

The Politics of Jewish Invisibility

Evelyn Torton Beck

Like these, my despised ancestors I have become a keeper of accounts
— Bashert, Irena Klepfisz

The task of integrating Jewish women's history and culture into the feminist project has been only partially successful in spite of the many different kinds of writings produced by Jewish feminists in the last decade and the variety of papers and workshops on Jewish themes presented at the National Women's Studies Association conferences.¹ Not even the presence of a strong and visible Jewish Women's Caucus, which in 1986 organized a highly successful plenary revealing the strength and diversity of "Feminist Jewish Women's Voices," has assured Jewish themes a recognized place in the feminist classroom or within feminist theorizing.²

For this reason, delighted as I am by the publication of three excellent new resources in Jewish Women's Studies, which will be of enormous help to those who wish to engage in research or teaching about Jewish women, I can no longer simply celebrate the appearance of these books as if I believed their availability would really make a major difference in the emerging discipline of Women's Studies. In truth, I see no reason to believe that these new books will be any more successful than were the books and essays which preceded them and which these texts document and annotate.³ Because Jewish women's lives continue to remain so

Correspondence and requests for reprints should be sent to Evelyn T. Beck, Department of Women's Studies, 1115 The Mill Building, The University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742

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²A tape of this session is available for \$6.95 from the National Women's Studies Association, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742. These tapes include the stories of Jewish women who are secular and religious, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, rural and urban, American-born and Holocaust survivors, and those who represent different class backgrounds.

³These are Sue Levi Elwell, ed., *The Jewish Women's Studies Guide*, 2d ed. (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1987), Aviva Cantor, ed., *The Jewish Woman, 1900-1985: A Bibliography*, 2d ed. (Fresh Meadows, N.Y.: Biblio Press, 1987), Joan Scherer Brewer, *Sex and the Modern Jewish Woman: An Annotated Bibliography* with essays by Lynn Davidman and Evelyn Avery (Fresh Meadows, N.Y.: Biblio Press, 1986). The first edition of Aviva Cantor's *Bibliography* was

conspicuously absent from the majority of introductory Women's Studies texts as well as most feminist and lesbian-feminist anthologies—even those purporting to represent the spectrum of difference—it is difficult not to believe Jewish themes are being systematically excluded.⁴ A few texts that do mention Jewish women marginally, often focus exclusively on the patriarchal aspects of the Jewish religion, fail to mention feminist transformations of Judaism and fail to speak of the diversity Jewish women themselves represent. Nor do they develop a conceptual framework that would provide an analysis of anti-Semitism.

Let me be clear that I am not speaking of the exclusion of writings by Jewish women. Many of those who have produced feminist theoretical writings are, in fact, Jewish, though it may be unadvisable to call attention to that fact since Jews have historically and stereotypically (on more than one occasion even within the feminist movement) been accused of "taking over" and "grabbing power."⁵ Let me be clear, therefore, that I am not talking about an exclusion of Jews *per se* either from the institutions, the presses or from positions of power within Women's Studies. I am talking about the absence of writings *about* Jewish women from feminist texts and the conspicuous absence of Jewish women's culture from feminist "multicultural" events or those focusing on "minority" women.⁶ But most especially, I am writing of the silence surrounding

published as early as 1979, the first edition of *The Jewish Women's Studies Guide* appeared in 1982. Major anthologies about Judaism and feminism appeared as early as 1976, as for example, Elizabeth Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), some of whose essays were in print as early as 1970.

⁴Johnnetta Cole's anthology, *All American Women: Lines That Divide, Ties That Bind* (New York: Free Press, 1986) is a welcome exception to this generalization. Cole's text not only includes substantial information about Jewish women, but the complexity of that information is reflected in the index. Edith Blichsilver's anthology on *The Ethnic Woman: Problems, Protests, Lifestyle* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1978) is also exceptionally inclusive, though Jewish lesbians are not mentioned in either text.

