

## **Kol Isha Atop the Mechitza:**

### **Finding a Women's Voice in Jewish Transgender Activism**

by Jess Levine

It is said that those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it, but this aphorism is rarely presented with the necessary corollary: whose history? In a tradition authored largely by and for men, the creation of Jewish women's history is a fairly recent phenomenon. From the factual to the mythic, the way that we tell our stories does not just describe who we are, but also prescribes how we should be, and even influences what we want to be.<sup>1</sup> Given a history written largely in a Jewish man's voice, it is dangerously easy to take this authorship for granted, and to reinscribe a hierarchy in which Jewish men's traditions, Jewish men's practices, and Jewish men's narratives are subtly given priority, whether intentional or not. Resisting this tendency must be an active practice, in which explicit attention is given to the task of defying it. In a body of law and legend in which men are the assumed subject and which places a literal ban on *kol isha*—the singing voice of a woman as heard by a man—challenging gendered hierarchies cannot be accomplished by challenging the concept of gender alone, but rather must include an intentional practice of offering a women's voice that countervails the default and *de facto* prioritization of men's history and practice.

This dilemma is in not new—Jewish feminism has confronted it since the conception of the movement. But within the relatively young sphere of Jewish transgender activism, this issue has largely been either ignored or avoided. Yet, transgender Jews are not the first group to grapple with masculine hegemony and the role of women's voices in a non-gender normative Jewish movements. The writing of

Jewish lesbian-feminists has named and contested this reinscription of hierarchy within the Jewish lesbian and gay movement since the earliest major works of Jewish lesbian-feminism. In confronting the issues that we personally face in progressive and trans affirming Jewish spaces, trans women are offered powerful lessons from the life experiences of Jewish lesbians, and the theoretical frameworks they devised from them.

When considering this potential for reinscription, we can begin in the seminal *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, where contributor Aliza Maggid gives a brief summary of the role of “Lesbians in the International Movement of Gay/Lesbian Jews,” highlighting the important coalition work carried out by gay and lesbian Jews, but also drawing attention to the resistance of some gay men to recognize and address the sexist aspects of Jewish ritual in gay/lesbian Jewish spaces, and instances of gay men speaking over women writ-large in conference settings.<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Alpert’s *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* puts a finer point on it:

Because of sexism, however, both in the gay Jewish movement and the Jewish community at large, gay men’s issues have been at the heart of the gay synagogue movement and lesbians, ironically, have had to fight to become visible in the gay Jewish world . . . lesbian issues often take second place to gay issues.<sup>3</sup>

This history—in which a coalition of oppressed gender and sexual minorities organize for their rights within the Jewish community and are forced during that process to confront their own sexism and misogyny—already provides a valuable roadmap for those in the movement of Jewish transgender activism. But this movement has more to offer us than just history; Jewish lesbian-feminists have authored a rich canon of

feminist theory by which transgender Jews can come to interpret and understand the nuances of our situation and improve our capacity to act upon it. This history and these intellectual works also offer us an example of both the importance and potential of a distinct women's voice within Jewish activist coalitions working on behalf of gender and sexual minorities. Jews are a 'people of the Book' and by learning our people's history through Torah, we become better prepared to face the present and the future.<sup>4</sup> I argue that when Jewish trans women encounter the idea "our history,"<sup>5</sup> we should take seriously the lesbian-feminist claim that "our lives themselves are text . . . that make up the sacred canon of the Jewish people,"<sup>6</sup> and treat the work and experiences of Jewish lesbians as a vital part of our *own* heritage as Jewish trans women, and a topic that demands our study.<sup>7</sup> And yet, transgender Jews are not without our own "Book."

### ***Balancing on the Mechitza and Nice Jewish Girls: A Comparative Analysis***

In 2010, editor Noach Dzmura published the groundbreaking anthology *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*. In this work, Dzmura collects a number of essays written about transgender Jews, the majority (but not all) of which both authored by transgender Jews and the overwhelming majority (but not all) of which are either republished works from the late 2000s or original work written for the anthology. In soliciting and collecting these stories, Dzmura helps to speak into existence an identity that previously existed almost exclusively on disparate fringes of the Jewish community. Prior to his anthology, most resources about being transgender and Jewish were limited to brave individual voices, and as his introduction notes, transgender Jews were only just beginning to birth a distinct subcultural community.<sup>8</sup> In this respect, *Balancing on the Mechitza* served a similar historical function for those

who are transgender and Jewish as *Nice Jewish Girls* did for those who are lesbian and Jewish; it encountered a situation in which “if you tried to claim both identities—publicly and politically—you were exceeding the limits of what was permitted to the marginal” and demanded a right to be heard as both.<sup>9</sup> Each anthology served as a “coming out” moment to the Jewish community at large, and compelled Jewish institutional bodies to respond to the needs and sheer *existence* of Jews along its intersection.

But, despite the similarity of their historical roles, *Nice Jewish Girls* and *Balancing on the Mechitza* were authored with meaningfully different goals in mind, and it is necessary to understand these differences in order to draw out the importance that Jewish lesbian-feminist works like *Nice Jewish Girls* hold for Jewish trans women. Editor Evelyn Torton Beck asserts in the introduction to *Nice Jewish Girls* that “few represented here are seriously interested in transforming the religion,” succinctly capturing the way in which the watershed anthology for Jewish lesbians did not particularly desire to speak to Jewish tradition or the Jewish community—religious or secular. Instead, its emphasis is upon speaking to the lesbian-feminist movement and to other Jewish lesbians—and challenging their antisemitism in particular.<sup>10</sup> Antisemitism in the lesbian-feminist movement certainly receives the plurality of the anthology’s attention, and the only occasion upon which the introduction speaks (indirectly) to the Jewish community at large is a solitary paragraph during which Beck expresses that she hopes the book will “open a dialogue” and would “like to hear them say ‘mazel tov’ instead of ‘oy gevald’ when they see we’ve made a book of our own.”<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, she concludes her introduction by describing a moment of *almost exclusively lesbian* Jewish community during which there was “no uncertainty of belonging-ness,’ here all was

trust” and stating that “if this anthology were to make that just a little more possible, then I would sing. . . *dayenu*, ‘it is enough.’”<sup>12</sup>

Dzmura, on the other hand, writes in his introduction to *Balancing on the Mechitza* that it is his “fervent prayer than gender identity and expression no longer generate discomfort in Jewish sacred or secular space.”<sup>13</sup> He explicitly names multiple audiences for the book: “transgender and gender-variant Jews who are seeking a way into communal life,” “those who would ally with us in the quest for acceptance and understanding,” and “those for whom the very thought of a book about transgender Jews is deeply disturbing.”<sup>14</sup> In all three, this initial anthology by and for transgender Jews distinguishes itself from the initial anthology by and for lesbian Jews: *Nice Jewish Girls* did not desire an audience of those who rejected lesbians, it demonstrated interest in allyship almost exclusively from gentile lesbians, not sexuality/gender-normative Jews, and it displayed at most ambivalence towards Jewish communal life (while putting a clear focus on lesbian communal life for Jews.)

