
In this context I would like to come back to the positive aspects of the family pasts. I believe that only by examining our own family history, by assimilating and internalising the positive Jewish elements, can we ensure a viable Jewish identity for the future.
In doing so, we would not only become more self-assured and confident, but less vulnerable in the dialogue with the non-Jewish world around us. Ultimately, it would allow us to revive traditions believed long-lost and develop these in a creative fashion. At the same time we could find spiritual growth in the traumatic break-up and destruction of our families under the Nazis.
As the »second generation« we are the last remaining link to the generation of victims; and in view of the rapid passage of time, this is perhaps our last chance to transform this link into something new and authentic for us and our children. For me, determining the shape this transformation should take and how it should take place should not only constitute a major topic of future discussions – this is a task we need to take on.
How important this is to many of us was demonstrated by the fact that about fifteen members of the group met the following day for further discussions. The attendees from Berlin continued to hold regular meetings until around the end of October to talk about themselves and their family histories. ■

Translated from German by
Dorothy Gordon

Susanna Keval, born in Bratislava in 1955, came to Germany in 1968. She is an academic, active in the fields of cultural and social science.
She works at the Centre for Women's Studies and Research into Gender Relationships at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University, Frankfurt am Main. She is also editor of the Jewish Community Newspaper, Frankfurt.
She has many publications on female spirituality and Jewish women in Germany. Recently she published »Painful memories. German resistance fighters recall persecution and extermination of the Jews« (Frankfurt/Main, Campus 1999).

PIPE-DREAMS AND INTUITION

BY RACHEL HERWEG

Lilith was born in 1927 in Vienna and in 1938 was forced to flee to Belgium. In 1942 she went undercover in the Ardennes and managed to survive on her own. 1945 saw her Aliyah to Israel, followed by military service, life on a kibbutz and the birth of two of her three sons. She has lived in Berlin since 1958 and now runs a practice as a physically oriented gestalt therapist.

Lilith was the first person to sign up for Bet Debora. She once told me that she was deeply convinced that Judaism had no future in Germany. Her concern as a Jewish woman with spiritual needs was emotional survival, to feel secure as part of a circle of Jewish friends and acquaintances with whom she could be herself, where there was mutual trust. That made me, 30 years her junior, sad and a rather disheartened. I wanted to hear from Lilith what she made of Bet Debora and whether she sees any point in carrying on working here…

Lilith: Bet Debora exceeded all my hopes. I suddenly realised that people here are living the way I have wanted to for so long. I was filled with enthusiasm. I don't have to go to Toronto or Jerusalem – we can achieve our goals here! And for the second time in my life, I was convinced that if we want something badly enough, it won't remain only a dream.

Rachel: When did you experience this before?

Lilith: After the Shoah I, together with other young people, had the job of collecting Jewish children from hiding places and monasteries. It broke my heart hearing the kids say, »My mummy's coming to pick me up tomorrow.« When the radio station Kol Zion la-Gola broadcast its appeal to young Jews everywhere to come to Israel, I became a Zionist on the spot. I wanted to learn to use a weapon, never to be helpless and unable to defend myself again. So that's how I came to be on the last illegal ship from France that arrived in Palestine on October 6, 1948. I listened to my inner voice, had an intuition and acted accordingly. »If you want it sufficiently, it won't remain only a dream« – meaning, if I want something, it's up to me to do something about it. And I have always followed this inner voice since 1942 when I was left to fend for myself. I hid in the woods, scared to death and despairing, cold and hungry, until I decided to give myself up because I couldn't stand it any more.

I wanted to end up in a camp with other Jewish girls, but luckily for me, I followed faint voices I heard in the woods and ended up with people from the Resistance. Much later, when the German army began to withdraw, I even managed to convince a German officer not to blow up a bridge and to get him to surrender to the Americans. That was my first attempt as a therapist. I intuitively knew how to talk to him…

Rachel: And what was it like at Bet Debora? You suddenly had an intuition that »something« is really possible here and that you don't have to go looking for it in Toronto or Jerusalem any more?

LEARNING BY INSTINCT, AND RELIGION FROM THE HEART

Lilith: I have been to visit my youngest son in Toronto twice every year since he moved out there and come into contact with progressive Judaism there. I have visited Reform synagogues, and the feminist movement has made a big impression on me. In Jerusalem I became acquainted with the congregation of Kol ha-Neschama, where neo-Chassidism meets the Progressive movement. In this congregation, which structures and carries out its services by itself, I received my first Aliyah le-Torah at the age of 70! I have been seeking precisely this sort of congregation for such a long time in Berlin. I began to study in earnest. What also inspired me was Bea Wyler. She spent 12 months in Berlin before her ordination and really gave us new impetus. I realised for the first time that I have a deep-seated wish to confront the patriarchal version of Judaism that I learnt as a child in an orthodox congregation in Vienna. I suddenly realised that I belong as well, with all the rights and obligations this implies. At Bet Debora I met numerous women from European countries who are already doing what has been the miraculous for me up till now – for whom the same things are important…

Rachel: …i.e. to follow your own inner voice and intuition and not to cling to traditional images and ideas and regulations?

Lilith: Yes, learning by instinct and religion from the heart. Speaking as a woman and from experience, I need to be emotionally involved in what I am learning for it to stick. I allow my own feelings and emotions to become part of the learning process. Women should study together with other women and women should be taught by women precisely because we learn and act through intuition. This was really obvious at Bet Debora. There was such a mood of change, the desire to reshape our religious lives – this in turn gave me new impetus.

Rachel: …and the feeling that if you – as a group, as an individual – want something enough, it need not remain a dream!

Lilith: Yes, we come full circle here. Today, after Bet Debora, I can see that it is possible to live out Progressive Judaism in Berlin. That means involving myself and all I can offer as a woman. When I study I am actively rediscovering my religion in its original form and I am able to discover that there are many ways to God – but only one God. I can search for and serve this one God my own individual way, to the best of my abilities. This realisation has made life in Berlin palatable to me again, and given a sense of meaning to the place where I have lived nolens volens for the last forty years. For a long time I believed that we as Jews, like those of our fellow Jews in Spain who refused to become Marranos, should pronounce a Cherem, a ban, on Germany. I am deeply grateful for the realisation that I now can live here again, and wish for, hope for, a repeat experience! ■

Translated from German by Dorothy Gordon

A LETTER FROM MIRIAM TO MOSES

BY EVELINE GOODMAN-THAU

That night I had a dream:

I stood in a long dress at the bank of the river. It was night, and the dress had the color of my body; in the moonlight no difference could be discerned between my body and my dress. I was white, transparent as a cloud. I stood on one side of the river Nile and you, a beautiful young man, with long black curls, stood at the other side of the river. At first I did not recognize you. You were wearing the clothes of an Egyptian prince, with bare shoulders and thighs, but your high forehead and black curls reminded me of Aaron, our brother. I called to you, and you looked at me with total surprise, and wanted to answer my call. Your lips were moving, but no sound came from your throat. It seemed as if your tongue had become heavy in your throat. And then you suddenly turned, and I saw a great many people, people, slaves, and understood that these must be Jews, our brethren, and then the silence of the night was shattered by a terrible cry, a cry that echoes from one side of the world to the other, a cry that never ends. And then I saw how you, my brother Moses, raised your hand to silence this cry. I did not see, whether you had a stone or a sword, but the earth trembled when the man fell… and then all was still. You, with your bare hands, opened the earth, and covered the blood of the man.

I wanted to speak, I wanted to say: Why with a blow, why with force, why not first with words… try to convince him… try to save the Jew in another way… perhaps it is still possible, but perhaps also not… my lips were moving, but no sound came from my throat. My voice was lost in the cold of the desert night. I stood there, lost, and suddenly the picture changed and again I was standing at the bank, in my white dress, transparent as a cloud.

