

אשה
צעירה

(Young woman)

Shira Marie#1

July 2011

בראשית

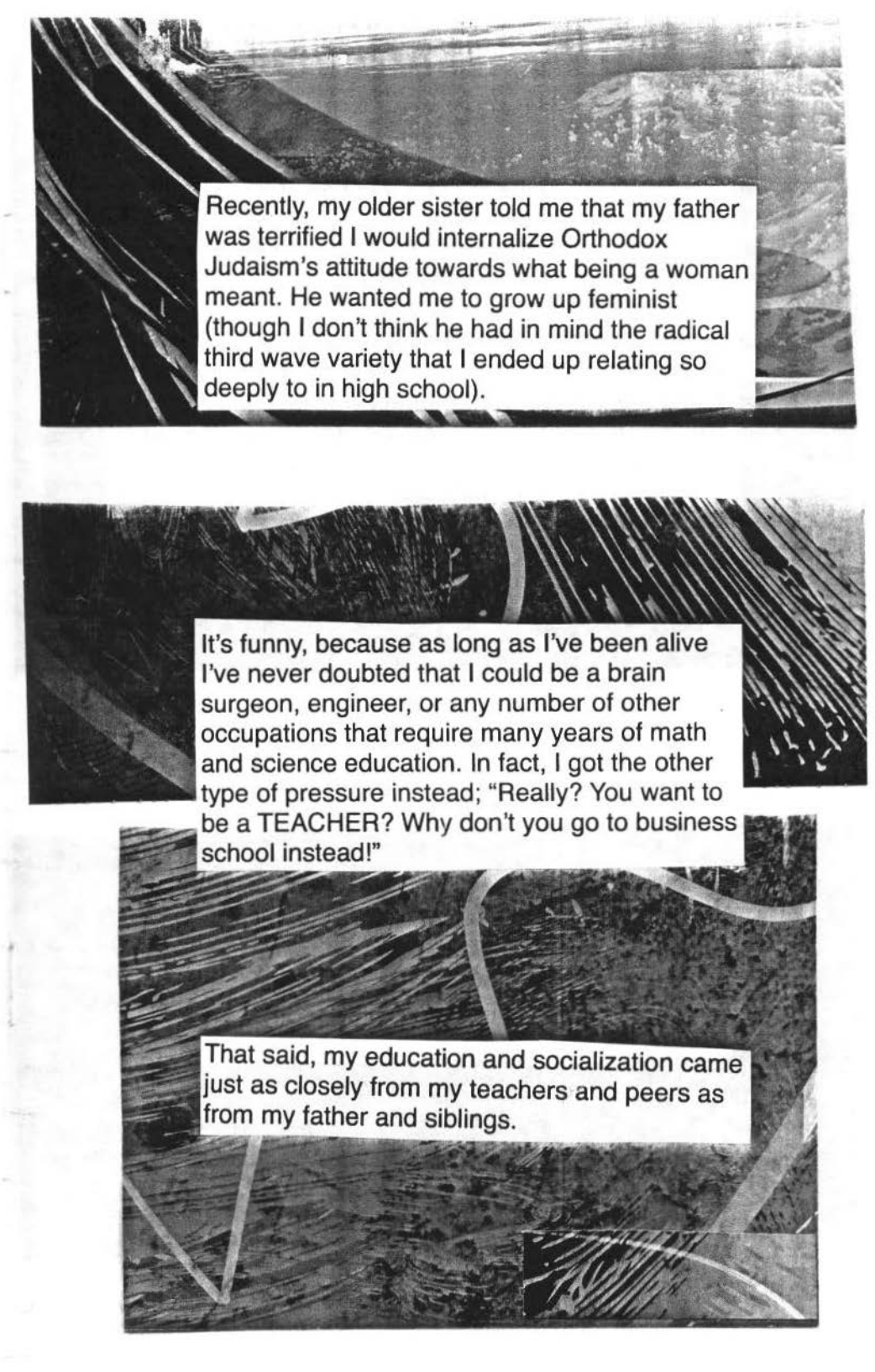
In the Beginning

My father is the child of Holocaust survivors. Much like many European Jews in the late 1940s and 50s, his parents were deeply resentful of Judaism and of God-as-a-concept. When he met my mother in the 70s, she was an American gentile who had fallen in love with Israel and Judaism and had moved to Israel to study at Tel Aviv University.

She converted, married my father, and moved with him to the US to build a family. My father had always been very secular, but he loved my mother enough to bullshit piety and raise his kids in a religious environment.

When my mother was dying in the late 80s, he promised her that her kids would get a good Jewish education.