In the conclusion to his introduction, Dzmura envisions a reality in which “there is no Jew in the world who has not encountered the word *transgender* . . . no Jew in the world who sees this beloved, precious, and progressive tribe and thinks of his, her, or his own gender in the same way again.”<sup>15</sup> In this, we encounter another significant difference: the classification of Jews collectively as a “progressive tribe” seems almost unpronounceable in the discourse of *Nice Jewish Girls*. Beck’s introduction notes that “all of the contributors to this anthology reject the patriarchal aspects of Judaism—yet it is not always easy to separate the elements”<sup>16</sup> while contributor Elana Dykewomon phrases it in its most knifelike form: “There are woman slaves and behind them another line of woman slaves, and now and then a willing captive princess.”<sup>17</sup> Certainly, *Nice*

*Jewish Girls* recognizes the presence of progressive traditions within Jewish history: the “Jewish radical-activist tradition in Eastern Europe”<sup>18</sup> and the Jewish Labor Bund,<sup>19</sup> Jewish women partisan fighters during the Shoah<sup>20</sup> and anti-fascist political activism,<sup>21</sup> and to “never cross a picket line”<sup>22</sup> all supplement the assumed and usually autobiographical emphasis on contemporary Jewish lesbian-feminism. Rarely, however, is any “progressive” nature assigned to Jewish *religious* values, and *never* is “progressive” assumed to be a universal trait of the Jewish people; to wit, many contributors appear to implicitly reject that association. One possible source for this different perspective can be found in another assertion in Dzmura’s introduction:

It seems obvious to state than in a book with the agenda of transgender inclusion, the liberal (left, political and religious) is better represented than the conservative (right). However, I would argue that transgender inclusion is not a liberal agenda at all, but a Jewish agenda that should concern even the most conservative communities. This call is not necessarily for the liberalization of Judaism, but for compassionate responses from all streams of Jewish practice to people whose genders vary from the norm.<sup>23</sup>

Even with the conflation of left and liberal set aside,<sup>24</sup> this statement once again presents an assertion which could hardly be articulated in the discourse of *Nice Jewish Girls*, within which the right is never depicted a potential source of compassion nor as a desirable subject of reconciliation. When depictions of the contemporary right are encountered in *Nice Jewish Girls*, at their most innocent they take the form of anti-feminist misogynists, and more frequently they take the form of swastika graffiti and the

white hoods of the KKK. Rather than reconciliation, *Nice Jewish Girls* emphasizes resistance: “I will fight our oppressors with any weapon that works—words, fists, guns, or magic.”<sup>25</sup> Where *Balancing on the Mechitza*, on the whole, employs a view of a universal Jewish community, united by certain values, and presents areas of Jewish community with a disdain for transgender people as potential allies to be reached, the introduction to *Nice Jewish Girls* only references a “unified culture” when speaking of Jews in order to name that Jewish culture as “also extremely diverse” and state that “most Jews” have certain shared bodies of *knowledge*—with little reference to any universal values.<sup>26</sup> While certainly coalition is presented as possible with those who exhibit sexism, and antisemitism is presented as something the women’s movement can work through,<sup>27</sup> the political right is largely depicted as an enemy to combat, not reach.

Interestingly, this conflict also presents an opportunity to unify the two anthologies through the intersection of a particular contributor. In one of the only instances in which an essay in *Balancing on the Mechitza* demonstrates the same approach to political conflict as most essays in *Nice Jewish Girls*, contributor Kate Bornstein recalls a time in which “when the rabbi gave his sermon, I was incensed . . . jumping to my feet in the middle of the rabbi’s sermon, arguing some point of social justice”; a potential explanation for this shared attitude is offered earlier on the same page, where Bornstein recalls stating, to her mother, that she is about to “become a dyke.”<sup>28</sup> A vocal attachment to lesbian identity runs through both this essay and the entirety of *Nice Jewish Girls*, and presents a possibility that lesbian identity is the basis for this shared political perspective. Yet, there are complicating factors. Bornstein’s essay is one of the only two to have been written in the 90s, having first appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1998, nearly a decade before any other contribution

except Rachel Biale's 1992 "Abandonment to the Body's Desire"; does Bornstein's attitude reflect the time during which it was published more than it does her relationship to being a lesbian? In addition, while no other contributor claims lesbian identity quite so enthusiastically as Bornstein, others demonstrate relationship to their position as lesbians—past or present—in ways that are usually either implicit or ambivalent. The fact that no other lesbian in the book displays the same outlook challenges the idea that Bornstein's position as a lesbian explains this difference—but this outlook is not the only way in which a contribution by a lesbian departs from the anthology's dominant perspective.

Preeminent (cisgender) feminist theologian Judith Plaskow pens multiple essays in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, and while she does not explicitly mention her own homosexuality, her approach to gender differs significantly from the perspective offered in Dzmura's introduction, and much of the rest of the book. Where Dzmura writes that "the point is not to dismantle gender, but to embrace it as we do Torah, whose meaning continues to unfold for each new generation,"<sup>29</sup> Plaskow states that she "wants to see a society in which gender is simply one of numerous facets of identity and is far less salient than it is in ours" such that "through multiplying, we dissolve."<sup>30</sup> While she concludes that she does not know "what the ultimate role of gender should be in a society that abandons gender dualism," she still emphasizes that "heterosexism and homophobia cannot finally be overcome without moving beyond the gender binary."<sup>31</sup> This vision of dissolution goes far beyond Dzmura's introduction, which sets as its most distant goal for gender as a system in Jewish spaces that gender be a "question whose outcome is negotiated at each meeting," and within which he states clearly that "I do not mean 'dismantle the mechitza.'"<sup>32</sup>

These conflicts—between Bornstein’s more adversarial approach to social conservatism, Plaskow’s more adversarial vision of the future of gender, and the more reconciliatory approach taken to both issues in Dzmura’s introduction and many of the other essays in his anthology—can also be united through another lens. As women, Bornstein and Plaskow both suffer significantly greater restrictions under traditional Jewish gender roles (and therefore under socially conservative attempts to retain them) than do Dzmura and other transgender men. This trend is not *limited* to women: of the remaining essays in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, Ri J. Turner’s “Queering the Jew and Jewing the Queer” with its framing of gender as a system that “punishes”<sup>33</sup> and Max K. Strassfield’s “Becoming a Good Boy: A Transmasculine Meditation on Gendered Ritual Objects and the Challenges of Transfeminism” with its framing of gender movements as a “lose-lose proposition”<sup>34</sup> both stand out in their challenges to the boundaries of traditional gender roles. While both essays reflect on movements away from the role of “woman,” both authors use pronouns other than “she” or “he” and clearly do not find a solid home in either “woman” or “man.” Noticeably, these essays also comprise two of the three contributed by those who do not use “she” or “he” pronouns.

Perhaps then, this dichotomous approach to gender and conflict over it is split by those who are men, and therefore retain a chance of being offered the status and opportunities reserved for Jewish men, and those who are not. This too, is troubled by the text: in her essay “Crossing the Mechitza,” Beth Orens, an Orthodox Jewish transsexual woman, is not so troubled by gender as a system within Judaism:

When it comes to religious issues, however, I’m not as bothered by the discrimination. . . . As Orthodox Jews, we don’t see separate or different as

inherently unequal. Women are neither superior nor inferior to men in Judaism. Just different.<sup>35</sup>

Here, we encounter multiple problems. Not only does Orens' outright defense of traditional Jewish gender roles upend the dichotomous lens of adversarial and reconciliatory approaches to traditional gender roles and other forms of social conservatism, but we have also now exceeded lesbian, woman, and non-man as potential categories to contain this dichotomy. It would appear that Orens' example demonstrates the limit of identity as a tool of analysis of these contradictions within *Balancing on the Mehitza*. There is, however, a more subtle issue at play.