This time it was at the bank of the Red Sea and looking into the desert. I was tired, I had stood there for such a long time, waiting for the day when you would remember your sister Miriam, the »Bitter« one, the one »Rising from the Water,« the singer, who had led all the women in song and dance since God had destroyed the horses and chariots of the Egyptians, so they could no longer make war. Day and night I had waited for you. Never had I married… and instead of me, the »Shining« one, you had found a dark woman, who stood in your shadow, did not urge you to speak. Who, on the way, had saved your life with a stone, not to kill, but to save you from death. To bind you and you and her son, the »Stranger« in a covenant, a covenant with her… a covenant, which our mothers and grandmothers had sealed with God. But with her you have never spoken, this act of saving, like mine, you never saw, just as you could not save the Egyptian, only his victim…

And then, then I suddenly saw you, now a tired, old man, with a long grey beard and a large rod. Next to you stood Aaron, our brother, in splendid, priestly garments. And I saw your dark, small, but strong woman, in the background in the shadow, a mute, quiet servant. Then, she suddenly stood next to you, and then before you, face to face. You looked at her, but your eyes did not see her, you spoke to her, but you did not hear her. Her lips were moving, but no sound came from her throat. You wanted to ask her, why… but your tongue had become heavy in your throat… And then, then I saw suddenly myself, I stood next to you, in the same white dress, white like the moon, white like the night, white like my body. And I screamed: what is the matter with her? Why is she dark? Why don't you hear her?… And then, then here were only three people standing there: you, Moses and Aaron and I, the sister Miriam with her two brothers, born from one womb… we looked at each other, and knew… And then suddenly came a voice, like thunder from heaven, an answer to a question, to the question I had asked myself all my life, which had echoed from one end of the world to the other, through all times, like a constant cry: »Did God speak only to Moses?« Finally it was said, the unspeakable was spoken, for ever and ever, never to be forgotten, never to be erased, to be asked again and again…

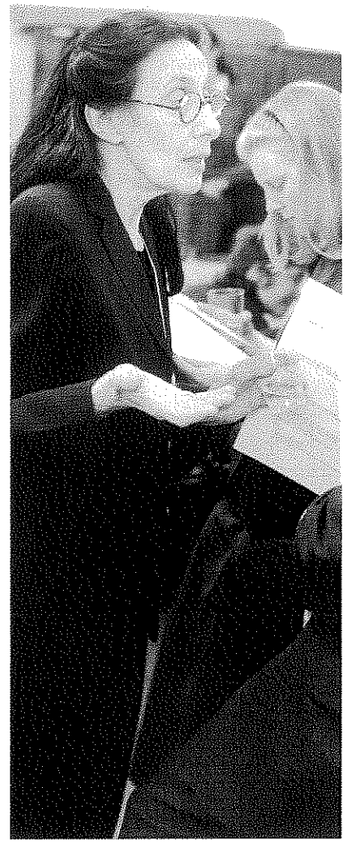
But a voice thundered from heaven: »Only with Moses do I speak from mouth to mouth.« The voice enveloped in a cloud in front of the Tent of Meeting, where we were standing, and when all was quiet, and the cloud had lifted, I stood there, completely white, guilty, but innocent, in my white dress, white like my body, but now leprous like snow… You my brothers, looked at me in fear and led me out of the camp, far away from all people. There I remained alone, seven days and seven nights, as the number of the Days of Creation and waited for you, my brother Moses, to give you speech, so that your tongue might be light in your mouth, the movement of your lips may be light in your mouth, the movement of your lips may be heard as a voice from your throat. To teach you from my mouth, to sing, to dance, to laugh, and more than anything else, to speak and not to strike… to return to you your mother tongue.

»Who is she who comes up from the desert like columns of smoke… all of them trained in warfare, skilled in battle, each with sword on thigh because of terror by night… Don't stare at me because I am swarthy, because the sun has gazed upon me. My mother's sons quarreled with me, they made me guard the vineyard; My own vineyard I did not guard… Upon my couch at night I sought the one I love… I held him fast, I would not let him go till I brought him to my mother's house, to the chamber of her who conceived me…«

I waited for you, but you did not come… and I wanted to die. But you, you prayed to God for my sake, and I recovered and had to go on, through the dry desert mute, without words, without a voice, until I became sick and weak and completely dried out. There was no more water…

One day I could not go on any further and there I died in the desert, at a spot called »Holy«…

At that moment I woke up form my sleep and wanted to get up, but a silent voice told me: »Miriam, wait for one more moment, I want to show you something«. I closed my eyes and dreamed again:



There you stood, Moses, and Aaron and the entire people of Israel around you and all were screaming and yelling at you: »Why did you take us out of Egypt and bring us to this deserted place where one cannot sow, to die here, where there are no figs and no dates, no pomegranates, and no water to drink… And I saw the look on your face as once in the burning bush, when you did speak: »What if they do not believe me… do not listen to me and say: God did not appear to you… how God had changed your rod into a snake and your hand into a leprous member… how you became slow of speech and tongue then… how you pleaded not to go: please, God, make someone else your agent… and how God refused: »Aaron, your brother shall be your mouthpiece, and I, God, will guide your tongue…

»A prayer for Moses, the man of God: … Give us joy for as long as You have afflicted us, for the years we have suffered misfortune.«

And now, as then, God spoke with you: »Take your rod and speak to the rock. Thus you shall bring forth water from it…« And my heart stood still… now it will happen, at last Moses will speak, with his own tongue, liberated from the weight of his mouth… speak, speak now please, I whispered, speak up, I begged… but: »And Moses took the rod and struck the rock twice…,« and water burst forth from it. The people drank and drank and drank this water, obtained by force… Again, you Moses, my brother had lost, you could not speak and God closed therefore the Promised Land before you… I stretched out my arms, but could not save you, this time…

Then suddenly I saw a long column of people, men, women and children, from many countries and many nations, poor and rich. All were going barefoot through the desert, in silence, without words, without a voice. Finally, they came to a place called »Be'er« – Well – and there, like a burst of light in a dark night, these people began to sing, first very silently, quietly, their tongues were still heavy in their mouths. But gradually their voices became stronger and stronger and they sang from the fullness of their throats, and their voices echoed from one end of the world to the other, and all, the entire world sang with Israel the »Song of Miriam«, the »Song of the Well«: »Spring up, O well – sing to her…«

And these voices opened all eyes of the earth and water emerged from the depth of depths and embraced the waters of heaven.

I felt as if awakened from a deep sleep and tears streamed down my face, like water from a deep well… The Egyptian sun streamed into my room, I quickly got up, bathed and put on a long white dress, transparent like a cloud, and went down to the Nile to see, what would become of you, my little brother Moses.

»And his sister Miriam stood from afar and watched to see what would befall him.« ■

Excerpt of the author's lecture at Bet Debora

Eveline Goodman-Thau was born in Vienna in 1934. She survived the Shoah in a hiding-place in Hilversum (Netherlands). Since 1956 she has lived in Jerusalem, where she studied and taught History of Jewish Religion and Philosophy. Since 1985 she has been shuttling between Israel and Germany. She had professorships at various universities in Germany and the USA. Recently she founded the Hermann Cohen Academy in Buchen (Odenwald); as its director she organizes conferences and learner's seminars. Publications, among others: »Zeitbruch – Zur messianischen Grunderfahrung in der jüdischen Tradition« (Berlin 1995).

New Focuses *Women discover new approaches to the Bible and to the Rabbinical Scriptures. At Bet Debora, a Midrash written and recited by Eveline Goodman-Thau struck a chord with the greatest part of the audience. In several workshops and Shiurim it was evident that women put new questions to the Torah, have their own focuses and tackle taboo topics. In her speech, Judith Frishman pointed out options of feminist prospects that are in line with a »useable past.«*

AN ATHEIST AT BET DEBORA

BY RODIKA MANDEL

I have just turned fifty and have experienced and tried out a lot of things. I've always fought for a more humane world, for people to treat each other in a more humane way. Of course I am lucky not to have experienced the war, but with my deep-seated idealism I felt a sense of guilt towards every victim of injustice. Why me? Why did I feel guilty? I was not involved with forced labour, I had not exploited people, gotten rich at their expense and then forgotten them for 50 years, only then to fob them off cheaply with derisive comments. Why was I torn out of my childhood at the age of ten? Why did my parents have to leave Romania, my cosy childhood home? When we arrived in Israel, the land of our dreams, there was no work to be had, so my parents were forced to carry on their journey. They sent three letters, cries for help, we need a place to stay where we can work. The letters went to Canada, the USA and Germany – and it was from Bavaria that they finally got a reply, saying there was work available. This is how we ended up in Germany. As a child this puzzled me for a long time.

After suffering forced labour, the loss of family and children, the ghetto in Budapest, why did we come to Germany? I am troubled by many »whys.« But I have come to realise that this suffering has an advantage: I am always searching for explanations. A religious friend of mine told me about Bet Debora, so I went to see and listen for myself. What impressed me most was a Midrash about Miriam, the sister of Moses, written by Eveline Goodman-Thau. She read it to us herself, slipping into the role of Miriam, writing a letter to her brother Moses. This revealed the Torah to me as a treasure trove, not in the sense that I got answers to my whys, but as a sign that I belong here, where people had the same questions as me 2000 years ago. I also experienced a strong feeling of belonging in Susanna Keval's workshop on the consequences of traumatisation for the second generation. Everyone had a dramatic story to tell, similar to my own. We formed a working group which met a couple of months later, where again we shared the tension of these stories and were strengthened by our feelings of togetherness. I was able to continue these experiences when I went to the Hermann Cohen Academy, where I feel due honour is paid to the rural Jewry, and which in my perception aims to re-establish Judaism in the Odenwald area. Eveline Goodman-Thau set up this academy from scratch in response to the demand to carry on where Bet Debora left off, so once more I sat down »in the midst of it« and examined my roots. I was inspired to write a story about Miriam myself – about Miriam in the desert, after she had been punished by God with leprosy.

