
Reviewed by Amy Tziporah Karp, English Department, University of Maryland, College Park

*My story is the story of the exile of the Jews: a story of discovery, of picking up and discarding, of mending the worn fabric of a life, and sometimes throwing away the sharp shards of identity found in the back of a dark closet.*

Lynne Meredith Schreiber, “Meeting in the Middle”

*Joining the Sisterhood: Young Jewish Women Write Their Lives*, edited by Tobin Belzer and Julie Pelc, features essays and poems by twenty-four young (mainly) North American Jewish women between the ages of sixteen and thirty-three. Although the anthology is divided into three sections (Ruach: Ourselves in Relation to Others and the Environment, Nefesh: Ourselves in Relation to Our Bodies, and Neshamah: Our Emotional and Intellectual Selves) it would be fair to say that each one of the sections encompasses the concerns of the other two. One of the main theoretical threads of the anthology is that the Jewish ‘parts’ of these young women cannot be separated from any of the other ‘identities’ they inhabit. Attempts at such a separation constitute a form of violence they have been taught to inflict on their collective body in order to be ‘normal’ (read: white, middle-class). This collection is, in a sense, a rejection of such violence and an attempt at embracing fragmentation and fracture as a hopeful and viable home. Thus, Belzer and Pelc tell us in their introduction, “the very process of telling our stories is empowering,” particularly when considering “the dearth of writing by young women in the quickly growing canon of Jewish women’s literature” (4). It would be safe to say, as addendum, that even in the growing body of criticism attending to the volumes of Jewish women that have been traditionally ignored in Jewish studies, young Jewish women writers continue to be disregarded as a viable critical space for understanding contemporary Jewish life in all its variations.

The stories and poems, while told in fragments, (partly in dismissal of a traditional Western beginning, middle, and an end), nonetheless do have a narrative trajectory that moves across the stories. The writers featured in Joining the Sisterhood tell of childhood and early adolescence as a time in which they sought to de-ethnicize themselves to fit into a secular world as well as attempting to maintain their role as “good Jewish girls.” Early adulthood then becomes concerned with reexamining these presumptions and reforming observance, belief, and performance of self and identity.

Some of the women, like Vered Hankin, managed to ‘successfully’ perform away their ‘ethnic’ markings and behaviors during childhood and adolescence, though as an adult she

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grapples with this earlier attempt at excision. Hankin, in “Where the Mountain Touches the Sky” writes: I noticed how my classmates spoke and what they said: how girls spoke to boys, how boys spoke to girls. I imitated them. I noticed that boys seemed to like it when girls laughed and giggled, so I began to laugh and giggle. I would laugh. I would smile. Nothing ever bothered me. I observed how to be a nice Midwestern American. For the most part, it worked (62).

Others tell of painful, and unsuccessful, attempts to shrink and hide their bodies, voices, and gestures. Eve Rosenbaum, in her essay, “Bais Yaakov Girl,” is at first a devoted Yeshiva girl who begins to go astray from religious life at the same time that she can no longer get her socks to stay up, leading to her ultimate expulsion (and some might say redemption) from Bais Yaakov. All but a few of these women tell of the starvation diets they tried in order to escape being Zaftig, the hair straighteners they employed to control kinkiness, and the nose jobs meant to ameliorate bumps and length that indicate, in North America, an ethnic identity.

While adolescence and young adulthood in this collection are filled with a desire to discipline the self into a de-ethnicized, “American,” the next years are filled with a desire to reclaim the rejected Jewish self. This reclamation comes in a myriad of forms, but most importantly includes a simultaneous reclamation of the parts of themselves they had been taught were incongruent with Jewish, or American, identity. Loolwa Khazzoom tells of embracing her Mizrahi and Sephardic culture only when she rejected the Jewish, Middle Eastern female stereotypes that had plagued her early life. Clara Thaler writes of being freed from self-loathing and body hatred when she came out. She goes on to describe how the acceptance of her body and her sexuality brought her back to Judaism, despite the stereotype that religion and queerness cannot exist peacefully in the same body. She writes, my persistent and unignorable attraction to women was a catalyst that led to my discovery of feminism and eventually to my return to Judaism. Acknowledging my queerness allowed me to me to recognize that I deserve love. Loving myself motivated me to engage with my cultural and religious heritage, to ask questions about these aspects of myself, rather than ignoring them (102).

The majority of essays in the collection end on an ambivalently triumphant note, by which I mean that they end with a hope that is tinged with a deep sadness at the work that must be done, at the memories that need to be sifted through in this process of reclamation. The hope is that through telling their own stories and trying to reckon with the ghosts of their parents’ and grandparents’ stories that a new and more inclusive more complicated vision of Jewish American history and contemporary life will emerge. Caryn Aviv, in her essay “Chutzpah and Menschlekeit: Negotiating Identity in Jerusalem,” summarizes most succinctly the goal of this anthology, writing:

The delicious challenge in life is to meld a gutsy combination of chutzpah and menschlekeit. In other words, I want to do good for and with others, maintain a sense of honest integrity and
ethical responsibility, and have fun in the process. In my mind, this is what being an American Jewish woman/feminist/queer is all about. I relish that challenge, with all of its attendant hopes and dilemmas (162).

As more and more anthologies and texts emerge in which Jewish hybrid identity is explored we will gain a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Jewish American life. Joining the Sisterhood is a good place to start in the project of making young Jewish women’s voices more audible.