### **Whose voice?**

As determined, to the best of my abilities, by a combination of the author biographies in the "Contributors" section of *Balancing on the Mehitza*, the editor's notes, and the text of the essays themselves, of the twenty five contributors to *Balancing on the Mehitza*, four are out trans women at time of writing.<sup>36</sup> Of the twenty seven contributions, six are authored or coauthored by out trans women. Of the six contributions by out trans women, five are reprints previously published in other contexts, including the pieces by Bornstein and Biale, both written over a decade before the anthology was published. The only original contribution to *Balancing on the Mehitza* authored by an out trans woman is "Crossing the Mehitza" by Beth Orens.<sup>37</sup>

*Balancing on the Mehitza* is edited by a man—a man whose introduction explicitly rejects the idea that the anthology is a political project, and eschews the idea that liberation for trans people necessitates the dismantling of gender or even the

mechitza. The decision to publish an anthology with the contributions of only four out trans women in a book on Jewish transgender activism with twenty five contributors, and to include as the only original contribution by an out trans woman an essay in which the statement “Judaism is not bound by *Brown v. Board of Education*” is used to justify gender discrimination in Jewish spaces,<sup>38</sup> was not itself made by a trans woman. Jewish trans women speak in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, but they speak in the setting and volume determined by a Jewish man.

It is always important to ask ourselves: who talks? Research has demonstrated that the amount of space women take in a conversation is consistently overestimated by listeners—that women’s marginalization is perceived as equality, and women’s equality as overrepresentation.<sup>39</sup> During conversation about my own desire to reclaim “*Loud Pushy Jew Dyke*” (a collection of labels reappropriated by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz in her essay in *Nice Jewish Girls*) a trusted friend (who did not herself identify as transgender) asked me whether it was the place of trans women to do so, with us having grown up on the receiving end of attempted male socialization around being ‘loud’ and ‘pushy.’<sup>40</sup> This provoked a process of reflection and observation; to repurpose another of Kaye/Kantrowitz’s aphorisms, it had never occurred to me to count Adam’s apples, but I counted Adam’s apples.<sup>41</sup>

We are quite early in the movement of Jewish transgender activism—as Dzmura noted in his introduction only nine years ago, “Transgender community...is still in its infancy; transgender *Jewish* community as a subculture is currently being born.”<sup>42</sup> Quantifiable sociological data on the gender demographics of transgender Jews, in leadership roles or at large, does not yet exist, and likely will not exist in the near future. But I do know what I have witnessed. Borrowing the words of Rebecca Alpert:

I do not claim a distant or objective perspective on this subject. As a feminist, I do not believe that such a perspective is either attainable or desirable. . . . I have no choice but to write out of my own experience. And while I know my experience is unique, I hope that it will be resonant for others.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout this process of reflecting and observing, I have come to realize how truly little I witness trans women speaking in Jewish spaces. When I went seeking advice on a personal concern that I was taking up too much space in large communal conversations in our congregation, my own rabbi, a transmasculine genderqueer person, included in his reply that my speaking up played the important role of helping other trans women feel safe to speak up in our congregation as well. I have taken note in the time since both of these conversations how infrequently—for whatever reason—the few other trans women around me speak in congregational settings. More so, I have had a series of conversations with queer and trans rabbinical students, Jewish program and retreat directors, other Jewish trans people, and other Jewish trans women. For those in my network, the observations have been the same: from congregations, to retreats, to rabbinical student bodies, trans women are rarely even *present*, even in spaces with a significant number of trans people—the ratios of trans women to the number of trans people at large have looked eerily similar to that of the contributors in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, if not slightly worse.

In a reply letter to Rabbi Elliot Kukla, as part of an ongoing private conversation—between a trans man and a cisgender lesbian—about reconciling Jewish

transgender thought and Jewish feminist thought, later published in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, Judith Plaskow writes:

I see the most fundamental theological question I raise as that of authority: Who has the authority to define the ongoing meaning of Judaism? Who has been included and who has been excluded from the conversations through which Jewish life takes on meaning?<sup>44</sup>

While the dam appears to be breaking on transgender inclusion in this conversation, it is my worry that like in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, trans women are not bursting through the cracks at the same rate as other trans people. As noted earlier, this would not be the first time that women have not seen the benefit of a liberation struggle by and for a coalition of oppressed gender and sexual minorities at the same rate that other members of the coalition do. The work of Jewish lesbians documents a similar history of feeling unfairly underrepresented or outright silenced in the Jewish lesbian and gay movement on many occasions, particularly in the late 1970s.<sup>45</sup> In that time period, and in the years that followed, Jewish lesbians embarked on a long campaign of visibility, within lesbian-feminism, the Jewish gay and lesbian movement, and the Jewish community at large.<sup>46</sup> The titular “bread on the seder plate” of Alpert’s book captures the story of a tradition adopted by Jewish lesbians to put a slice of bread on the seder plate to symbolize and draw attention to the fact that in Jewish law and community, lesbians, like the bread, did not belong—that they were forbidden to exist in that space.<sup>47</sup> *Nice Jewish Girls*, while not intending the Jewish community as its primary audience, was successful in that role regardless—nine positive reviews of the book appeared in

Jewish press, while a self-proclaimed “Supreme Rabbinic Court of America” issued physical “writs of excommunication” outside a reading of the book.<sup>48</sup> In *Nice Jewish Girls*, Jewish lesbians established a collective voice that was sizeable and demanding—or “loud” and “pushy,” if you will—enough that it could not be ignored.

For Jewish trans women to hold authority and take a seat at the table in the conversations through which Jewish life takes on meaning, we too will have to establish such a collective voice. And meaningfully, *Balancing on the Mechitza*, an anthology of transgender Jewish thought, is not this voice. Just as it was necessary for Jewish lesbians to have a space in which they distinguish themselves from the Jewish lesbian and gay movement and the lesbian-feminist movement at large, so must Jewish trans woman speak together in their own voices.

In some respects, this resolves the dilemma posed by the way that applying an identity-oriented lens to the contradictions in *Balancing on the Mechitza* stumbled on Orens’ essay. Rather than viewing identity as an analytical tool to understand why particular contributors or groups of contributors took—or did not take—a particular position, identity can instead be employed to ask: who has—or has not—had the opportunity to speak? In the case of *Balancing on the Mechitza*, it was clearly necessary to go deeper: who adjudicated which identities had access to this speech? In this question, we begin to uncover the wider complexity of the issue of authority at hand.<sup>49</sup>

### **Beyond Diversity of Identity**

In *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference*, Janet R. Jakobsen writes that “a simple commitment to diversity is inadequate because it does not articulate the relations of production which create that diversity.”<sup>50</sup> Jakobsen goes on to describe the

limits of liberal pluralism, in which the representation of an ever expanding list of categories flattens and contains the complexity of these relationships, rather than challenge the underlying structural hierarchies that generate them.<sup>51</sup> Jakobsen's work spells out a clear warning for the future of a trans women's voice in transgender activism: an overemphasis on the distinct nature of a Jewish trans women's voice risks essentializing and flattening what it is to be a Jewish trans woman, while an underemphasis risks subsuming the Jewish trans women's voice into a trans coalition which then fails to challenge the reinscription of gendered hierarchies. Both the potential and the challenge of this balance is captured by a section of Bernice Johnson Reagon's "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century" in which she describes both the power and danger of separatist spaces for identity groups:

That space while it lasts should be a nurturing space where you sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are. And you take the time to try to construct within yourself and within your community who you would be if you were running society.<sup>52</sup>

Trans movement spaces, whether physical or in text, represent an experiment in what society could be, and how gender could be structured. The Jewish trans woman represents a narrow intersection of needs, but these narrow intersections offer a platform by which to challenge the reinscription of larger systems of hierarchy and oppression (like sexism and misogyny) within the temporary and visionary experiments that Jewish trans movement spaces represent. When we consider a distinct Jewish trans women's voice, we cannot, to again borrow the words of Jewish lesbian-feminist

Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, “[ignore] how much political energy can be generated as groups develop a cohesive identity and analysis” nor can we splinter our movement “into 1000 groups whose members at last feel sufficiently the same: comfy but not a powerful resource.”<sup>53</sup> We also cannot essentialize trans womanhood as a unified identity with a particular perspective, or allow a victim narrative to limit the horizon of what change is possible and encourage “comparisons of oppression.”<sup>54</sup> This requires an ever-shifting perspective on coalitions of gender and sexual minorities: we must particularize our identities in order to complicate existing oversimplifications, and recognize the inevitable oversimplification of these new identities, and repeat the process, all while maintaining a resilient coalition against the interlocking systems that create our oppressions, and without overly prescribing or demonizing various groups within these coalitions as “more” or “less” oppressed, or as our oppressors themselves.