LETTER FROM MIRIAM TO GOD ▩ Dear God, you rescued me from Egypt and from slavery. Why did you do this? Our problems have not diminished, but have been replaced by a different set of worries. We must now bear the burden of responsibility for our decisions ourselves – the difficulty of deciding when we should use our freedom and when we should subordinate ourselves to prevailing circumstances.

The journey through the desert was so exhausting. You never knew how long it would take, when you would finally get to the end. And how difficult it is to have any trust when you were born as a slave and struck down with leprosy. Dear God, give me trust in this world. ■

Translated from German by Dorothy Gordon

Excerpt of an interview by Rachel Herweg with Rodika Mandel, who is a secondary school teacher in Berlin.

TACKLING TABOOS

BY HADASS GOLANDSKY

Sexual abuse of children is widespread in our modern society. It is generally assumed that every third girl and every fifth boy is sexually abused, mostly in their own families. In Israel, the talk is of every fifth girl. Boys are hardly mentioned, and in orthodox cities in Israel, according to statistics, sexual abuse of children hardly exists. Among the Jews in the Diaspora, the numbers are unclear. Is Israel really »better« than the rest of the Western world? Are we Jews really spared this problem? Or is sexual abuse of children so taboo in Judaism that we actually believe it doesn't exist? How is it that sexual abuse of children is more taboo in Judaism than in other Western religions and societies?

LOT AND HIS DAUGHTERS ▩ Let us begin with the famous story of Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19,30): »And Lot went up out of the Zoar, and dwelt in the mountain, and his two daughters with him; for he feared to dwell in Zoar; and he dwelt in a cave, he and his two daughters. And the first-born said unto the younger: 'Our father is old, and there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth. Come let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father.' And they made their father drink wine that night. And the first-born went in, and lay with her father; and he knew not when she lay down, nor when she arose. And it came to pass on the morrow, that the first-born said unto the younger: 'Behold, I lay yesternight with my father. Let us make him drink wine this night also; and go thou in, and lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father.' And they made their father drink wine that night also. And the younger arose, and lay with him; he knew not when she lay down, nor when she arose. Thus were both, the daughters of Lot, with child by their father. And the first-born bore a son, and called his name Moab – the same is the father of the Moabites unto this day. And the younger, she also bore a son, and called his name Ben-Ammi- the same is the father of the children of Ammon unto this day.«

At first glance, the story appears to be completely clear: the daughters were desperate because they believed there were no men in that land, and they outwitted their father into having sex with them. That is also the usual interpretation. Yet, is the story really so simple? Let's go into it more deeply: Lot, Abraham's nephew, lived with his wife and two daughters in Gomorra, a city that, together with Sodom, formed the cities of sin that God completely annihilated (Gen. 19, 24-25).

It is not clear exactly what happened in Sodom and Gomorra, only that the citizens of both cities were extremely evil. But evil in what way? The name of the city Sodom can give us a hint, because sodomy means sex with an animal. In modern Hebrew, the word means anal rape. This brings us to the assumption that forbidden sexual practices were carried out in Sodom and Gomorra.

Although Lot was represented as the only just man in Gomorra (Gen. 19,1), and together with his wife and daughters, was the only one to be saved, we must still ask why he had lived for so long in such a city at all. Was Lot perhaps nice only once to the guests, the messengers of God who had come to the city, but otherwise evil like all the other inhabitants? Verse 29 in the same chapter gives us one indication that Lot was actually not so good: »And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the destruction, when He destroyed the cities in the area where Lot dwelt.« That means that God saved Lot not because he was the only just man in Sodom and Gomorra, but because he was related to Abraham!

As we know, Lot's wife froze into a pillar of salt while fleeing out of Gomorra (Gen. 19,26) and Lot was left alone with his two grown daughters. He was afraid to settle in Zoar and moved with his daughters into the mountains, where he lived alone with them in a cave (Verse 30). Why was he afraid to live in a city that God had recommended to him? One has to simply wonder why he could live fearlessly in Sodom and Gomorra, but not in Zoar. It is not known how long Lot and his daughters lived in the cave. One day, in any case, the older daughter decided to sleep with her father because there were no men in the land (Verse 31). How did she arrive at that conclusion? The daughters were certainly not born in the cave, away from civilisation. They didn't only know men and women in Sodom and Gomorra, but they certainly must have also seen and met men in Zoar and on the way into the mountains. The daughters had their father drink wine until he noticed nothing more (Verse 33). That means that Lot must have been so drunk that he lost consciousness. In such a state, he couldn't have been physically capable of having an erection! At the end of the story, each daughter then brings a son into the world (Verse 37). But that his daughters became pregnant doesn't seem to have surprised Lot at all. If he really hadn't noticed anything, and if there actually had been no men in the land, he must indeed have been quite astounded!

This closer look at the story brings us thus to the conclusion that Lot was for some reason protected, perhaps because he was Abraham's nephew, or perhaps because in biblical times as opposed to post-biblical times, as the family line stemmed from the father, and his children and grandchildren founded two important tribes (Verse 37).

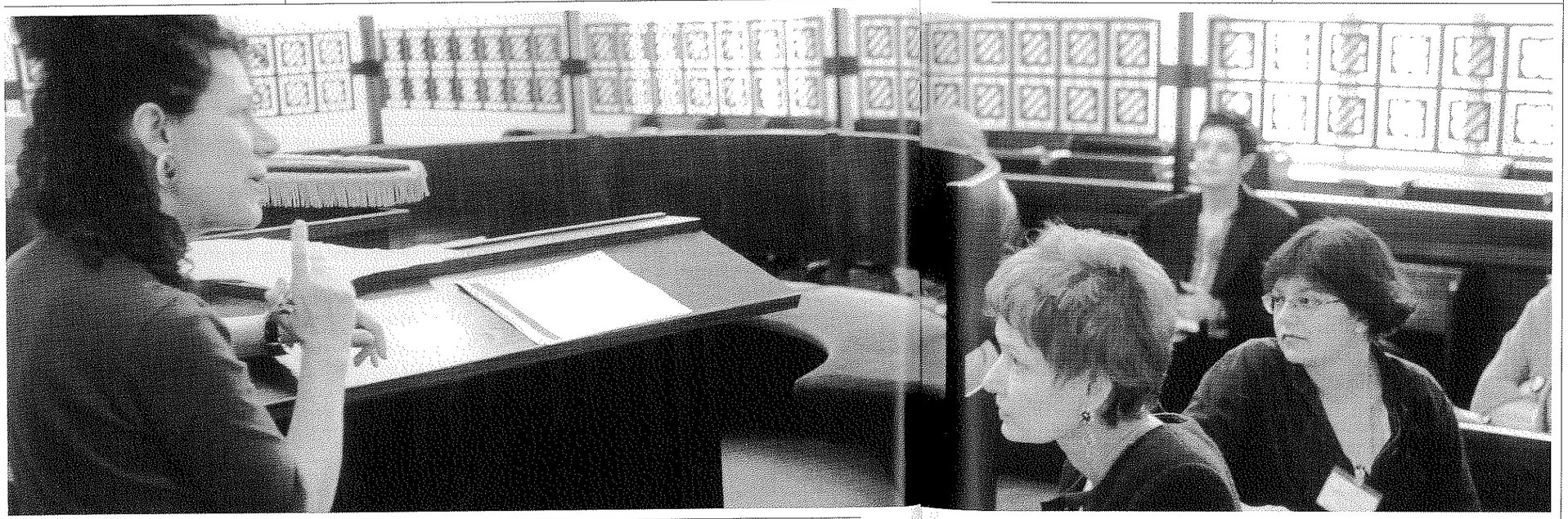
PROHIBITION ON INCEST ▩ Incest was not only hushed up in stories, but also tabooed by laws, bans, commandments and repetitions. Most of the laws of the Torah are found in the Third Book of Moses, including the prohibition on incest (Lev. 18 and 20). Many of the laws in chapter 20 are repeated from chapter 18, for example, the prohibition on homosexuality (Verse 22). In Israel and in Progressive Judaism, (Reform and liberal Judaism), homosexuality is currently no longer taboo. Unfortunately, mention of incest still is.

We find the prohibition on incest in greater detail in Lev. 18,6-17. In the following

list, the specific prohibitions on incest are given. The perpetrator is always the one to whom the prohibition applies:
General prohibition on incest (Verse 2); sex with parents (7), perpetrator: child; sex with the mother, respectively, stepmother (8), perpetrator, child; sex with the sister, respectively, half-sister (9), perpetrator: child; sex with the aunt (12-13), perpetrator: child; sex with the uncle (14), perpetrator: child; sex with the uncle's wife (14), perpetrator: child; sex with the sister-in-law (15); perpetrator: child; sex with the daughter-in-law (15), perpetrator: father in law; sex with the granddaughter (19), perpetrator: grandfather; sex with the step-daughter (17), perpetrator: step-father; sex with step-granddaughter (17), perpetrator: step-grandfather.
In most of the cases (7 from 11), the perpetrator is the child, who doesn't have to be a minor.
The first detailed prohibition refers to sex with the parents. There is, however, no prohibition that refers to sex with the daughter or son. The biological father and biological mother are not denoted as perpetrators.