⁵See, for example, Letty Pogrebin, "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement," *Ms* 12 (June 1982): 45-49, 62-75; Pogrebin, "Going Public as a Jew," *Ms* 16 (July/August 1987): 76-77, 194-195; Selma Miriam, "Anti-Semitism in the Lesbian Community," *Sinister Wisdom* 19 (1982): 50-60; Evelyn Torton Beck, *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1982); Beck, "Between Invisibility and Overvisibility: The Politics of Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement and Beyond," Working Paper in Women's Studies, No. 11 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1984); Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, "Anti-Semitism, Homophobia, and The Good White Knight," *off our backs* 12 (May 1982): 30-31; and Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz, eds., *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology* (Montpelier, Vt.: Sinister Wisdom Books, 1986).

⁶The strange removal of Jews from categories of "minority" and "ethnicity" probably has its origins in the fact that Jews no longer constitute an "underrepresented minority" in the professions and are thus not included in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The reality is that Jews still only represent a small minority in the United States and have never exceeded 3.7 percent of the total population, thus, the exclusion of Jews from these namings can only be a political decision that distorts and ultimately obliterates the existence of Jews.

the recognition that *anti-Semitism*, whose shadow continues to fall on Jewish women's lives, is, or ought to be, a feminist issue

An unwillingness within the women's movement to recognize anti-Semitism as appropriate to the feminist agenda is not new in the history of feminism. In "American Feminism and the Jewish Question, 1890-1940," a revealing essay that ought to become required reading in a number of Women's Studies courses (especially American women's history and feminist theory), Elinor Lerner demonstrates persuasively "that Jews have been essentially discounted in the history of American feminism" throughout the twentieth century.⁷ She shows how the reluctance of native-born white American feminists to talk explicitly about Jews or to deal with rising anti-Semitism in the early decades of this century made Jewish support for feminism invisible, and further, allowed feminists to neglect issues that were specifically Jewish. As a result, the Women's Joint Congressional Committee, an umbrella group formed in 1920 to lobby for women's issues (to which the National Council of Jewish Women belonged), refused to take any formal position against the persecution of Jews in Europe, although it took a stand on a wide variety of other social concerns not focusing specifically on women, such as peace issues, anti-lynching legislation, internationalism, and home rule for the District of Columbia. While Lerner also documents some clear acts of overt anti-Semitism and Jewish stereotyping within the suffrage movement, she concludes that "More common than open, anti-Jewish statements was anti-Semitism by neglect the non-recognition of Jewish existence." I find it deeply troubling that, with only a little modification, Lerner's words can be used to describe the contemporary period of feminism as well.

Some aspects of historical neglect are uncomfortably reminiscent of NWSA's initial reluctance to include anti-Semitism among the "isms" it opposes, a position NWSA ratified in the early 1980s only after considerable debate, when it went on record as "opposing anti-Semitism against Arabs and Jews." While this compromise is clearly a better solution than non-inclusion, it seems a transparent effort to protect the organization against the interpretation that if it is unqualifiedly against "Jew-hating," it will be viewed as being "for Israel." A stronger stand would have left anti-Semitism its integrity of meaning, and would have added "anti-Arab discrimination" as an act of greater inclusivity and specificity.

⁷David A. Gerber, *Anti-Semitism in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 305-328. Many of the other essays in this anthology would also prove to be useful for women's studies theorizing about marginality. Gerber's introductory essay, "Anti-Semitism and Jewish-Gentile Relations in American Historiography and the American Past" provides a good overview of how deeply implicated the dominant American culture has been in anti-Semitism.