Achieving this balance is never one-size-fits-all; it requires a constant process of particularization and unification that comes from a deep analysis of the situation at hand and the relationships between the people in it. Rarely will any participant get this balance “right.” But there are interlocking shifts in perspective we can employ to make it easier on ourselves.

The first that I would like to propose is the remapping of a concept from education theory: applying an “asset-based approach” to how we think and communicate about identity and oppression.<sup>55</sup> Within liberatory coalitions, we can respond to the objections and needs of particularized identities by viewing and analyzing them as *helpful* challenges to the reinscription of oppressive systems within our spaces—a reinscription we can understand as inevitable and therefore *needing* individuals willing to challenge it. With active effort, those with more relative power in

these spaces can practice working through initial defensive responses and understand these challenges as assets with potential to improve the community. Creating a community where this is possible requires an intentional effort not to employ guilt and shame as motivators for change, and to disempower those who do; to suppress the “crusader” and “white knight” and encourage instead self-interested solidarity.<sup>56</sup> It also requires acting in good faith, which is intimately connected to a second shift in perspective.

It is not always helpful to frame the enactment of systems of oppression as the malicious actions of a group of “oppressors.” Within liberatory coalitions of the marginalized, we are not free from the material conditions of oppression that exist in our society at large, and this will *necessarily* mean that these systems of oppression will be replicated in our communities. This is a structural issue, and as such does not entail that the individuals who run these spaces are the enemies with whom we need to fight and hold as responsible for these conditions of oppression. It is possible to recognize someone as responsible for their replication in a coalition space without being responsible for their *creation*, and to hold them *accountable* for their disrupting this replication without framing the actors as malicious. This requires an extension of good faith, and these vulnerable extensions of this faith in either direction—a marginalized person trusting the intentions of those with more power in that coalition and offering them a chance to improve, or those with more power viewing the protests of those with marginalized, particular identities as areas for improvement that are full of potential—build the base upon which mutual trust and solidarity can be built and strengthened. Finally, achieving this shift is made easier by relinquishing another lens.

Much of transgender activism more broadly is deeply entwined with the liberal individualism present in American society at large, and not even contemporary American Jewish thought has escaped this environment unscathed. As long as the emphasis of our politics remains upon the individual, we will remain incapable of transcending the systems that oppress us. As long as the emphasis of our analysis remains upon the individual, it will be too easy to miss the forest for the trees; the replication of systems of oppression cannot be fixed by laying blame on the individuals replicating it, but only by deeply understanding then acting together to transform the material conditions by which that oppression comes to exist in the first place. The actors in these situations are exactly that: merely actors, fulfilling roles constructed by larger systems. The relationships between people allow us to move between and alter the borders of these roles, but the individual is only empowered to act in a social context that provides that power.<sup>57</sup> Treating individuals as the root of the problem in our communities is counterproductive to the goal of liberation, which requires both understanding then transforming the material relationships that inform them.

Luckily, applying this frame of analysis makes the two earlier shifts easier, and vice versa. It is easier not to treat marginalized leaders as our oppressors when we analyze the underlying systemic issues, and it is easier to do both when we view conflict and protest from marginalized identities as an opportunity to challenge these systems within our own experiments at society. Whether these individuals are the editors of identity-oriented anthologies, the directors of progressive Jewish camps and retreats, rabbis in LGBTQ+ affirming congregations, the leaders of small nonprofit or democratic Jewish activist organizations, the moderators of progressive Jewish groups on social networking sites, or any other position of power relative to a particular space but

marginal within society at large, it is on us to hold them accountable without portraying them as personally responsible for the existence of these systems of oppression, and it becomes easier to do so when we possess the political education and engage in the political analysis necessary to deeply understand how these larger systems of power operate within our spaces.

The work of analyzing these systemic issues, however, is easier said than done. The particulars vary from space to space and community to community, and analysis *must* always be done in a local context. To make matters even more complicated, it can at the same time be necessary to generalize in order to develop heuristics for identifying the reinscription of oppressive systems. If we look to the case of Jewish trans women, we find that many of our issues are not new.

### **Women and misogyny in progressive Jewish spaces**

Despite much progress having been made, I share Judith Plaskow's fear that progressive Jewish spaces are hesitant to "look yet again at the more intransigent aspects of sexism"<sup>58</sup> and that perhaps this informs both the issues with distribution of voices in *Balancing on the Mechitza*, and the fact that despite the first acceptance of an out trans man to a rabbinic institution occurring in 2003 and the first ordination of an out trans man by a rabbinic institution occurring in 2006,<sup>59</sup> the first ordination of an out trans woman by an institution did not occur until 2017.<sup>60</sup> The Jewish lesbian call for "a dues structures that includes us,"<sup>61</sup> which also extends to conference, retreat, and camp fees, and other financial barriers to participation in Jewish communities, is just as strong a concern for Jewish trans women, considering that trans women in America also suffer triple the unemployment rate of the average person,<sup>62</sup> and face all the barriers to hiring,

promotion, and so on that are faced by women *and* by transgender people. As Kimberly Crenshaw’s now famous but often misunderstood concept of intersectionality explains, trans women also experience each of these overlapping systems of oppression in unique ways—as someone who is both trans and a woman, one cannot always access that which is for transgender people, or that which is for women.<sup>63</sup> Sometimes, the particular is more straightforward; for example, even trans women with desire and access to medical transition do not benefit from changes to their voice as part of hormone replacement therapy, and transmisogynist policing of their particular *kol isha* makes entering Jewish religious spaces, with a common emphasis on song, an anxiety-laden endeavor for many. And, as always: it is challenging to enter a space in which the majority of people do not look like you.

Establishing a Jewish trans women’s voice in Jewish transgender activism and Jewish tradition and community more broadly both requires and is an opportunity to present a challenge to continued structural sexism and misogyny in Judaism. For one such example: Jewish feminists have long criticized that Jewish tradition makes women into “peripheral Jews” by not requiring or often even allowing their participation in positive *mitzvot* that would therefore allow them a “positive formation of religious identity as a Jew.”<sup>64</sup> Much of the feminist response to this issue has been to open these positive *mitzvot* to women, claiming for women previously “masculine” practices like the wearing of *kippot* and *tzitzit*, the role of serving as rabbis, and other forms of religious and spiritual observation.<sup>65</sup> While unquestionably a liberating step forward for women in Jewish community, this approach is limited and troublesome in multiple ways—limitations and issues raised directly by the needs and desires of Jewish trans women.<sup>66</sup> These issues include but are not limited to:

1. Continuing to equate practices designed by and for men as the most recognizable basis for the formation of positive Jewish identity.
2. Failing to preserve the limited number of positive Jewish women's practices as vital pieces of our history and tradition, let alone uplifting and centering them as equally important to men's practices.
3. Failing to require Jewish men to perform an equal share of the feminized labor reserved for women which enabled men's practice of the *mitzvot*.<sup>67</sup>
4. Requiring the approval of *poskim*, *halakhic* decisors, for acceptance in communities bound by *halacha*, Jewish law—decisors who are and for at least the foreseeable future will be predominantly men.<sup>68</sup>

All of these issues are raised concretely by the experience of Jewish trans women in trans movement and trans affirming Jewish spaces:

1. For Jewish trans women, being asked to assume traditionally masculine practices to form positive Jewish identity, be seen as a Jew, or be centered and uplifted in their practice or leadership in Jewish spaces has the doubly negative side effects of increasing the likelihood that they will be assumed to be men by others in the space *and* to engage in practices that may feel gender incongruous and increase feelings of dysphoria.
2. When the already limited number of tradition Jewish women's practices are not preserved by public practice in Jewish communities, it becomes harder for Jewish trans women to even know what practices are available to them. In a

world where a significant portion of women's already select practices are inscribed based on essentialized bodily traits that may not apply to trans women (practices like *niddah*)<sup>69</sup> it becomes incredibly challenging for trans women to learn of and about gender affirming Jewish practices, let alone be seen and validated in them by community.