ATROCITIES ▩ Unfortunately, I do not have an explanation for these phenomena. Yet, if the incest prohibitions to do not apply to the parents, it means that they must never have been perpetrators. Parents who sexually abuse their children are therefore taboo! And if a sexual act occurs with the father or the mother, the child is guilty and not the parents. After the prohibitions follow the warning, the repulsion and the choosing of the people of Israel: »Defile not yourselves in any of these things; for in all these the nations are defiled, which I cast out from before you. And the land was defiled, therefore I did visit the iniquity thereof upon it, and the land vomited out her inhabitants…« (Lev. 18, 24-25). The punishment was announced at the end: »For who ever shall do any of these abominations, even the souls that do them shall be cut off from among their people« (Verse 29). In chapter 20, the punishment for these atrocities is death. Next to murder and idolatry, incest is one of the three main atrocities in the Torah.

TEN COMMANDMENTS ▩ It is often maintained that because of the forceful and repetitive warnings and threats of death penalty, incest does not exist in Judaism. Unfortunately, this is not the case. An additional taboo – related to incest – may be inferred from one of the Ten Commandments, which – like the prohibition on incest – is listed twice in the Torah (Ex. 20,1-17 and Dtn. 5,6-20). The 6th commandment: »Honour thy father and mother, as the Lord thy God commanded thee…,« obligates the child to honour his parents, regardless of what they have done or do to him. This commandment is further enforced by the obligation to God, in which the child who is abused by his parents can in no way act against them. A commandment »Honour thy children« doesn't exist… ■



Freema Gottlieb in the Midrash workshop

Excerpt of a manuscript of the author. Translated from German by Madelon Fleminger

Hadass Golandsky, born in Haifa in 1962, studied photography and pedagogic. 1987 she moved to Vienna, where she works as a secretary at the Institute of Jewish Studies at the university of Vienna. Besides she is also a painter and a singer (under the name Haddi Golan). She teaches »Basic Judaism« at Or Chadasch in Vienna and leads services.

We know very little about the feelings or the internal world of the women in the Bible. Indications of what they might have felt are very delicate, and all the more precious for this reason. For example, the great biblical romance of Yaakov and Rachel is mainly Yaakov's love story. He left the Holy Land with his bridal clothes on, says the Zohar, only stopped to have his wonderful vision of the ladder reaching from earth to heaven, with angels going up and coming down, and continued on like a mythological sungod into the kingdoms of the night until he came across a well, which for him was an indication that there (like his parents before him) he would meet his predestined bride. As soon as he set eyes on Rachel coming towards him with her sheep he rose up and singlehandedly lifted the stone that all the shepherds gathered in the place could not remove, thus allowing the waters of the well to flow free. And the waters of the well rose towards him, a sign of affinity with the woman about to come on scene. Rachel was beautiful of form and lovely to look at. And Yaakov loved Rachel so much that he was prepared to work seven years for her father in order to obtain permission to marry her. In all this we have no indication at all what Rachel was feeling but can only suppose since there is no mention of her fending off the kiss with which he greeted her, that she was happy with the attentions of the newcomer.
The Maharal asks why Rachel cries more than the other matriarchs. Where do we see that she did? While Yaakov and Leah are both overcome with tears at various points in the story, tears are not associated with Rachel. On the contrary, she is a figure of joy. Both sisters were equally beautiful, according to Midrash Rabbah, but Rachel, Yaakov's fiancée, radiated joy, when she heard all the wonderful qualities of her future husband, while Leah, who was engaged to Esau, cried her eyelashes and beauty away when she sat at the crossroads and listened to gossip about his crimes. When the Baal Shem asked Reb Nachum Mendel of Chernobyl which sister he preferred, Rachel or Leah, the latter answered evasively: One can downgrade neither, since both are numbered among our matriarchs, so he had to be diplomatic. Therefore he said: »What Leah effected with her tears, Rachel attained with her joy.« »For more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith the Lord.« (Isa. 54:1)
In the Bible narrative a kind of silent subversion is very often going on. More often than not it is the younger who gains precedence; therefore in this case, when the younger daughter of Laban (Rachel) was engaged to the younger son of Laban's sister Rivkah, she was the more legally entitled, (and therefore the more complacent). One might have thought, by double subversion then that the elder, being »desolate« and unloved, might have won the prize. And that is indeed what happened. For most of her short life, Rachel remained joyous by nature, whereas Leah's tears got her places, opening doors of compassion in Rachel's heart and in God's.

JEALOUSY ▩ A Midrash says: »When God in the aspect of mercy saw Yaakov's unloving attitude to Leah, He said: »There is no cure for this but sons. Sons will make him desire her.« Thus Leah, fated to marry Esau, unloved by Yaakov »cried«, and here tears mean prayer of such intensity that God in the aspect of mercy, transformed destiny for her sake. Not only did she marry Yaakov, but she had the majority of the Tribes. She made such a fuss so that the whole world moves in her direction. She »took precedence even over her sister.« Yaakov's predestined wife and mother of the Tribes. The priesthood was hers; royalty was hers; and she was fit to sleep beside her husband in the burial ground of the Couples. Once the »desolate« wins through to children and marital happiness, however, and the barren Rachel is in danger of being handed over as a sop to the lustful Esau, who then has that privileged position of outcast and brokenhearted whose prayers God listens to? From the outset Rachel had been gifted with such grace that simply by virtue of walking on stage she won Yaakov's heart, and therefore prizes it less. Here she only seems to have the advantage, however. In fact Rachel, Yaakov's beloved, does not get her opening for

selftransformation out of that relationship. »And when Rachel saw that she had borne no children to Yaakov, then she became jealous of her sister.« Rachel only started to taste the bitterness of envy when she saw that while her sister was producing son after son, she remained childless. This is the first feeling we see in her, a quickening of her own nature and capacity to feel. And in that sense it is a good thing. Suddenly at the birth of Leah's messianic fourth son, Rachel was jolted into life as she viewed her situation and did not like what she saw. Then and not before.

Jealousy to Western eyes may not be the most pleasant quality, yet in Rachel, who had led a rather superficially happy existence until then, it was precisely at the point of denial, (a closed womb) that her eyes were opened to reality and she became capable of enlarging her nature and therefore her destiny. Usually the way to transformation and elevation of the personality does not open in what comes easily to us, but in what is most difficult. One of the rare dialogues between Yaakov and any of his women in which we actually hear the woman's voice is Rachel's desperate plea for children: »Give me children or I am already dead!« (I have lost all purpose in being alive.)

VIRILITY ■ It is impossible to believe that Yaakov had not prayed that he and Rachel would have children together. That had been his initial dream. In her beauty, he visualized a supernal Twelve Tribes incarnated. But when he saw what was actually taking place, he became fatalist about what God was meting out to him, which was easier for him to do since his need for children had been met, and he only had to cope with the disappointment that he was not having them with the woman he loved most. The anguish of his beloved does not touch his heart. Rather he blazes with anger against her, singling her out and putting her to shame: »What do you want from me? Am I instead of God who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb. From you and not from me.«

Yaakov has been like this before. When his brother cried out with hunger, he began bargaining rather than immediately coming to his aid. And it was this that made his own brother into an enemy unto death. Exactly the same treatment he dealt out to his sibling, he now metes out even to his own beloved Rachel, the person in the world he claims to love the most! How far Yaakov has traveled from the pristine vision of himself as knight errant springing to the succor of the lovely shepherdess! The one who dreamed of Rachel as mother of all his children, all cast in her mold and all of supernal beauty, has become a realist at last! He has accepted their separate fates. What kind of love is this? The same kind of love that permits Yaakov to mistake Leah for Rachel, a love of externals that therefore can be masked and deceived, not empathy with the emotions and suffering within.

Certainly Yaakov worked seven years in exchange for Rachel, but that was an expansion of his own virility; he did not give seven years to her. Whereas love often means listening in to the other's need, curbing one's own life energies to make room for a totally different point of view, and submitting to a self-imposed restraint in exactly the same way as mystics say God does to make room for the »otherness« of creation. If this kind of self-restraint for love's sake is a »feminine« quality it is also divine! And it is one which Rachel has, rather than Yaakov; if she does not yet have the gift of tears, she does experience tears vicariously, and her heart is open to the suffering of her fellow-human.