In 1982, I wrote, "*Jewish invisibility is a symptom of anti-Semitism as surely as lesbian invisibility is a symptom of homophobia*"⁸ This statement has an even stronger resonance in the conservative political climate of the late 1980s, a time when Jews have a high *negative* visibility because of the ways in which the media has perpetuated the false myth that all Jews approve of Israel's foreign and domestic policies. While it is true that a number of conservative American and Israeli Jews do continue to defend Israel's hard-line policies, many others are in sharp disagreement. While some hesitate to criticize Israel because of historic anti-Semitism and a misplaced sense that to criticize Israel is to betray it, there are many thousands of Jews in the United States and Israel who are protesting Israel's actions and issuing a call for immediate negotiations for a peace in the Middle East which will recognize the rights of both Jews and Palestinians to a homeland.⁹

In the United States and Europe, anti-Semitism is also being fueled by the growth of neo-Nazi white supremacists, neo-conservative Christian fundamentalists, and extremists in the Nation of Islam. The increasingly rigid alignment of the political Left with the cause of Palestinians has resulted in the easy elision of "Jew" with "Israel," which has made Jews the world over targets for anti-Israeli sentiments that are often expressed by violent acts of Jew-hating.¹⁰

Because patriarchal world politics also enters the feminist arena, this is the context in which we must analyze the reluctance of many Jewish women to write about Jewish themes. On the whole, it has not been felt safe to bring Jewish issues into feminist discourse. First, there is the fear of attack that produces a protective silence, second, is the fear of being perceived as too "demanding," "pushy," or "politically incorrect." Third, and possibly more than any other factor, the fear of being excluded keeps Jewish women silent. Speaking and writing about explicitly Jewish themes (or even including them substantially) raises the worry that the

⁸Beck, *Nice Jewish Girls*, xv

⁹In the United States, New Jewish Agenda, a progressive political organization, has staged vigils in front of the Israeli embassy protesting Israeli policies and has recently launched a petition campaign calling for negotiations and an international peace conference that would include the PLO as representative of the Palestinian people. New Jewish Agenda is located at 64 Fulton St #1100 New York, N Y 10038. The "Jewish Women's Committee to end the Occupation" holds weekly vigils in front of the offices of the *Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations* in New York City.

¹⁰In 1987 overt acts of anti-Semitism in the United States rose by 23 percent. On November 9-10, 1987, the eve of the anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, Jewish-identified shops and synagogues were vandalized, windows smashed, swastikas and "Jews Die!" painted on walls in dozens of communities across the United States. These acts clearly mirror the events of that night in 1938 when seven thousand Jewish shops were destroyed and synagogues throughout Germany burned down by state-sanctioned pogroms. During the first 4½ months of 1988 the Anti-Defamation League reported 443 anti-Semitic incidents—88% of them had a politically-related anti-Israel component.

work will be perceived as marginal, and therefore not as widely read and discussed. In short, in writing as a Jew, the feminist takes the risk of losing her place. I have long believed that it is the centrality of Jewishness to her writing, that has kept the brilliantly evocative poetry of Irena Klepfisz from being more widely known.¹¹ There is also a fourth factor: the confusion that many Jewish feminists experience in trying to bring together Jewish and feminist (or lesbian-feminist) identities and agendas. Just how unsafe it can be is demonstrated by Jenny Bourne's virulent attack on such efforts in which she singles out *Jewish* women's struggle for identity as particularly reactionary. "Nowhere has the reversal of political priorities in feminism been more evident than amongst Jewish women."¹² While this particular debate is occurring in Great Britain, it has its resonance in the United States and has, I believe, discouraged some feminists from speaking out as Jews.¹³

The responses of Jewish women to the 1986 NWSA plenary is particularly instructive. Many reported that they felt equally elated by the positive reception to the session and relieved that there had been no negative response. A number of women who only marginally identified as Jews were especially moved and encouraged by this public support to identify themselves as Jews *in a non-Jewish space* for the first time in their adult lives.

In the last decade Jewish women have also been increasingly intimidated by the virulent attacks upon them that have taken the form of a vicious stereotyping commonly known as "JAP" ("Jewish American Princess") baiting.¹⁴ This most recent embodiment of anti-Semitism (promoted by greeting cards, T-shirts, jokes, books, cartoons, and in common speech) has become a short hand to designate all that is despicable in American culture, framed in anti-Semitic terms and projected onto the body of the Jewish woman. In fact, the term "JAP"

¹¹See, for example, *Keeper of Accounts* (Watertown, Mass: Persephone Press, 1982, distributed by Sinister Wisdom Books, Box 1308, Montpelier, Vt. 05602), *Different Enclosures* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1985), and essays and poems in *The Tribe of Dina*.