3. When the feminized labor of cooking, cleaning, and other tasks that were traditionally relegated to women are not equally demanded of Jewish men, then Jewish trans women can be left with less room to explore the development of positive Jewish identity or serve in roles of spiritual leadership. Put more simply: who organizes the potluck?
4. As previously established, trans men appear to be making inroads into traditionally recognized forms of Jewish institutional leadership significantly faster than trans women. My own personal experience and conversations with Jewish leadership in progressive spaces echoes these institutional observations, with Jewish out trans men and nonbinary people serving in leadership roles at significantly higher rates than out trans women in the trans affirming congregations, retreats, and other spaces which I participate in. If we are still reliant on halachic decisions (or even more flexible forms of decision by institutional leadership) then women, even within the trans movement, will still find their roles arbitrated by men (or even non-men who assume masculine practices, for the same reasons explored immediately above.)

Challenging these issues is difficult, as attested to by the struggle of the feminist movement broadly to achieve some of these shared goals. As bell hooks addresses in her

essay “Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In,” the modern neoliberal, “faux feminism” of Sheryl Sandberg’s “Lean In” abandons previous feminist objectives and theory and presents the false promise that assuming men’s roles and positions of power will trickle down into liberation for all women.<sup>70</sup> hooks’ criticism attests to the fact that liberation cannot be a movement towards the roles of oppressors, but instead must include a radical deconstruction of the social relations that produce these roles, and a democratization of their power. For Jewish trans women, this criticism is played out across our minds and bodies: the need to have empowering roles and practices for Jewish women that are not just stepping into men’s roles and practices is felt in our overwhelming experiences of gender euphoria and dysphoria. Jewish trans movement spaces (and progressive Jewish spaces more generally) that continue to center men’s practices as the formation of positive Jewish identity will continue to replicate this issue.

While this need does not obviate the difficulty of the task, the work of Jewish lesbian-feminists does offer Jewish trans woman (and our allies) a theoretical and experiential basis upon which to build initiatives to address these issues. I am reminded of Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz’s anecdote in *Nice Jewish Girls*:

I notice in the group that P. who knows hebrew commands much respect. She’s been researching Jewish ceremony, looking to recreate a matriarchal religion, and she performs an evening prayer for us, closing the shabbes, something to do with the new moon. All the while she holds and rocks and tips the glass of wine . . . she has poured very full; and L. whose house it is and whose rug it is not keeps bending over P. to steady the glass, her face showing anxiety about the juice and the rug, but P. will not sip off the top, she keeps waving her arms the juice slops

dangerously to the edge and some drops spill on the blanket, yes, on the rug, but there's no stopping P. as she performs the ritual—

(and I think, this is why I don't like religion, she is wonderful in the rabbi role, absorbed and holy, but *she* won't have to clean up the spilled juice)

I also notice that P. in her knowledge of hebrew and religion, those arenas of Jewish male activity, is more heeded than L. who is younger, softer, and knows yiddish and hundreds of songs, and worries about her friend's rug. The hierarchy of hebrew over yiddish, male over female, rich over poor replicates here.<sup>71</sup>

Here, Kaye/Kantrowitz truly highlights the predicament of the creation of a woman-affirming Judaism—even this implicitly feminist women's gathering struggling with its reinscription of gender hierarchies. But Kaye/Kantrowitz has also offered us both tools and experiments that could open a different kind of future: when was the last time a Jewish progressive or trans movement space included a Yiddish *techine* as part of the egalitarian prayer service?<sup>72</sup> Which kinds of labor are highlighted as being of social importance? Are we considering the intersection of class (and for that matter, race) in the construction of gender roles in Jewish spaces?

We can also look elsewhere in Jewish lesbian-feminist history. Reopening Alpert's *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition*, we find countless ritual innovations, and while the emphasis is upon lesbian women, the techniques that Alpert shares as reference for their creation offer Jewish trans women powerful tools by which to approach the creation of our own gender affirming ritual innovations that are grounded in Jewish history, text, and tradition without recentering masculinity.<sup>73</sup> But, as Alpert attests to in her concluding chapter,

engaging in this transformation requires trans women (like lesbians) to act as a part of a broader coalition, all while retaining our differences, “the perspectives and practices that made us unacceptable to begin with.”<sup>74</sup> Succeeding in this effort will require us, like Jewish lesbians, to first acquire visibility by establishing our own voice in the community and tradition. *Balancing on the Mechitza* was a groundbreaking work of Jewish transgender activism, and Jewish trans women everywhere, myself included, enjoy the fruit of its efforts. But, as Kaye/Kantrowitz writes, “true coalition is not a smattering of tokens. True coalition forms between groups; the premise is that each group has a strong base in a larger community.”<sup>75</sup> “Transgender” is inherently a coalition—attested to by the struggle of various contributors in *Balancing on the Mechitza* to define who is and is not included in the term—and like Jewish lesbians in the Jewish lesbian and gay coalition of the late 1970s, we must find our own distinct voice and establish our own strong base in that coalition. Those who wish to act as allies to Jewish trans women would do well to explicitly make and procure spaces and systemic resources that will allow us to do so.

### **Coalition Politics**

Addressing the needs of Jewish trans women would be to both our benefit and to the benefit of those we are in coalition with—exactly the self-interested solidarity I advocate above. Not only do trans women’s needs and desires directly attest to many still elusive feminist goals, but the potential that a strengthened coalition holds for other gender non-normative Jews (especially Jewish nonbinary people and Jewish lesbians) is immense and latent. Within *Balancing on the Mechitza*, Ri J. Turner’s “Queering the Jew and Jewing the Queer” and Max K. Strassfield’s “Becoming a Good Boy: A

Transmasculine Meditation on Gendered Ritual Objects and the Challenges of Transfeminism” present some of the most interesting and compelling challenges to structural misogyny, and neither were authored by trans women. The work of Jewish lesbian-feminists, inside of *Balancing on the Mechitza* and out, present clear challenges to the same system that oppresses cisgender Jewish lesbians and transgender Jewish women, and some have recognized these shared interests explicitly.<sup>76</sup> Gender is a system that oppresses all of us, and we cannot exist outside of it, only in relation to it. To transform those relationships into something less oppressive is an inherently political project, which we enter stronger together. As Jakobsen puts it, “The task of alliance politics, then, is how to work with differences so that they are mobilized to challenge dominating power relations.”<sup>77</sup>