THE GIFT OF TEARS ■ Not only did Rachel overcome barrenness, and become a mother, but she gave birth to Yaakov's firstborn of intention and desire (Joseph) who leapt to protect his mother from the lascivious gaze of Esau. And she also brought all the Twelve Tribes to completion. Now when Rachel was moved to name her son Joseph, saying: »The Lord has gathered in my reproach. May the Lord add to me another son.« Yaakov knew that it was she that was destined to complete the number of the tribes, and that she herself would not survive. Not until the very end of her life, and beyond does Rachel learn the gift of tears. Yet the Maharal sees a germ of it already there, in the very first meeting of the lovers. According to the Zohar the rising of the waters at their first encounter spelled out the perfect affinity of male and female and there was perfect unity between them comparable only to the perfect union of God with the Shechinah before He created the world. The moments of time were telescoped and became as one before such an ideal coming-together. When Yaakov kissed Rachel and burst into tears, presumably he was not the only one to cry and there was an ocean of tears (what had originally been the waters of the well) between them. Not only Yaakov but Rachel also, according to the Maharal, after one moment of overwhelming unity, sensed the ebbing of the current, the separation and disruption that overwhelms every ideal state in this world.

Then while Yaakov saw what would happen in the future, that there would be separation, that there would be exile, and that she would not be buried with him in the end, since Rachel was a prophetess, she saw into the very heart of reality. Lacrimae rerum. And what she saw was the separation, disintegration and flux that are an indissoluble part of the nature of this world, the »tears« at the very heart of things. ■

Excerpt of a manuscript which forms a chapter of a book Freema Gottlieb is currently writing and which was the subject of her workshop

Freema Gottlieb was born in London and grew up in Scotland. She taught Midrashic Literature at various Jewish institutions in New York. Recently she was a visiting lecturer of Midrash at Charles University in Prague. She is the author of three books, including »The Lamp of God: A Jewish Book of Light« (Aronson, New York).

Two Berliners in conversation: Ora Guttmann, religion teacher, and Walter Rothschild, liberal community rabbi

RECONSTRUCTING A USEABLE PAST

BY JUDITH FRISHMAN

»Durch Erforschung des Einzelnen zur Erkenntnis des Allgemeinen; durch Kenntnis der Vergangenheit, zum Verständnis der Gegenwart; durch Wissen zum Glauben.«

»**T**hrough the study of detail to insight into the general; from cognizance of the past to understanding of the present; through knowledge to faith.«

This is the motto of Abraham Geiger, leading figure in the scientific study of Judaism and one of the most influential founders of Liberal Judaism. He was also an advocate of woman's equality, rabbi of

the Oranienburger synagogue and lecturer at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin. In his classic »Urschrift und Uebersetzungen der Bibel« (1856) and popularized later in two lecture series: »Das Judentum und seine Geschichte« (1864–1865) and »Allgemeine Einleitung in die Wissenschaft des Judentums« (1872–1874), our author commences his account of Jewish history with the period of the sects beginning shortly after the return from the Babylonian exile in 533 BCE. The temple was rebuilt and offers and priesthood restored. The Davidic line however, became less important due to the fact that the foreign powers successively ruling over Palestine hardly tolerated local political leadership. One family of priests rushed to fill in the lacuna and declared itself the natural leaders of the people. These sons of Zadok belonged to an aristocracy which identified itself with the sanctuary and laid claims to it. Other priestly families were pushed aside.

PHARISEAN REVOLUTION ■ The Zadokites were quick to embrace the Syrian-Greek culture which was making inroads in Palestine in the 3rd century BCE and with their approval a statue of Zeus was placed in the Temple and contributions collected for the construction of a temple dedicated to Hercules. The people at large rejected this state of decline and revolted against those who confiscated not their land and material goods but their spiritual heritage. Under the leadership of the Hasmoneans the Temple was regained but the members of this supplanted priestly family soon allied themselves with the old aristocracy. In the end it was the Pharisees who were to join issue with them. The Pharisees' resistance consisted of their propagating the sanctification of the entire people. Everyone was a priest and as such had to adhere to the special purity laws and eat their meals in purity, as did the priests when eating the offers. The Pharisees were not hairsplitters; to the contrary, they formed in reality the core of the Jewish people. They fought for equality of all classes. Their struggle was the perpetual struggle against the priest, against hierarchy, against favoring one's own class and against the attribution of greater value to superficial matters. According to Geiger, the Pharisees valued internal religious experience. Because they were afraid to voice the need for change candidly, they couched their new regulations in traditional terms. They appealed to scripture but endowed it with new, albeit strained interpretation. Pharisaism is not simply the name of a movement in early Judaism but represents the principle which brings about evolution in world history. The struggle in Germany in Geiger's own time for a progressive society in opposition to a narrow-minded aristocracy reiterates the Pharisees' struggle. For Geiger the Pharisees served as a universal symbol of progress and thus he rewrote Jewish history in order to accommodate his newly created image of rabbinic Judaism.

Geiger claimed that Judaism was a living tradition in which inner creative forces were always able to transform Judaism. This vision of Judaism is the key to Geiger's writing of history. His history was not only a counter history but in the words of Arnold Eisen, »the constructing of a useable past,« a past that would justify religious reform in Geiger's own time, including change in women's status.

THE CONCEPT OF TRADITION ■ The need to construct a useable past or reappropiate Jewish tradition is a relatively new phenomenon, which unquestionably arose in response to the crisis occasioned by the confrontation between modernity and tradition. In fact – as Charles Liebman has proposed – the notion of tradition is itself peculiarly modern. »We have a conception of tradition,« he says, »because we have a conception of ourselves as distinct from tradition. Traditional society takes it rhythms of life, including changes, for granted. It is guided both emotionally and intellectually, in judgment and activity, by unexamined prejudices. Man and society may in the past have lived their lives in total harmony with tradition. But if they did so,

then they were unaware of tradition.« It is historical self-consciousness which gave rise to the idea of tradition in the 18th and 19th centuries. For Liebman »it seems fair to conclude, therefore, that no matter how faithful any modern society may claim to be toward tradition, it is by definition nontraditional.«

One will recall that Abraham Geiger was led to rethink his views on Judaism, firstly because he questioned the historicity of the Bible. If both the written and oral Torahs were not given to Israel at Sinai, what was the status of the Bible? In what way could it be considered God's revelation? What was the authority of the Mishnah and the Talmud if they were to be regarded as purely the products of men and what were the consequences for Halachah? If Judaism was shown to have developed, what was then unchanging and eternal about it? For Geiger is was certainly not Halachah which he considered eternal. Instead, adopting the ideas of Herder, he spoke of a religious genius, a religious spirit which dwelled in the Israelite collective (Volksgenius) because it was the people of revelation. What was then the role of the Mitzvot, the commandments? Geiger distinguished among Mitzvot which belonged to the core of Judaism and those which belonged to the outer shell. Certain laws and customs he considered oriental and out of date. In doing so he placed himself on shaky grounds, allowing contemporary conscience and sensibility to play a role. Thus it was not only critical historical study but individual intellectual and moral concerns which determined Geiger's reconstruction of history and reappropriation of tradition. And it is precisely these factors so characteristic of modernity which have continued to prompt all ensuing attempts at reappropriating tradition, the attempts of feminist Jews not in the last place.

The importance of critical, historical study for feminist Jews reflects beyond doubt its significance for feminists and for women's studies in general. For Jewish women – and for women of other religious faiths as well – the problem has been twofold. Not only have they – we! – been relegated very limited space in the traditional (canonical) literature, they have also been more or less »written out« of historical studies on Jewish history and culture. But today one need only peruse the shelves of the local bookstore or (university) library to discover that many contemporary scholars, both male and female, have taken feminist criticism to heart and incorporated women's history in their works, even if only summarily or in an effort to be politically correct. The first step has been to determine the role of women as presented in the sources. Critical study of the Mishnah, for example, has made it clear that women are dealt with in their relationship to men and especially in those situations where the control men have over women is at stake. Feminist hermeneutics of suspicion have taught us to deconstruct texts in order to discover evidence of female activity and power other than what is expected on the basis of proscribed behavior. Additionally, evidence culled from written documents not belonging to the canon such as wedding contracts and gravestones unearthed in archeological digs, increasingly serve to portray a new picture of what society as a whole was like in, for example, the rabbinic period. Surely all this increased, redirected activity is the result of contemporary conscience and sensibility.

FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY ▩ The »return to tradition« is also noticeable among individual Jews. For many this return mirrors the need for a generational link with the past. For a smaller number this return is genuinely motivated by the desire to engage in a fuller and richer life of religious practice, guided by Torah in general or by Halachah more specifically. For some, the desire to remain within Halachah has lead to a search for the true nature and function of Halachah. Eliezer Berkovits has tried to demonstrate that it is not the Halachah but its present day interpreters who make alleviation of the injustice caused to women impossible, as the unresolved problems of the divorce laws and the Agunah attest. Yet change is for Berkovits and other liberal halachists a possibility.

