
Reviewed by Diane Lichtenstein, Beloit College, Beloit, WI

Where We Find Ourselves, a recent addition to SUNY Press’s Modern Jewish Literature and Culture series, provides creative, often intimate, responses from the hearts of Jewish women who have experienced exile and national homelessness but also home-based love and belonging. This anthology “speaks in the voices of forty Jewish women who in turn represent the voices of Jewish women around the world and throughout history, telling us what we have forgotten or never knew about being at home in the world” (Preface xi). The multi-generational voices sing from and about locations in North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. The contributors’ original and frequently personal reflections on “home” take the form of novel chapters, personal narratives, poems, and mixed-genre reflections.

Mirian Ben-Yoseph and Deborah Nodler Rosen, the editors, provide a brief introduction but basically let the authors speak for themselves. The book is divided into four sections: Displacement and Exile, Place and Memory, Language and Creativity, and Family and Tradition. A reader may easily dip into and out of sections and enjoy each piece as a unique creative text.

All of the contributors to Where We Find Ourselves are women “intent on establishing home—a place, literal or metaphorical, where they can be Jewish, establish safe havens for themselves and their families, and freely express their essential selves”(5). Ben-Yoseph and Rosen explain that the central question they posed to the contributors is, “Where do we find home?” The writers also responded to: “What is home? Is it a concrete place? Is it the place you were born and raised, or is it a place you were forced to

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leave because of nationalism, racism, or violence? Is home where you live now, or is it an
abstract composite of memories? Is home embodied in the art you create, or in the Jewish
rituals you observe?” (1)

The book contains nuggets of wisdom that allow readers to forge connections with
the writers. Here are some examples. Diana Anhalt writes in her personal narrative “A
Home Called Exile,” “the concept of home for the Jew has been an essentially simple one:
a secure place where one can subsist and light the Sabbath candles with some guarantee of
privacy and respect. Or, to paraphrase my grandmother: ‘...home is a place where you
can sleep all night without having to worry about Cossacks at the door’” (20). For Rachel
Goldin Jinich, “...home is not a house with curtains on the windows and a car parked
outside; it is not just a land that one can call his or her country. In all the Jewish
wanderings, home is a place carried in the heart of a family” (“Home for Thanksgiving”
237). Ellen Cassedy also imagines home as a destination for wandering Jews but asks
readers to consider Yiddish “‘the linguistic homeland of a people without a home’” and
hopes that by “helping to keep that cultural homeland alive, perhaps [she] could find a
way home” (“Yiddishland” 162).

A number of the profound observations contained in Where We Find Ourselves
are less explicitly about Jewish concepts of home. In her poem “Here,” Judith Ilson
Taylor suggests that finding home is a journey whose destination is a question. The poem
concludes,

I live in the question.
Not knowing the answer
is home.

Viva Hammer also writes of home as an uncertainty: “This is home: a place you go in
your mind (deep in the night) when you’re alone and nothing is familiar” (“America”
130). In her “pseudo-memoir,” “The Girl in the Balcony,” Angelina Muniz-Huberman also comments on the power of the imagination to create the possibility of and for a home: “…’home’ is not just the actual living space but also one’s own interior space where everything is possible and where life cannot be thwarted” (173). For Madeline Tiger, and for a number of other contributors, home is a location for and of comfort. In her poem “In the Margin,” Tiger imagines home as

a place one comes back to
every day
for the peace and the smell a child might describe
because that’s what a good house holds. (ll. 22-25)

Ben-Yoseph and Rosen target a “general audience” for Where We Find Ourselves. The contributions are accessible—thoughtful and compelling. English-reading undergraduate and graduate students at universities around the world in which modern Jewish literature and culture are taught will find the volume compelling as will all readers who are interested in Jewish women and/or in concepts of “home.” Yet, while I appreciate the beautiful and heartfelt expressions collected in the volume, I would have liked additional context from the editors, in the Introduction or before each text. Although having those texts stand on their own creates a powerful effect, historical, literary, and/or cultural grounding for the authors and their words would have enhanced my reading.

Cha Johnston’s poem “Isibaya (The Home)” begins,

I have homed
in these sacred spaces

This brilliant transformation of the noun into a verb captures the spirit of Where We Find Ourselves, a choir of voices celebrating the journeys of Jewish women as they seek and find their way home.