¹²"Homelands of the Mind: Jewish Feminism and Identity Politics," *Race & Culture*, 29 (Summer 1987): 1-24. While this essay is poorly argued, its effects may nonetheless be crucial, especially as it appeared in a widely read journal. For a response, see Francesca Klug, "Jewish Feminists Answer Back," *The Jewish Socialist* 12 (Winter/Spring 1988): 12-14.

¹³Letty Pogrebin was attacked when she wrote about anti-Semitism in *Ms* (June 1982), see especially the responses to her article in the June 1982 *Ms*.

¹⁴A major portion of the Fall 1987 issues of *Lilith: The Jewish Women's Magazine*, no. 17, focuses on harmful effects of the still flourishing stereotypes of Jewish women. See especially the essays by Sherry Chayat, Judith Allen Rubinstein, and Susan Weidman Schneider. This topic was discussed in December 1987 on National Public Radio and has become the focus of educational projects by many Jewish women's organizations. The New Jewish Agenda Feminist Task Force Newsletter, *Gesher* (Winter 1988), featured articles on the theme by Evelyn Torton Beck, Ruth Atkin, and Adrienne Rich.

(many foolishly deny that the "J" for "*Jewish American Princess*" is of any significance) has become the female embodiment of all the evils previously cast upon Jewish men—she is shown to be greedy, manipulative, parasitic, crude in speech (she has a New York accent), vulgar in dress, ugly (like the hooked-nosed Jews of old, she needs a "nose job"), materialistic, ostentatious, unfeeling, sexually unreliable. This attack comes not only from the dominant culture, but has also been perpetuated by the misogyny of some Jewish men. As a result, those Jewish women who have internalized this anti-Semitism as a form of self-hatred also use the term. The existence of these stereotypes serves to make Jewish women feel especially vulnerable and keeps them from identifying as a Jew in environments where that "safety" is even more questionable.

In this connection, an anthology like Carole S. Vance's *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* provides a good example of a missed opportunity, for this book's theorizing about female sexuality would have been more complete and more complex if it had included the experiences of Jewish women. Vance leads one to expect inclusivity and a deeper level of self-reflection, since she is fully aware of the ways in which some feminist theories have replicated the false universalizing of white males, by assuming "that women are white, middle- or upper-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, and moderately youthful, or that the experiences and perspectives of these women are shared by all."¹⁵

But Vance's book reveals that she herself does not yet recognize the presumption of a shared Christian (or non-Jewish) background as an equally unspoken norm within feminist theorizing and within her own text. When she amplifies the "self-criticism of feminist parochialism in recent years," she lists only anthologies by lesbians or women of color. No Jewish texts are named or recognized as having made a significant contribution, in fact, the word *Jewish* barely appears in this text. Yet, Jewish women have a particular history of sexual projections placed upon them, in which, in the contemporary period, the Jewish woman is said to be both a nymphomaniac and frigid, accused of using sexuality to maintain control over her (male) partner.¹⁶ An analysis of the residue of traditional Jewish attitudes toward women and sexuality and their effects on Jewish women who may not themselves be Orthodox would have strengthened the anthology and would have provided a point of dialogue with Hortense Spiller's analysis of the sexuality of Black women.

The list of supposedly inclusive anthologies from which Jewish themes are absent is long, and I do not intend to document them all here. But

¹⁵Vance, *Pleasure and Danger* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 17.