Judith Hauptman, in her »Rereading the Rabbis« and Daniel Boyarin with his brilliant interpretation of talmudic texts in his »Carnal Israel« have made the most recent attempts to salvage rabbinic Judaism for feminism, neither very successfully to my mind. Boyarin has in fact made a better case for the acceptability of what he calls »feminized« or »sissy« men in rabbinic tradition than he has for the empowered woman. The repercussion of this deviant male role for Jewish woman need not, as Boyarin is quite aware, necessarily be positive.

The two writers whose new theologies deserve the most attention to my mind are Judith Plaskow and Rachel Adler. Plaskow, in »Standing Again at Sinai«, divides her theology into the triad of Torah, Israel and God, making use of traditional categories yet transforming them at the same time. She regards Torah firstly as a history containing memories of the past, but an incomplete past. Feminist historiography, she writes, »can open new questions to be brought to the past and offer a broader picture of Jewish religious experience. It must, however, first be combined with feminist Midrash and liturgy before it can shape the Jewish relationship to God and the world, become part of the community's collective memory and thus contribute to the transformation of Torah.« Plaskow wants to restore the viability of God-talk in Judaism by making use of new language. Is Halachah then part of that language? The author is very careful to consistently speak about Torah and not Halachah. For her, law is but one aspect of Torah and certainly not its essence. In fact our author refrains from identifying an essence in a Judaism so shaped by a patriarchal society that the will of men has come be identified with God's will. Although she is less radical in her rejection of Halachah than in earlier essays and does not insist that law is antithetical to women's understanding of life, Plaskow stresses the concept of rule-making as a shared communal process in feminist Judaism which, she says, it is not in traditional rabbinic Judaism. But in the end she warns that even if feminists can imagine an attitude toward Halachah that is compatible with radical halachic change, they must also be suspicious of the claim that without Halachah there is no Judaism. Thus Torah while definitely embracing Midrash – the method by which women can create a past if they are unable to discover one – need not necessarily include Halachah. It may in fact, as Buber felt, interfere with the possibility of directly communicating with God.

FEMINIST JURISGENESIS ▩ Rachel Adler, in »Engendering Judaism. An Inclusive Theology and Ethics,« employs a slightly different strategy. Instead of transforming Torah, she transforms the meaning of Halachah. Halachah is not limited to »classical Halachah« but is a path making; it translates the stories and values of Judaism into ongoing action. Halachah is in that sense an integral part not only of Orthodoxy but of any kind of Judaism – here Adler reappropriates Halachah for all Jews. Halachah is authentic Jewish language for articulating the system of obligations that constitute the content of covenant. It is a communal praxis grounded in Jewish stories. Like Plaskow, Adler insists that if praxis is indeed to be the embodiment in action at a particular time of the values and commitments inherent to a particular story, then women's stories, their values and commitments must be included. Recognizing that societies are human constructions which can be understood only in context (i.e. through critical historical study), Adler rejects the notion of divinely revealed Halachah. Instead of repairing an irreparable Halachah, she calls for a feminist jurisgenesis which would regenerate a world of legal meaning in which the stories, dreams and revelations of Jewish men and women are fully and complexly integrated. She borrows Robert Cover's concept of law as a bridge strung between »reality« – our present world of norms and behavioral responses to norms – and »alternity« – the other normative worlds we may choose to imagine. Law is then neither reality nor alternity but what bridges the gap: the committed social behavior, which constitutes the way a group of people will attempt to get from here to there. For Adler, Halachah is maintained or remade not by orthodoxies or visions (»It is not in heaven«) but by commitments of communities either to obey the law as it stands, or resists and rejects it in order to live out some alternative legal vision. For Plaskow as well the problem of authority resolves itself into the question of whether the primary community to which she is accountable finds her images of God, or Torah or Israel compelling.

I would like to close with a story of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, as a parable for the current predicament of the Jews and for the contemporary religious situation more generally.

The Baal Shem Tov would go into the forest whenever faced with a difficult task. He would light a fire, say a prayer, and what he had set out to perform was done. In the next generation his disciple, the Maggid of Meseritz, could no longer light the fire, but he did know the place to go and the prayer to utter. The third

Workshop with Pamela Rothmann-Sawyer, to her left Chazanit Avitall Gerstetter

The chairman of the Berlin Jewish Community, Andreas Nachama, at the reception

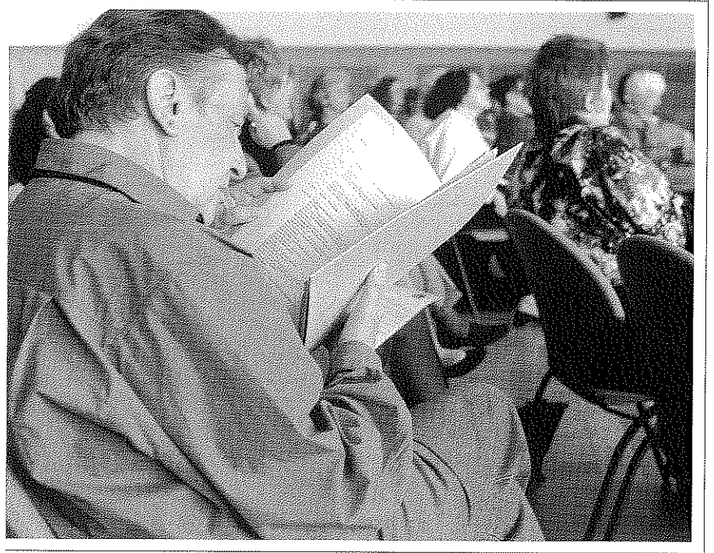
generation could neither light the fire nor say the prayer, but it could still find the sacred place in the forest. All generations since cannot even do that. What can they, what can we do? Are we reduced to the mere telling of this story and hope that it will have »the same effect as the actions of the other three?« Not if it is up to women. We have our own fire, our own prayers and our own places which we must find, in order to have the effect other fires and other prayers of other Jews had in the past. ■

Excerpt of Judith Frishman's lecture at Bet Debora

Judith Frishman was born in 1953 in New York. She lives in Amsterdam and is professor of the History and Culture of Rabbinic Judaism at the Catholic Theological University of Utrecht as well as professor of the History of Jewish-Christian Relations in the Modern Period at the University of Leiden. She is active in the Liberal Jewish Community of the Netherlands.

Yaacov Ben-Chanan

A GUEST IN DEBORA'S HOUSE ▩ I never learned to pray, if one means by praying, appealing to God. When I was growing up, nobody prayed in our home. And when I was almost an adult and was taken in by a family where men and women did pray, I found myself isolated among them. I didn't know any DU (intimate form of »you« in German) except as it applied to some people. For me God was, and remains, the sum of all striving, hopes and fears which people experience throughout their lives and which they pull together in their attempts to speak with a DU. In this sense »God« is a reality for me, and in this spirit I read the Siddur and feel connected to my Jewish house.



I don't know how men pray. I am a man, but bisexual and androgynous. »Being an Other« has always led to a sense of not being at home anywhere. I am not at home among men, nor among women. As a man I am often excluded, especially by women who are searching for their own identity, sovereignty and finally spirituality. For decades I felt no attraction to any synagogue. The men seemed to have no recognizable connection to the words they were saying as they carried out the ritual. They talked about business and football, chiming in with an occasional »Amen,« »Baruch Hu,« or only a »Shmo« at the right place. It was an artificial rather than a spiritual experience. In Berlin I experienced a different variant of masculine prayer: stiff, ceremonial celebration, a liturgical politeness, but no illumination on people's faces, no spontaneous swaying of bodies. Everything was just too orderly. One day I visited a small Jewish group, consisting almost entirely of women, which met once every three weeks in Oranienburger Strasse. Here everything was different. There was no »Up« and no »Down.« Everyone sat around a table, most women wearing a Kippah, and some with a Tallit. One had prepared the liturgy in advance, all sang along, they read or prayed, every single one, as he or she was able, from a Siddur which they had put together themselves. The Parashah was read out of Bibles which all had brought along, each person in turn reading some part in whatever language – Hebrew, German or English. Somebody had prepared something to say and then made a presentation which led to a long discussion of the weekly portion. When, following Kiddush, one finally went home, one had the feeling of bringing something from the others along. For the first time I felt at home at a religious service, and I stayed. It was not only the egalitarian nature of the group, but also the fact that there were no hierarchical elements at all. Everything was free, without any pressure, spontaneous, never sinking into banality. It was a spiritual experience which strengthened the feminine in me, without embarrassing my masculine side. It engaged my entire being, nourished it and made me feel good.

