
Reviewed by Shayna Sheinfeld, Chicago, IL

“It is written in the Talmud that every woman has a mind of her own, which might infer stubborn resolve or the privacy of women’s thinking…It is only during the last hundred years and in some countries where the Enlightenment penetrated, that she is worthy as a learner,” (i) states Doris B. Gold in the introduction. It is this learner, this woman of intelligence and enlightenment, who Prudence Wright Holmes seeks to highlight in her compilation, entitled *Voices of Thinking Jewish Women*. *Voices* is a short paperback book which provides brief biographies and written excerpts from Jewish women through the 20th century. The book is self-described as a “…continuation of consciousness raising among the women who began to reshape awareness of their predicament since the 50’s and 60’s, and especially among Jewish feminists since the 70’s in the United States,” (ibid) and highlights 42 different Jewish women and their thoughts on various topics that are relevant to women and the women’s movement: from motherhood to single-parenting to infertility, Jewish alcoholics to pornography to politics to business, the Holocaust to Israel to Zionism, and of course topics pertaining directly to the women’s liberation movement and feminism in America.

The biographies that open each selection are perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the entire book. Indeed, if the book were to be edited in such a way as to include only these biographies, it would still be a book worth picking up. Besides listing the basic demographic information of each woman, the biographies provide details of their lives that the reader might find interesting, and of course serve as an introduction to the excerpt that follows. It is here that we learn that Ethel Rosenberg was sentenced to death with her husband after being found guilty of selling atom bomb secrets to the Soviet Union – and that she and her husband were later executed. Here, too, we find that Blu Greenberg, who writes about single Jewish women who want to be parents, is an Orthodox Jewish feminist, which makes her stand on single parenting all the more profound.

Following each biography is the excerpt from that particular woman. These written passages do not necessarily provide rhetoric on individual topics: Most of them are in the first-person, detailing personal experiences and thoughts directly from the writer. But each has the potential to inspire the reader and provide insight. Sally Jane Priesand, the first woman rabbi and one of the women highlighted in this compilation, describes a young boy from her congregation who thought that only girls can be rabbis, an example that she takes to be just as problematic as teaching kids that only males can be allowed into the rabbinate. Priesand’s goal is to remind readers that “Everything we do sends a message.” (86) Golda Meir, well known as the first female Prime Minister of Israel, writes about the guilt that a working mother feels when leaving her child to go to work, “[The working mother], of course, has the great advantage of being able to develop…therefore she can bring more to her children than if she were to remain at home…But one look of reproach from the little one when the mother goes away and leaves it with the stranger is enough to throw down the whole structure of vindication. That look, that plea to the mother to stay, can be withstood only by an almost superhuman effort of the will…” (71)

Three of the women highlighted do not follow the general structure of biography preceding except. The most disappointing of these is Barbara Streisand, where a list of activities follows her brief biography: copyright restrictions limited Holmes from including the original speech that she had intended. However, Holmes would have been better off simply leaving her out rather than providing readers with a list they could find easily with an internet search.
The excerpts themselves are a short - two to four pages each. Considering that there are 42 Jewish women highlighted here, and that the book clocks in at 153 pages – including the introduction to the book and biographies for each woman - the issue with the length of the selections becomes clear. Obviously, the editor and compiler struggled with the same issue that every compilation struggles with: What is an appropriate length for an excerpt? While the biographies do a good job to whet the appetite of the reader, the excerpts tend to fall short; most are not long enough, or moving enough, to create a desire in the reader to seek further information, or to provide the reader with an inspirational quote. In some, Holmes has certainly succeeded in creating an interest in the reader. Gretel Bergmann’s piece, for instance, is a “live first-person account spoken to Prudence Wright Holmes...” (5) and the piece relates her struggles as a Jew and an athlete around the beginning of the Nazi occupation of Germany. Bergmann tells us that “I really didn’t believe they would allow me to compete at the Olympics because to have a Jew compete for Germany in front of 100,000 spectators didn’t look too good. I thought, “How are they going to get rid of me…are they going to break my legs?” (7). The story, while simple in its style, is captivating, and could very well inspire a reader to go out and seek further information about Bergmann or Jews in the Olympics of 1936. However, Bergmann’s piece is the exception: in most selections, the voices of the very women that Holmes hopes to highlight are not heard clearly.

Each reader of *Voices of Thinking Jewish Women* will probably take something different from this book. This is the benefit, I think, to having covered so many different women and so many topics. Besides the length issue addressed above, however, the lack of structure – the women are arranged alphabetically rather than by topical themes related to each excerpt – would make it difficult to use this book as a starting point for research: it seems unlikely that you could pick up this book to find out about specifics, such as who the first woman rabbi was in America, although she is highlighted here. In addition, the titles of the excerpts are not topic oriented, which also makes it harder to look for a specific topic. Bergmann’s piece mentioned above is entitled “Righting a Wrong,” which gives no indication of the topic she addresses. Holmes gives us just a smidgen of the lives of the women highlighted in the book. This is a shame, as there is so much richness hinted at within the biographies and selections: a better balance is really required in order to honor these women.

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