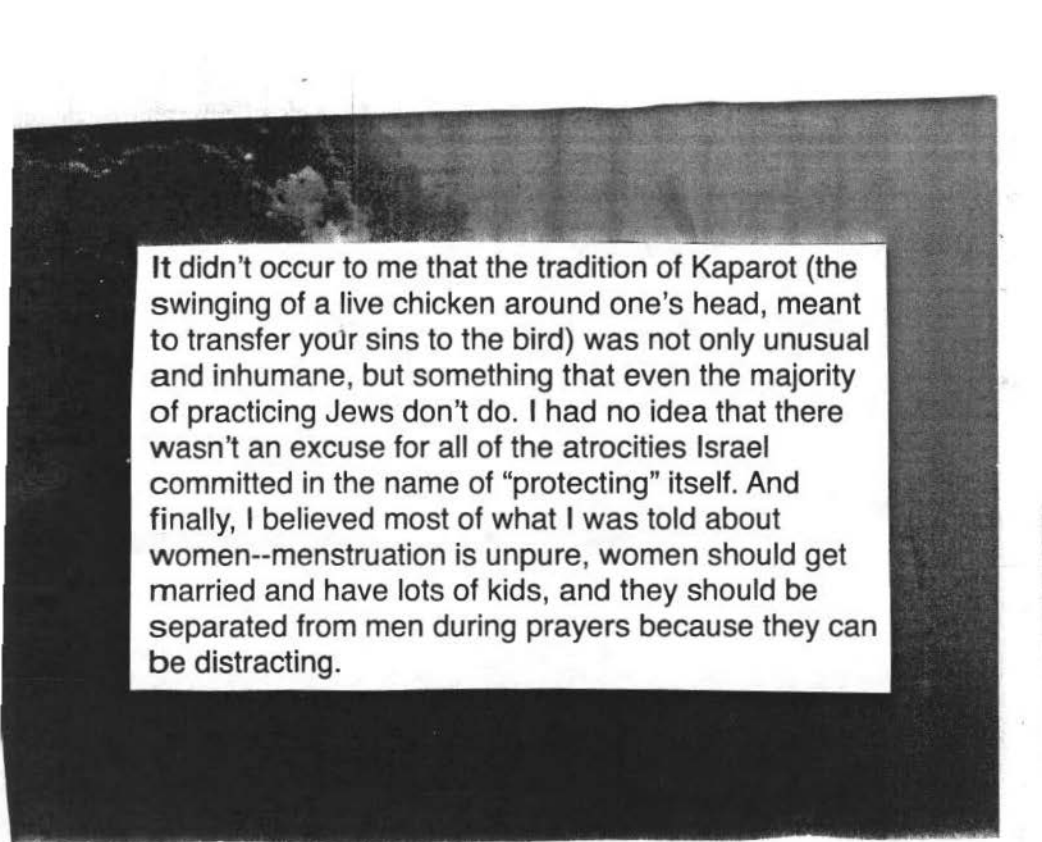
My understanding of my Jewish identity has always been really fragmented (due in part to the fact that my mother's family was mostly full of anti-Semites). Going to a school where many of my peers weren't allowed to watch television because it was too secular, and then coming home to a family that watched Married With Children and Jean Claude Van Damme movies was a little absurd.



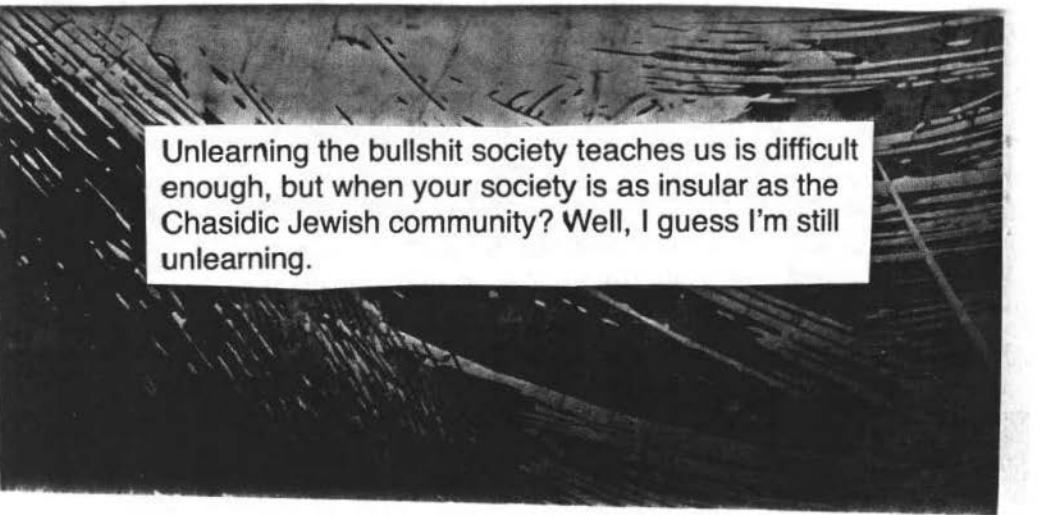
Recently, my older sister told me that my father was terrified I would internalize Orthodox Judaism's attitude towards what being a woman meant. He wanted me to grow up feminist (though I don't think he had in mind the radical third wave variety that I ended up relating so deeply to in high school).