### **A place for ourselves**

Finally, I wish to speak directly to other Jewish trans women: don’t be afraid to have a little *chutzpah!* In her introduction to *Nice Jewish Girls*, Beck writes: “Having to hide: a sure sign of danger.”<sup>78</sup> We must no longer be content to be present in silence; *you* deserve space and a voice. In her essay “Anti-Semitism in the Lesbian/Feminist Movement,” Irena Klepfisz writes that ignoring or treating as unimportant your own unique forms of oppression “can only breed low self-esteem, can only increase defensiveness about drawing attention to oneself, can only encourage apologies for distracting others from ‘more important’ issues.”<sup>79</sup> At the end of her essay, she includes fifteen questions which she encourages readers to use to reflect upon their internalized antisemitism, and I believe most of these questions can and should be reused to inspect our own internalized misogyny and transphobia, and when it prevents us from labeling

the misogyny and transphobia we do experience. I have included her questions below, with my adaptations in italics.<sup>80</sup> I have chosen to separate misogyny and transphobia rather than applying the combined classification of transmisogyny, as while that intersection poses its own unique issues, my immediate concern is that we investigate the relatively distinct issues of how we feel unwelcome and hesitant to draw attention to our issues as trans people, because cis people in progressive spaces may doubt our womanhood, or as women, because trans people in trans spaces may dismiss our attention to womanhood and feminist concerns. As women, we have experienced far too much silencing, and offered far too many apologies, so let us ask:

1. Do I have to check with other *trans women* in order to verify whether something is *misogyny or transphobia*? Do I distrust my own judgment on this issue?
2. When I am certain, am I afraid to speak out?
3. Am I afraid that by focusing on *misogyny or transphobia* I am being divisive?
4. Do I feel that by asking other *trans people* to deal with *misogyny or transphobia* I am draining the movement of precious energy that would be better used elsewhere?
5. Do I feel that *misogyny or transphobia* has been discussed too much already and feel embarrassed to bring it up?
6. Do I feel that the commercial presses and the media are covering the issue of *misogyny or transphobia* adequately and that it is unnecessary to bring it up also in the movement? Am I embarrassed by the way *misogyny or transphobia* is presented in the media? Why?

7. Do I have strong disagreements with and/or am ashamed of *feminist rhetoric that is trans exclusionary* and, as a result, don't feel that I can defend *trans women* whole-heartedly against *misogyny*? Is it possible for me to disagree with *trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs)* and still oppose *misogyny in trans affirming spaces*?
8. Do I feel guilty and/or ashamed of *trans exclusionary radical feminism* and, as a result, feel I can't defend *trans women* whole-heartedly against *misogyny*? Is it possible for me to acknowledge *trans exclusionary radical feminism*, struggle against it, and still feel *feminist pride*? And still oppose *misogyny*?
9. Do I feel that *trans women* have *male privilege* and, therefore, should not complain?
10. Do I feel that historically, sociologically, and/or psychologically, *misogyny or transphobia* is "justified" or "understandable," and that I am, therefore, willing to tolerate it?
11. Do I feel that *misogyny or transphobia* exists but it is "not so bad" or "not so important"? Why?
12. Do I believe that by focusing on the problems of *misogyny or transphobia* I will make it worse? Why?
13. Do I feel that *trans women* draw too much attention to themselves? How?
14. Do I associate the struggle against *misogyny* with *trans exclusionary radical feminism*? Why?
15. What *trans women* stereotypes am I afraid of being identified with? What do I repress in myself in order to prevent such identification?

I encourage you to reflect, observe, and question assumptions made about you and other trans women. I encourage you to reject the TERF in your head, reject the “lose-lose proposition”<sup>81</sup> offered to transgender people, and speak. We must speak, for trans women’s liberation is bound up in women’s liberation, is bound up in all gender liberation, is bound up in total liberation.

And, at the same time, we must remember where our enemies are — and are not. It is much easier to lash out at those that you can see, and those with relatively less power, than it is to attack the source of the problems. It is our responsibility to hold compassion for all we form coalition with — trans men, nonbinary people, cisgender lesbians and gay men, and infinitely more — and to remember that these systems live inside all of us; the only way out is through. *Besiyata Dishmaya*, with the help of Heaven, we might live to see a day in which colonial, capitalist cisheteropatriarchy is abolished completely, but until that day we have to remember that none of us exist outside of it, and all of us share a collective interest in its dissolution. In her conclusion, Alpert states:

Jewish lesbian self-awareness grew out of an anger about invisibility and oppression and moved forward to demands for acceptance. We have moved beyond wanting to simply make a place for ourselves, beyond the bread on the seder plate: we now seek to transform the Judaism we found when we reached that place.<sup>82</sup>

We are still balancing. We are one foot in, one foot out in the Jewish transgender movement. Our voices are included, but tokenized. Our presence is welcome, so far as

we conform to the practices of others. We are somewhere between invisibility and a place for ourselves. But we are not the first to walk this path. These are our ancestors too. Our holy texts, too. This *Torat Chayim*—the living Torah of Jewish lesbian lives—offers us a guidebook with which to navigate the road ahead. For us, like for Jewish lesbians, a place at the table is necessarily a transformation of the Judaism we find there. Let us find our own voices, be our own *poskot*, decisors, and overturn the prohibition on *kol isha* (whether it be explicit or implicit) in every space that we call home — or coalition.<sup>83</sup>

## Bibliography

- adler, rachel [sic]. "The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman." *Off Our Backs* 2, no. 6 (1972): 16–17.
- Adler, Rachel. "The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman." *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review*, Summer 1973, 77–82.
- Alpert, Rebecca T. *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- NYU Steinhardt Teacher Residency Program. "An Asset-Based Approach to Education: What It Is and Why It Matters," October 29, 2018. <https://teachereducation.steinhardt.nyu.edu/an-asset-based-approach-to-education-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters/>.
- Bart, Pauline. "How a Nice Jewish Girl Like Me Could." In *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, edited by Evelyn Torton Beck. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone P., 1982.
- Beck, Evelyn Torton, ed. *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone P., 1982.
- , ed. *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*. Revised and Updated edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.
- Berrout, Jamie. "Against Publishing." Patreon, May 31, 2019. <https://www.patreon.com/posts/new-essay-27285892>.
- Bornstein, Kate. "HOOWAHYOO?" In *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, edited by Noach Dzmura. Berkeley: Calif. : North Atlantic Books, 2010.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989).

Cutler, Anne, and Donia R. Scott. "Speaker Sex and Perceived Apportionment of Talk." *Applied Psycholinguistics* 11, no. 3 (September 1990): 253–72.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716400008882>.

Dyke, Elana. "The Fourth Daughter's Four Hundred Questions." In *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, edited by Evelyn Torton Beck. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone P., 1982.

Dzmura, Noach, ed. *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*. Berkeley: Calif. : North Atlantic Books, 2010.

Fonrobert, Charlotte Elisheva. "Gender Identity In Halakhic Discourse." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, February 27, 2009.

<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/gender-identity-in-halakhic-discourse>.

Franklin, C. "Coming Out and Staying Home: Nice Jewish Girls and Home Girls." *MELUS - AMHERST* 22, no. 1 (1997): 105–28.

hooks, bell. "Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In." *The Feminist Wire* (blog), October 28, 2013.

<https://thefeministwire.com/2013/10/17973/>.

Jakobsen, Janet R. *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference: Diversity and Feminist Ethics*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1998.

JEB. "That's Funny, You Don't Look Like a Jewish Lesbian." In *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, edited by Evelyn Torton Beck. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone P., 1982.

Kaye, Melanie. "Some Notes on Jewish Lesbian Identity." In *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, edited by Evelyn Torton Beck. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone P., 1982.