And so I came to the Shabbat service of Bet Debora. A large congregation had assembled, with very few men – although men had been expressly invited! – and lots of women. Much of what was already familiar to me from the egalitarian Minyan I found here again: spontaneity, openness, clarity, all of which didn't focus in on itself but rather illuminated the »Holiness«. I was most moved by the fact that the Torah was not handled as a cult object only by those from »above«. No, it was passed around, from hand to hand, to everybody in the congregation and I could actually feel a sensation in my own skin that I was a link in the long chain which connected past and future. From the smiling and the laughter of my neighbors, from whom I received the Torah and to whom I passed it on, I had a sense of a higher order of friendliness, which the religious call »Chen, Chesed and Rachamim.« It was an unforgettable religious experience for me, a transcendent experience, which didn't require me to change in any way my atheistic convictions. I knew that this was where I belonged, that this was my house.

Yaacov Ben-Chanan

Translated from German by Joel J. Levy

WOULD MY MOTHER BE PROUD OF ME? ▩ During the Shabbat morning service for the first time I was part of an Aliyah in a group. While I was standing in front of the Bimah, I glanced over the roofs of the nearby houses thinking the following: Now you are standing here, where two generations ago the women assembled for the service in the New Synagogue. How would your great-grandmother or your grandmother react, if they could see you? Would they be

proud of you? Your mother is surely proud of you, that you found the way back to the Jewish religion. For the first time I felt an answer deep inside of me, as I was standing among the women. As if my wish to take up again the thread of Jewish traditions of my ancestors, cut off by assimilation, was answered by Shechinah with a »now you belong to us again.« For me it is of great importance that I will be able to enlarge this deeply felt experience with the others in the »egalitarian« Minyan in the Oranienburger Strasse. I am very grateful that I can be part of the group. *Angela Schoschana Reinhard*

AN HONORARY GOY AMONG WOMEN RABBIS ▩ The expression Bet Debora was as foreign to me as a scientific equation, but still I managed to be there. My knowledge of Judaism prior to the conference was essentially non-existent. This conference gave me the opportunity to meet involved, emancipated Jewish women. The first thing which impressed me was the commitment and the joy of the three organizers who successfully managed to bring a new idea to reality. To them I tip my hat – or rather, my Kippah. At first, my work in the conference office felt like a jump into cold water. But very soon I got into the spirit of the unique event, influenced by the enormous commitment of the helpers and the tremendous patience of most of the participants. This helped me greatly to figure out what I had to do. The fact that there were so many women from so many different countries made the task exciting. Sometimes the exaggerated requests from some of the participants got on my nerves, but I always regained my composure when I got involved in discussions (usually during breaks.) Particularly interesting for me were the discussions with the »older women«; through these I always managed to forget about the few negative things which occurred. But why should I be surprised? Among Jews, too, there are some people who seem to need more space than they should.
In conclusion I would like to say that this conference was something very special for me. In spite of some very stressful moments, I have the impression that »we did a great job« and that was for me the ultimate goal. And so I would like to be there next time, too, but then I would like to participate more substantively.
Rainer Krokat
Translated from German by Joel J. Levy

ARROGANCE AND IGNORANCE ▩ In spite of all the beautiful and apologetic words which have already been spoken, I would like to add something totally banal to the discussion, on behalf of those who helped at this conference. We helpers and organizers all worked as volunteers – without any payment and in our spare time. And at the same time almost all of us were also participants in the conference. Theoretically. Because instead of attending sessions we were busy all day and all night, clearing dirty dishes off the staircase, copying mountains of documents for various presenters, washing the floor and organizing the dining room which day after day was left looking like a battlefield. Had this been a conference of men rabbis I would not have expected it to have been otherwise. But I did have higher hopes for women rabbis. Instead of that we were confronted with an abundance of arrogance and ignorance. Many important things were said at the conference. Unfortunately, these positive ideas seemed not to apply to the details of the daily tasks of running the meeting. Otherwise we might have convinced a few more people to show solidarity by at least clearing their own cups and plates instead of leaving a mess on the tables and throwing food on the floor. For those women who tried to arrange the food and to present it tastefully, this was rather frustrating. I would like to thank the few participants who, without prompting from anyone, pitched in and lent a helping hand. I would also like to thank all the volunteers who worked day and night and to apologize to them for the abuse they suffered in the way they were treated by some of the participants and speakers when one or another detail was not exactly as it might have been. For all of us this was a first time; it was certainly not perfect, but we tried our best. *Judith Kessler*
Translated from German by Joel J. Levy

A JEWISH WOMAN IN VARIOUS WORLDS ▩ The concept of a European-Jewish identity is, for me, questionable. There is no such thing as European Jewry, and yet there are Jews all over Europe. I think that those who have truly chosen, in a voluntary spirit, to be Jewish are those who have made the greatest progress, even more so than those who were born Jewish and for whom being Jewish is taken for granted. For me, being Jewish means combining the various sides of my being and making them all visible. I would like to know how others have managed to deal with being Jewish and, at the same time, voluntarily being leftist, anti-fascist, lesbians or gays. How do they deal with their Jewish-Christian or Jewish-Moslem backgrounds? I am interested in individual strategies, because I know that many have failed in their efforts to bring these different aspects of their identity together. They partially lie to themselves and have not yet overcome the anti-Semitism and homophobia which they have internalized. *Malin Kundi*
Translated from German by Joel J. Levy

AT THE END OF THE DESERT ▩ At the conference I became aware of the size of the desert, an image which has been in my mind since I, the product of a Jewish woman survivor and a Protestant minister, was a small child. God gave Moses the tablets with the commandments... Suddenly I was holding them in my hand and thought »I am a Levi« – even if only a female one. I stood there awkwardly, worried that the Torah rolls could fall out of my hand. On this weekend in Berlin I was amazed and excited by the variety of what was for me a new and open Judaism, practised and discussed by women from Western and Eastern Europe. There were no debates that were not open to general participation, and there was a great deal of understanding for the inevitable differences. Diana Pinto's concept of the »voluntary Jew« and thinking about the construction of a Jewish identity were important matters for me, for the very reason that they speak against a one-dimensional narrow way of thinking and allow a multiplicity of Jewish identities. One of the things that long prevented me from outing myself as a Jew was the feeling of being marginal in many respects, connected only to Judaism through the persecution and destruction of a part of my family. »Voluntarism« as formulated by Diana Pinto requires active participation and a conscious decision precisely because none of the private traumas of the Shoah were or are voluntary.
Bet Debora has unearthed the challenge of a pluralistic, multicultural Jewish Space. I'm already looking forward to the next conference. *Angelika Levi*
Translated from German by Dorothy Gordon

This time it was the men who were looking after the needs of the female participants: Hartmut Bomhoff and Rainer Krokat in the office

The crowd in the conference office

Belly-Dance at Mozae Shabbat: Jessica Jacoby

WILL THE FEELING LAST? ▩ What was important about Bet Debora is the feeling of belonging, the atmosphere of creating something new and the knowledge we all gained about our own potential – happily, the expected whining and withdrawl into a self-satisfied dissident position did not occur. There were, however, situations in which some individuals showed their authority, their hierarchical thinking or their competitiveness. There is no question that the exchanges of experiences and desires were good for both heart and head. Of course only future projects will show whether the feelings which transcended denominational lines and which gave us all a feeling of commonality will last. Bet Debora has, however, proved that a group of people with low status can have a positive and integrative effect on the religious establishment.
Hartmut Bomhoff
Translated from German by Joel J. Levy

TAKING HOLD OF THE TORAH ▩ Women rabbis! – Women cantors! – Rabbinical scholars, both male and female! – With its pretentious caption, the pro-

gramme of the Bet Debora Conference in Berlin might well frighten those who merely count themselves among »rabbinical-minded Jewesses and Jews.« So much scholarship gathered in one place will make me look like a fool! But the programme arouses my curiosity and motivates me to go. »Women stand on the Bimah, equal with men,« the introductory note says. Years ago, my daughters celebrated their Bat Mitzvah. They were well prepared by learning Torah, they participated actively in »their« Bat Mitzvah service, ascended the Bimah with their father and were allowed to speak up in the congregation. A true rite of passage, a girl's great day, made for a hearty welcome to the adult world and as a girl's first proof of her personal religious responsibility. But also a day with a striking discrepancy as for its consequences: from now on, she would be confined to a passive role up on the gallery, never counting for Minyan.