It's funny, because as long as I've been alive I've never doubted that I could be a brain surgeon, engineer, or any number of other occupations that require many years of math and science education. In fact, I got the other type of pressure instead; "Really? You want to be a TEACHER? Why don't you go to business school instead!"

That said, my education and socialization came just as closely from my teachers and peers as from my father and siblings.



It didn't occur to me that the tradition of Kaparot (the swinging of a live chicken around one's head, meant to transfer your sins to the bird) was not only unusual and inhumane, but something that even the majority of practicing Jews don't do. I had no idea that there wasn't an excuse for all of the atrocities Israel committed in the name of "protecting" itself. And finally, I believed most of what I was told about women--menstruation is unpure, women should get married and have lots of kids, and they should be separated from men during prayers because they can be distracting.



Unlearning the bullshit society teaches us is difficult enough, but when your society is as insular as the Chasidic Jewish community? Well, I guess I'm still unlearning.

ארת

I.

I had a nanny named Ellen when I was in 5th and 6th grade who was a Holocaust survivor from Budapest. Most of my knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust when I was a kid came from her. She never held back in telling me what happened to her and what she witnessed, even if it was unbelievably brutal.

One story in particular that sticks with me is the one about her mother: the Gestapo had come for Ellen's family and the other Jews in their shtetl, and they went on the days-long train ride to the concentration camp to which they had been assigned.

The only facilities were a bucket in the corner in which everyone was expected to urinate and defecate in plain view of the other passengers. Ellen's mother had just started her period, and she didn't have any pads or cotton or the like with her. Her blood dripped down her thighs and dried there over the days they spent in transit.

When they finally arrived at the station, they were told they would walk a few miles to the camp. For those that chose not to walk, other methods of transportation would be arranged.

Ellen's mother, uncomfortable from the stiffness of dried blood on her thighs, opted out of the march. She was placed in a different group, and Ellen never saw her again. The group, mostly comprising the sick and/or elderly, were led into a gas chamber and killed immediately.

This is a particularly unnerving story to be told when you're a ten-year-old girl, just beginning to learn about puberty and periods.

While many young girls would have developed negative and terrifying associations with periods, it never really happened for me. I just remember feeling angry about Ellen's mother's fate.

As I got older, I reflected on those feelings and finally understood what they meant to me. Ellen's mother's "condition" (you know, that condition that half the world's population endures--what a sick bunch we are!) led to her being classified as one of the sick or elderly.

Being a normal, healthy female human, she had normal, healthy female human bodily functions--and that was reason enough to gas her.

Sure, the Nazis weren't the most sympathetic bunch to begin with.

But if anyone who menstruates tells you they haven't been in some situation where they were made to feel less than capable, overly emotional, or dirty just because they were on their period, they're either lying or delusional.

שתים

II.


In 10th grade, I was in the remedial Hebrew class at my Orthodox high school. Every Monday we had to take turns standing in front of the class and recounting our weekend hijinks--in Hebrew.

Our teacher was a sweet old lady, and in true remedial fashion we took full advantage of her willingness to fill in the words we didn't know ("How do you say 'last weekend'? How do you say 'I went'? How do you say 'to a party'?").

One day when it was almost my turn, one of the head Rabbis of the school came in to observe our class for a bit. In the middle of my presentation he suddenly stood up and ran out of the room, looking embarrassed.

I thought nothing of it until I sat back down and a friend whispered to me that he had bolted immediately after I got "nipple-itis"--a cold draft had made my nipples visibly erect.

It made me pretty uncomfortable, but I didn't see it as such a big deal until I noticed the change in the way that Rabbi treated me.



He seemed to have a grudge against me. He frequently criticized my clothes, even when they met the requirements of the dress code. One day when I was wearing a baggy skater skirt (think JNCOs, but in skirt form) with a long tweed coat, he harassed me about my outfit to the point of telling me I looked like a bag lady.