- Kaye/Kantrowitz, Melanie. "To Be a Radical Jew in the Late 20th Century." In *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology*, edited by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz. Boston: Beacon Pr., 1989.
- Klepfisz, Irena. "Anti-Semitism in the Lesbian/Feminist Movement." In *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, edited by Evelyn Torton Beck. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone P., 1982.
- . "Resisting and Surviving America." In *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, edited by Evelyn Torton Beck. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone P., 1982.
- Lavie, Aliza. *A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2008.
- Leppel, Karen. "Transgender Men and Women in 2015: Employed, Unemployed, or Not in the Labor Force." *Journal of Homosexuality*, August 12, 2019, 1–27.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1648081>.
- Maggid, Aliza. "Lesbians in the International Movement of Gay/Lesbian Jews." In *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, edited by Evelyn Torton Beck. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone P., 1982.
- Orens, Beth. "Crossing the Mehitza." In *Balancing on the Mehitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, edited by Noach Dzmura. Berkeley: Calif. : North Atlantic Books, 2010.
- Plaskow, Judith. "Dismantling the Gender Binary within Judaism: The Challenge of Transgender to Compulsory Heterosexuality." In *Balancing on the Mehitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, edited by Noach Dzmura. Berkeley: Calif. : North Atlantic Books, 2010.
- Plaskow, Judith, and Elliot Kukla. "Remapping the Road from Sinai." In *Balancing on the Mehitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, edited by Noach Dzmura. Berkeley: Calif. : North Atlantic Books, 2010.

- Pollack, Rachel. "Abandonment to the Body's Desire." In *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, edited by Noach Dzmura. Berkeley: Calif. : North Atlantic Books, 2010.
- Reagon, Bernice Johnson. "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century." In *Home Girls : A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith. New York: Kitchen Table : Women of Color Press, 1983.
- Spence, Rebecca. "Transgender Jews Now Out of Closet, Seeking Communal Recognition." The Forward, December 31, 2008. <https://forward.com/news/14854/transgender-jews-now-out-of-closet-seeking-commun-03088/>.
- Strassfield, Max K. "Becoming a Good Boy: A Transmasculine Meditation on Gendered Ritual Objects and the Challenges of Transfeminism." In *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, edited by Noach Dzmura. Berkeley: Calif. : North Atlantic Books, 2010.
- Tanner, Vin. "Alternatives to 'AFAB' and 'AMAB.'" Medium, October 29, 2019. <https://medium.com/@transstyleguide/alternatives-to-afab-and-amab-d7cf8fe20a72>.
- Turner, Ri J. "Queering the Jew and Jewing the Queer." In *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, edited by Noach Dzmura. Berkeley: Calif. : North Atlantic Books, 2010.
- Zeveloff, Naomi. "Leiah Moser Challenges Progressive Jewish Feminism." The Forward, July 16, 2013. <https://forward.com/news/180240/leiah-moser-challenges-progressive-jewish-feminism>.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, 17–20 for how Torah functions in this role for Jews, and its contextual effects on lesbian Jews.

<sup>2</sup> Maggid, “Lesbians in the International Movement of Gay/Lesbian Jews,” 118.

<sup>3</sup> Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, 67–69.

<sup>4</sup> This is true in a literal and metaphorical sense. The Torah itself is a complicated, semi-historical document, through whose parables allow us to become more able to face the present. Torah is also a collective noun for the teachings of Jewish tradition which begin in the Torah and extend outward throughout time. Both of these meanings emphasize the importance of knowing and grappling with our history—good and bad, accurate and sensationalized, exhaustive and elective.

<sup>5</sup> As attested to in both Dzmura, *Balancing on the Mechitza*, xv; Plaskow, “Dismantling the Gender Binary within Judaism,” 201 defining trans identity categories is challenging, as the terms are evolving, fluid, and inherently expansive. Here, I use “trans woman” as a broad category: trans people who identify their experience of existing in society as being through (in part or in whole) the social role of “woman.” Possible identifiers included in my usage of this label also include transgender woman, transsexual woman, transfeminine, and MTF. I also include in my usage nonbinary trans women, and non-woman nonbinary trans people who (as I have witnessed) attest to ‘still being trans women, politically.’ Some may also self-apply the group lens of being “Assigned Male at Birth,” though this language, like much trans language, is politically contested. See Tanner, “Alternatives to ‘AFAB’ and ‘AMAB.’”

<sup>6</sup> Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, 151.

---

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, some of the parallels may be even more direct. See Alpert, 10–11 for historical understandings of lesbians as gender nonconformists and/or a “third sex.” Another parallel exists for those who are both trans women and lesbians, but while many Jewish trans women (myself included) exist along this intersection, the choice not to explore its particular issues in this essay is intentional, as my emphasis is upon the Jewish lesbian experiences and theoretical tools that are generalizable for all Jewish trans women.

<sup>8</sup> Dzmura, *Balancing on the Mechitza*, xviii–xix.

<sup>9</sup> Beck, *Nice Jewish Girls*, 1982, xiii.

<sup>10</sup> Beck, xvi.

<sup>11</sup> Beck, xxxi.

<sup>12</sup> Beck, xxxiii.

<sup>13</sup> Dzmura, *Balancing on the Mechitza*, xiv–xv.

<sup>14</sup> Dzmura, xxiv–xxv.

<sup>15</sup> Dzmura, xxvi.

<sup>16</sup> Beck, *Nice Jewish Girls*, 1982, xv–xvi.

<sup>17</sup> Dykewomon, “The Fourth Daughter’s Four Hundred Questions,” 150.

<sup>18</sup> Beck, *Nice Jewish Girls*, 1982, xxxii.

<sup>19</sup> Klepfisz, “Resisting and Surviving America,” 101.

<sup>20</sup> Kaye, “Some Notes on Jewish Lesbian Identity,” 40–41.

<sup>21</sup> Bart, “How a Nice Jewish Girl Like Me Could,” 59.

<sup>22</sup> Kaye, “Some Notes on Jewish Lesbian Identity,” 29.

<sup>23</sup> Dzmura, *Balancing on the Mechitza*, xxiii.

---

<sup>24</sup> See Beck, *Nice Jewish Girls*, 1982, xvi; Kaye, “Some Notes on Jewish Lesbian Identity,” 29; Kaye/Kantrowitz, “To Be a Radical Jew in the Late 20th Century,” 301 for examples of Jewish lesbian-feminists highlighting the distinction between “leftists” or “radicals” and “liberals,” of which the authors tend to categorize themselves as the first and distinctly not the second.

<sup>25</sup> JEB, “That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Like a Jewish Lesbian,” 126.

<sup>26</sup> Beck, *Nice Jewish Girls*, 1982, xvi.

<sup>27</sup> Beck, xxi.

<sup>28</sup> Bornstein, “HOOWAHYOO?,” 9.

<sup>29</sup> Dzmura, *Balancing on the Mechitza*, xxvi.

<sup>30</sup> Plaskow and Kukla, “Remapping the Road from Sinai,” 139–40.

<sup>31</sup> Plaskow, “Dismantling the Gender Binary within Judaism,” 204, 206.

<sup>32</sup> Dzmura, *Balancing on the Mechitza*, xxv, xv.

<sup>33</sup> Turner, “Queering the Jew and Jewing the Queer,” 49.

<sup>34</sup> Strassfield, “Becoming a Good Boy,” 115.

<sup>35</sup> Orens, “Crossing the Mechitza,” 46.

<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting that the usage of these in-text signifiers is an imperfect way to categorize authors’ transness and to place authors into gender categories, for reasons that include but are not limited to: the usage of pronouns may not reflect gender identity, gender identity may be fluid both within a particular moment or over time, these particular categories may not reflect how an author conceives of their gender, the author may be closeted, and so on. It is rare that transgender experiences are neatly categorizable, but it is necessary in this case to risk overgeneralization in pursuit of analysis.

---

<sup>37</sup> The overall ratio of republished contributions (as opposed to original works) was eleven republications to twenty-seven total contributions, which is a rate overwhelmingly lower than the five republications of six contributions by trans women. It is worth considering how this might reflect the access to resources of trans women authors, the editor's networks through which solicitation occurred, and/or the editor's choices for inclusion, some of which are explored later in this essay.