¹⁶For an excellent analysis of this phenomenon, see Susan Weidman Schneider, "In a Coma! I thought She was Jewish!" Some Truths and Speculations about Jewish Women and Sex," *Lilith: The Jewish Women's Magazine* (Spring/Summer 1977), 5-8.

when Jewish women are left out of texts focusing on women and religion (that form of Jewish life most easy for non-Jews to comprehend), then we know we are up against strong forces that would exclude Jews. *Women in the World's Religions Past and Present* contains not a single essay on the Jewish religion, but mentions Judaism, when it does, very much in passing, only *negatively*.¹⁷ This negative attention is the reverse side of invisibility and represents yet another form of anti-Semitism, which occurs not only in texts, but also in some conference sessions that otherwise exclude any mention of Jews. In, for example, a 1987 NWSA plenary focusing on coalition politics (the year after the successful Jewish plenary!), Jews were not represented, but Barbara Macdonald, in presenting examples of ageism, found it necessary to single out Ruth Geller's portrait of her Jewish grandmother in her 1984 novel, *Triangles*. I believe this criticism was misplaced and that Macdonald clearly did not understand the cultural context of this lovingly humorous portrait, the insidiousness of this kind of negative inclusion often escapes notice and should not be allowed to continue without comment.

The ignoring of Jewish texts can also distort our research. In historical accounts of women's autobiographies, I have nowhere seen reference to one of the earliest autobiographical texts, *The Memoirs of Gluckl of Hameln*, written between 1689-1719 in Yiddish, a Jewish woman's language. This text presents a fascinating view of the public/private intersection in Jewish women's lives at a certain moment in history.¹⁸ Other kinds of exclusions can be personally harmful to both Jewish and Gentile women. A recent self-help book for lesbian couples discusses how racism can affect interracial couples but does not even mention the difficulties Jewish/Gentile couples might encounter, especially in the charged atmosphere surrounding Christmas.

One of my purposes in this essay is to sensitize the Women's Studies community to the ways in which Jewish women's lives are left out of the feminist project and to suggest the contexts in which they should be included. Because theory builds on itself, one omission frequently prepares the way for the next. In this respect, I find the silence surrounding anti-Semitism (except as a marginal aside) in two recent

¹⁷Ursula Kung, ed (New York: Paragon House Press, 1987). Represented in individual chapters are several different forms of Christianity, Buddhism, Krishna worship, African religions, and Goddess worship. In the index under "Judaism," we find only three references: "patriarchal in nature," "monotheism based on male dominance," and "masculine aspects of God." Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds., *Women in Religion in America: The Colonial and Revolutionary Periods: A Documentary History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983) has quite a comprehensive focus on the religions of American Indian women, Spanish American, Colonial French, New England, Southern, Black American, and Utopian groups but does not even mention Jews, though Jews were present among the first settlers of the "New World."

¹⁸*Memoirs of Gluckl of Hameln* (rpt., New York: Schocken Press, 1977)

feminist texts, which I expect will be widely adopted for classroom use, particularly disturbing. In *Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study*, Paula Rothenberg defines the parameters of her analysis so that Jews, by definition do not belong in her study (because they are "white," though this is not explicitly stated either), yet, she undertakes the analysis of "discrimination" and "prejudice" against ethnic minorities in ways that make the omission of any consideration of anti-Semitism a travesty against the very real anti-Semitism to which Jews have been subject.¹⁹ What must have been a deliberate decision not even to mention the existence of Jews as an "ethnic" minority (not even in a chapter focusing on ethnicity), calls forth the words of Tsvetan Todorov, who is here commenting on a similar omission of Jews from a text entitled "Race, Writing, and Difference." He writes, "I was surprised, not to say shocked, by the lack of any reference to one of the most odious forms of racism: anti-Semitism. Its absence from the volume suggests that the authors chose to 'actively ignore' it."²⁰ If anti-Semitism is not most appropriately analyzed as a form of racism, it nonetheless has its own specificity, which needs to be named and analyzed.