I was keen on meeting such a great number of women to whom an active, i.e. a visible and audible participation in the services of their synagogues has long become the rule, not the exception. My approach was an unbiased one: nothing but a willingness to get involved in new experiences. So the equally warm and professional atmosphere suited me perfectly. It enabled the participants to satisfy their emotional as well as their intellectual needs. Emotional reactions surfaced during the Shabbat Morning Service, and these later led to some controversial discussions. Of course we are not used to seeing rabbis and cantors officiate collectively; honours must be distributed with utmost care because on that score the female psyche is not a bit different from the male. Of course an enormous and seemingly spontaneous increase in Aliyot can be disturbing. But we are all familiar with the same procedure on Simchat Torah Eve and we are well aware of its meaning: on this special occasion at least, everyone should get a chance of »taking hold of the Torah« – and of feeling moved by it. I was deeply moved for my part when the honorary guests were given Aliyot. Watching them I fancied my own foremothers going up to the Bimah and literally carrying out what I had told my Bat Mitzvah daughter to bear in mind: »You too, go and take hold of the Torah!« But there was something else that at first disturbed and embarrassed me: the Torah Scroll was handed over from one to another. I kept watching while my inner eye again evoked images of men in the synagogue on Simchat Torah Eve, carrying the Torah as if it were a child. Then a difference struck me. To my great surprise, the women did not lift up this »child« like a toddler, but they held it and passed it on like a newborn baby: lying down – an amazingly natural and gentle gesture. Who ever tries to denounce this handling of the Torah as disrespectful must be blind for the signs of body language. Through this action, the metaphor of »taking hold of the Torah« was made tangible in a genuinely feminine way, an expression full of respect and responsibility for a precious token. At last, I decided to receive the scroll, too, and to hand it over to my friend. My second thoughts about looking like a fool among all those women with so much more Jewish learning than I have had proved unnecessary. My experience in one workshop can easily be transferred to my Bet Debora experience as a whole. This Bet ha-Midrash of Women – for men and women in search of ways to live Jewishly in this ever-changing world – is a necessity.

Gloria Kraft-Sullivan

Havdalah with Miriam Rosengarten and Hannah Zinn

PROGRAMME

THURSDAY, MAY 13TH

▩ »Women on the Bima«: Opening lecture: *Rabbi Daniela Thau · Opening Discussion with Speakers and Special guests*

▩ Lectures

»History of Women in the Rabbinate,« *Rabbi Sybil Sheridan*

»Experiences as the first Woman in the Rabbinate after the Shoa in Germany,« *Rabbi Bea Wyler*

FRIDAY, MAY 14TH

▩ Shacharit Service

Rabbi Katalin Kelemen & Katka Novotna

▩ Lecture

»The Concept of ›The Voluntary Jew,‹« *Dr. Diana Pinto*

▩ »Egalitarian Communities in Eastern and Western Europe«

Discussion with Hadass Golandsky, Rabbi Katalin Kelemen, Dr. Susanna Keval, Rabbi Nelly Kogan, Cantor Pamela Rothmann-Sawyer

▩ Workshops

»The Status of Women in Community Life, Ritual Functions and the Rabbinate – Discrepancy between Equal Rights and Their Implementation,« *Rabbi Sybil Sheridan, Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild* · »Jewish Education in Eastern Europe,« *Rabbi Jane Kanarek, Rabbi Nelly Kogan* · »Exegesis and Freedom – Female Points of View on Rabbincal Literature,« *Prof. Dr. Eveline Goodman-Thau* · »On Being a Lesbian Rabbi,« *Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah* · »Contemporary Reading of Midrashic Literature,« *Freema Gottlieb* · »Between Tradition and Trauma – Jewish Women of the ›Second‹ and ›Third‹ Generation in Germany,« *Dr. Susanna Keval* · »Leining – Theory and Practice,« *Cantor Pamela Rothmann-Sawyer*

▩ Preparation for Shabbat

»In the Footsteps of Regina Jonas – History of Emancipation of Jewish Women in Berlin,« *Walking tour with Iris Weiss*

▩ Kabbalat Shabbat, *Cantor Pamela Rothmann-Sawyer & Rabbi Nelly Kogan*

SATURDAY, MAY 15TH

▩ Shabbat Service »British Style«

Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild, Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah, Rabbi Sybil Sheridan, Rabbi Daniela Thau

▩ Study and Relaxation - Shiurim

»The Parasha through Feminist Eyes,« *Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah* · »Rosh Chodesh Ceremonies,« *Jacqueline Rothschild* · »New Concepts of God in Liturgy«: *Prof. Dr. Judith Frishman* · »New Rituals – Menopause, Dying, etc.,« *Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild* · »Shabbat on Shabbat? - Alternative Sanctifications of Shabbat,« *Rabbi Daniela Thau* · »A Week before Shavuot – Ruth in the Midrash,« *Freema Gottlieb* · »Which Experiences Can the Older Generation Pass to the Younger One?«: *Historical Discussion, with Hanna Hochmann, Dr. Ilse Perlman, Shoshana Ronen* · »Leining – Theory and Practice,« *Cantor Pamela Rothmann-Sawyer*

▩ Lectures

»Study and Prayer; the Pillars of Jewish Tradition – Concept of a Jewish Culture Critique,« *Prof. Dr. Eveline Goodman-Thau* »Reconstructing a Useable Past,« *Prof. Dr. Judith Frishman*

▩ Dinner and a Music Programme, »Chasanut and Jewish Songs„ *Avitall Gerstetter (Soprano) and Chawa Gerstetter (Piano), Sarah Siegmann (Songs), Jessica Jacoby (Belly Dancing)*

▩ Havdalah and Rosh Chodesh

Miriam Rosengarten & Hannah Zinn

SUNDAY, MAY 16TH

▩ Rosh Chodesh Service

Rabbi Jane Kanarek & Rabbi Bea Wyler

▩ Panel Discussion: BET DEBORA – Summary and Perspectives

▩ Concert »Chasanut – Songs of the Synagogue,« *Cantor Mimi Sheffer*

SPEAKERS AND ORGANISERS

Lara Dämmig (Initiator Bet Debora) ▩ *Prof. Dr. Judith Frishman (Universities Leiden and Utrecht)* ▩ *Avitall Gerstetter (Cantoral Soprano, Synagogue Oranienburger Strasse, Berlin)* ▩ *Hadass Golandsky (Progressive Jewish Community »Or Chadasch,« Vienna)* ▩ *Prof. Dr. Eveline Goodman-Thau (Universities Halle and Harvard)* ▩ *Freema Gottlieb (Author, New York)* ▩ *Dr. Rachel Monika Herweg (Initiator Bet Debora)* ▩ *Hanna Hochmann (Petach Tikwa, former member of the »Liberale Synagoge Norden«)* ▩ *Jessica Jacoby (Author, Berlin)* ▩ *Rivka Jaussi (Egalitärer Minjan, Berlin)* ▩ *Rabbi Jane Kanarek (University Moscow)* ▩ *Rabbi Katalin Kelemen (Jewish Community »Szim Salom,« Budapest)* ▩ *Dr. Susanna Keval (Egalitärer Minjan, Frankfurt/M.)* ▩ *Elisa Klapheck (Initiatior Bet Debora)* ▩ *Rabbi Nelly Kogan (Community for Progressive Judaism »Simcha,« Minsk)* ▩ *Katka Novotna (Jewish Museum, Prague)* ▩ *Dr. Ilse Perlman (New York, former student of the »Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums«)* ▩ *Dr. Diana Pinto (Consultant of the European Council, Paris)* ▩ *Shoshana Ronen (Tel Aviv, former student of the »Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums«)* ▩ *Miriam Rosengarten (Synagogue Oranienburger Strasse, Berlin)* ▩ *Cantor Pamela Rothmann-Sawyer (»Temple Israel,« Alameda, California)* ▩ *Jacqueline Rothschild (Rebbetzin, Berlin)* ▩ *Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild (Jewish Community, Orpington)* ▩ *Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah (Leo Back College, London)* ▩ *Cantor Mimi Sheffer (Berlin)* ▩ *Rabbi Sybil Sheridan (Leo Baeck College, London)* ▩ *Sarah Siegmann (Singer, Berlin)* ▩ *Rabbi Daniela Thau (Bedford)* ▩ *Iris Weiss (Historian for Local History, Berlin)* ▩ *Rabbi Bea Wyler (Jewish Community, Oldenburg)* ■

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Women stand together with men, on an egalitarian basis, on the Bima. In the decade which is just ending a fascinating development has taken place in European Jewish life; increasingly, women are exercising important ritual functions. There are women rabbis in London, Paris and Oldenburg, as well as in Moscow, Minsk and Budapest. What does this mean for Jewish tradition and continuity? What impact do these women have on religious practices? Which themes have become more important? What are the new challenges? ■ *Berlin is the city in which Regina Jonas, the world's first woman rabbi, served. With her murder in Auschwitz in 1944 an important development in Judaism was cut off and set back by decades. The questions Regina Jonas raised about Jewish tradition then are still relevant today. We remember her courage and her difficult struggle for recognition as a rabbi. More than half a century after the Shoah we invited women rabbis, cantors, scholars and interested Jewish women and men from all over Europe to come to Berlin and join us in discussing what it means to be Jewish.*

BET DEBORA initiated by
Elisa Klapheck
Lara Dämmig
Rachel Monika Herweg