<sup>38</sup> Orens, "Crossing the Mechitza," 46.

<sup>39</sup> Cutler and Scott, "Speaker Sex and Perceived Apportionment of Talk."

<sup>40</sup> Kaye, "Some Notes on Jewish Lesbian Identity," 42.

<sup>41</sup> Kaye, 37. "It had never occurred to me to count noses, but I counted noses."

Obviously, both the original reference to noses and my adaption to Adam's apples are limited and somewhat problematic—the original for its equating of certain racialized facial features that do not apply to all Jews with "Jewish," and mine for the usage of essentialized bodily features to assume trans identities, which can fail on biology, identity, and/or surgical modification. The point, to wit, is not to treat these as decisive signifiers of the quantity of Jews or trans women in a given space, but rather to honestly capture a heuristic tool used by both Kaye/Kantrowitz and I while attempting to find others like ourselves in a space.

<sup>42</sup> Dzmura, *Balancing on the Mechitza*, xix.

<sup>43</sup> Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, vii.

<sup>44</sup> Plaskow and Kukla, "Remapping the Road from Sinai," 135.

<sup>45</sup> Maggid, "Lesbians in the International Movement of Gay/Lesbian Jews," 118; Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, 67–69.

<sup>46</sup> See Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, 1–6 for a brief overview of this history.

---

<sup>47</sup> Alpert, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Beck, *Nice Jewish Girls*, 1989, xl.

<sup>49</sup> In Beck, *Nice Jewish Girls*, 1982, vii we can see that this access “took the form of a brief but exceptionally clear message from [Jewish lesbian] Gloria Z. Greenfield, publisher of Persephone Press,” delivered to the editor-to-be Evelyn Torton Beck at the National Women’s Studies Association conference of 1979, “printed neatly on a scrap of paper: ‘Would you be interested in developing a Jewish lesbian anthology?’”. In the immediate, it would appear that by this playbook, Jewish trans women are in need of their own representative in a position of relative power, ready to offer them the opportunity to express a collective voice. However, even if such a person were to exist—something that would certainly be a blessing and a step forward—their access too is likely adjudicated by individuals who inhabit identities with relatively more access to power, as is the nature of the distribution of authority under capitalism. For a criticism of this issue as it exists in the publishing industry, and potential solutions, see Berrout, “Against Publishing” which primarily addresses racism in publishing. Berrout’s analysis with regards to race and publishing access could also explain the structural origin of issues with how *Nice Jewish Girls* handles race that are raised in Franklin, “Coming Out and Staying Home: Nice Jewish Girls and Home Girls.”

<sup>50</sup> Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Jakobsen, 5–15.

<sup>52</sup> Reagon, “Coalition Politics,” 358.

<sup>53</sup> Kaye/Kantrowitz, “To Be a Radical Jew in the Late 20th Century,” 306–307.

<sup>54</sup> See Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, 106–7.

<sup>55</sup> NYU Steinhardt, “An Asset-Based Approach to Education.”

---

<sup>56</sup> Kaye/Kantrowitz, “To Be a Radical Jew in the Late 20th Century,” 310–313.

<sup>57</sup> See Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference*, 18–20.

<sup>58</sup> Plaskow and Kukla, “Remapping the Road from Sinai,” 136.

<sup>59</sup> Spence, “Transgender Jews Now Out of Closet, Seeking Communal Recognition.”

<sup>60</sup> Leah Moser, direct message to author, December 17, 2019. “So far as I know I am the first trans woman to be ordained by an established rabbinical college post-transition. I may be the first trans woman ordained post-transition *stam*, but when you get into the realm of private *smicha* it’s hard to verify” (italics mine.) See further Zeveloff, “Leiah Moser Challenges Progressive Jewish Feminism.” Given the proliferation of rabbinic institutions and ambiguity surrounding when an individual “transitions” or “comes out,” it is worth leaving open the possibility that this may have occurred earlier.

<sup>61</sup> Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Leppel, “Transgender Men and Women in 2015.”

<sup>63</sup> Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.”

<sup>64</sup> adler, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There,” 16; Fonrobert, “Gender Identity In Halakhic Discourse.” It is worthy of note that Adler’s essay is republished in the *lesbian*-feminist periodical *off our backs*, and the feminist Jewish *lesbian* Judith Plaskow also references this concept in her essay “Dismantling the Gender Binary within Judaism” within *Balancing on the Mechitza*, 191.

<sup>65</sup> See adler, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There,” 16–17 for an early expression of the demand for halakhic inclusion of women in these practices.

<sup>66</sup> See Pollack, “Abandonment to the Body’s Desire” for a discussion of the role of radical potential of desire in a trans Jewish context.

---

<sup>67</sup> See Plaskow, “Dismantling the Gender Binary within Judaism,” 191 for women as “enablers” who performed the tasks that possible men’s practice of the mitzvot.

<sup>68</sup> See the postscript of the republished version of Adler’s essay in Adler, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There,” 82 for the demand for “*genuine*” halachic decisions.

<sup>69</sup> Fonrobert, “Gender Identity In Halakhic Discourse.”

<sup>70</sup> hooks, “Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In.”

<sup>71</sup> Kaye, “Some Notes on Jewish Lesbian Identity,” 36.

<sup>72</sup> See Lavie, *A Jewish Woman’s Prayer Book* for a fantastic collection of *techines* (Jewish women’s Yiddish prayers) and other women’s prayers, including those in other localized Jewish languages like Ladino.

<sup>73</sup> See Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, 37–46 in the chapter “Jewish Lesbian Interpretation of Torah” for explanations of these techniques.

<sup>74</sup> Alpert, 166.

<sup>75</sup> Kaye/Kantrowitz, “To Be a Radical Jew in the Late 20th Century,” 315.

<sup>76</sup> See Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, 100–101, 108–9, 165, 179 for instances of explicit expressions of solidarity with Jewish transgender people made by cisgender Jewish lesbians. 108-9 explore the potential for coalition most thoroughly.

<sup>77</sup> Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference*, 21.

<sup>78</sup> Beck, *Nice Jewish Girls*, 1982, xv.

<sup>79</sup> Klepfisz, “Anti-Semitism in the Lesbian/Feminist Movement,” 47.

<sup>80</sup> See Klepfisz, 50–51 for the original questions.

<sup>81</sup> Strassfield, “Becoming a Good Boy,” 115.

<sup>82</sup> Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, 167.

---

<sup>83</sup> See Reagon, "Coalition Politics," 359-360. "Coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn't look for comfort. Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They're not looking for a coalition; they're looking for a home! They're looking for a bottle with some milk in it and a nipple, which does not happen in a coalition. You don't get a lot of food in a coalition. You don't get fed a lot in a coalition. In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You can't stay there all the time. You go to the coalition for a few hours and then you go back and take your bottle wherever it is, and then you go back and coalesce some more. It is very important not to confuse them – home and coalition." See also, in conversation, Franklin, "Coming Out and Staying Home: Nice Jewish Girls and Home Girls," 125. "This interests me not only because I believe that no home offers complete safety and belonging, but also because positing such a distinction makes too absolute the boundaries between self and other, between one set of identifications and another. I would like to hold out the hope that from the multiple strands that constitute our identities, just as there is no home that is absolute, there are few coalitions that do not, given enough work, offer some of the possibilities and comforts of home," and the introduction to the revised and updated edition of *Nice Jewish Girls*: Beck, *Nice Jewish Girls* (1989), xlii. "Today I feel more clarity about what I can realistically expect from any community: some support from some people some of the time. No one community is truly 'home,' but Jewish lesbian space still feels the closest to it, most of the time."