Another particularly disturbing example of active omission is provided by Teresa de Lauretis' *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, which was based on papers presented at a conference entitled "Feminist Studies: Reconstituting Knowledge," in Milwaukee in 1985. The absence of any discussion of anti-Semitism in this volume is all the more troubling because the issue was raised at the conference, in a paper which first met with silence, then with hostility and overt verbal attacks that repeated many of the most obvious anti-Semitic assaults on Jews. The fact that this paper was not included in the body of the text, nor the episode recorded or analyzed by the editor, serves to obscure the existence of anti-Semitism within contemporary feminism.²¹ I take this omission particularly seriously.

¹⁹Rothenberg, *Racism and Sexism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

²⁰Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 377. The collection contains the essays which appeared originally as "Race, Writing, and Culture," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985) and 13 (Autumn 1986).

²¹Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). Because such events are rarely talked about, I would like to record the basic outlines of that episode, which I am in a position to do since I was the speaker in question. First, the moderator did not allow questions in response to my talk because "time did not permit," while she allowed time for several questions for the paper following mine. When I objected to this differential treatment, one woman in the audience shouted words to the effect that "Jews control the media, which is why the Holocaust is getting so much attention, while the Middle Passage is ignored." In response to a reminder about the gassing of Jews in the concentration camps in World War II, this same woman answered, "Yes, but you Jews have it so good until they come get you!" Another panel member made fun of this episode by quipping, "I can't possibly be anti-Semitic, I was married to a 'nice Jewish boy.'" Following this episode she ended her presentation by calling for solidarity with Palestinian

because this anthology seems likely to be a text which will, in the words of Catharine R. Stimpson, "do nothing less than to create the next stage of feminist thought." If it succeeds in so doing, it will also succeed in keeping Jewish themes out of the feminist agenda.

Having said that, it seems important to try to figure out how to proceed differently. I would like to believe that neither malice, deliberate anti-Semitism, nor complete indifference is the cause of these continuing omissions. While some of these factors no doubt do serve to keep Jewish themes out of feminist theorizing, there are also other factors to explore. I believe that a significant portion of the problem stems from our initial conceptual framework which established (and quickly *fixed*) the interlocking factors of "sex, race, and class" as *the* basis for the oppression of women. While such a framework has allowed us to stretch "sex" into "sexual difference" and "race" into "ethnicity," it failed to allow us to account for the *Jew*, who cannot be made to fit into the pre-existing categories.²² "Jew" describes a variety of factors (including, but not limited to the intersection of religious identification, historical, cultural, ethical, moral, and linguistic affinities). Clearly then, if the concept "Jew" does not fit the categories we have created, then I suggest, we need to rethink our categories. This is what feminists have said to the builders of patriarchal theories into which women do not fit, and it is what lesbians have said to feminist theorists who excluded lesbian identity—"not *we*, but your theories are inadequate." The unwillingness to rethink the adequacy of our categories, which in any case have become somewhat formulaic, suggests a refusal to consider the politics behind our namings and a refusal to face the implications of our questioning.

One of the results of perpetuating these categories is the invisibility of Jews, and an exclusion, a non-consideration which inevitably leads to the "benign" anti-Semitism of indifference and insensitivity that has allowed the "JAP" stereotype to flourish unchecked. The result, the Jew as subject in feminist discourse, is given a radical "otherness" that is denied at the very moment in which it is being created. This denial is especially schizophrenic if you are a member of the group that is actively being made invisible at the very moment that "difference" is becoming increasingly central to feminist discourse and is now considered essential to the appropriate further development of feminist theory. If Jews do not fit, it

women out of any context which would have made that appropriate. The audience, for the most part, seemed to be paralyzed and only one or two women came to the defense. By my count, about one third of the audience was Jewish.

²² Alison M. Jaggar and Paula S. Rothenberg, *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations Between Women and Men*, 2d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984) set up "frameworks" that completely box us in and allow no room for the consideration of how Jews might fit into the analysis.

is quite likely that other groups may not fit into the conceptual framework we have constructed. My own experience of working in the feminist project is that one opening almost always leads to another, this is a path that leads toward the expansion and transformation of our theories in ways which we cannot yet know but could nonetheless take pleasure in moving toward.