I was excused from all my classes and spent the rest of that day crying hysterically in the nurse's office (sidenote: the nurse was an amazing and inspirational lady who had been arrested for punching an anti-choicer in the 70s).

Ultimately, I didn't care if this Rabbi thought my outfit was bag ladyish. I spent the day crying not because my feelings were hurt but because it was the first moment in my life where I truly understood that people in positions of authority often do more harm than good.

Years later, I began to associate these seemingly disconnected anecdotes with one another. The Rabbi didn't start picking on me until after the nipple-itis incident. Presumably he had some resentful feelings about me, a young girl, merely because of an involuntary physiological reaction to a draft.

ששש

III.

Every spring, Jews celebrate a holiday called Purim. It's always been one of my favorites--you get to wear a costume, give food gifts to friends, bake hamentashen (jelly or poppyseed-filled cookies), and get very, very drunk. One tradition on Purim is the retelling of the story of Esther.

Basically, Ahaserus was a Persian king who asked his wife Vashti to come see his friends at a party. When she refused, he had her banished from the kingdom and needed a new wife.

He ended up marrying Esther, who was Jewish, and (together with her brother Mordechai) they foiled the evil Haman's plan to kill the Jews.

When I was in elementary school, we retold the story in our classes and discussed the *midrashim*, the interpretations of the story by generations of rabbis in the middle ages.

The one interpretation of the story that I remember being told year after year was intended to explain Vashti's banishment: Vashti refused to come see Ahaserus's friends because she had been cursed by God to grow boils on her face and a donkey tail. The reason God cursed her? She had been mean to Jewish women, of course.

reproduction of a
drawing I did of Vashti
when I was five



Throughout my childhood, this interpretation became so deeply ingrained in my understanding of the story of Esther that I forgot it was merely a midrash and the words were not actually present in the story.

Years later in high school I was telling the story to a friend in my creative writing class when another friend, H, interrupted me and was apparently outraged. She then told me the version taught to kids with egalitarian Jewish upbringings. When Ahaserus asked Vashti to come see his friends, it means he asked her to parade in front of them naked. She was banished from her home because she refused. In this understanding of the story, Vashti is a heroine, a sort of martyr for feminism.

At the time, I got annoyed at H for her version of the story. Didn't she know that I had way more of a Jewish education than she, who had gone to Jewish youth groups and a reform synagogue? Shouldn't she trust me, the superjew, to know what actually happened in the story of Esther?

[REDACTED]

On some level, I also felt my understanding of Judaism was threatened. Here I had a friend who related deeply to her own Jewish identity, but she knew of interpretations of biblical passages that completely dismantled my own perception. But there was more to it than that--without any hint of shame or uncertainty, she identified as a feminist, and I was still stuck in, "I'm not one of *those* people," territory.

[REDACTED]

Shortly after, I started to identify more with feminism. I experimented with all sorts of elements, reading classic femlit pieces and articles by Gloria Steinem, listening to lots of riot grrrl bands, and even burning my bra once (while I don't relate to the original message behind it, try burning a cotton bra--IT IS SO FUN). Somehow, H's perspective, not to mention her preaching of the Bechdel test and oh-so-many-other radical things that wouldn't otherwise have been on my radar, had led me to this point.

[REDACTED]

So I'd like to thank H, and Vashti, and my nanny Ellen, and my pro-choice school nurse, for playing major roles in my education and understanding of myself.

Y B T A

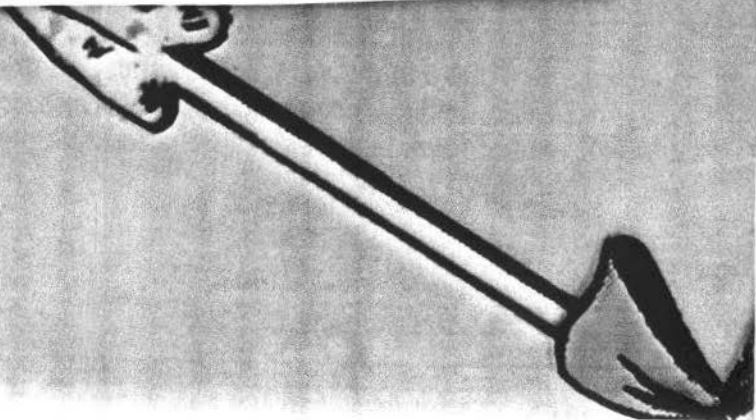
IV.

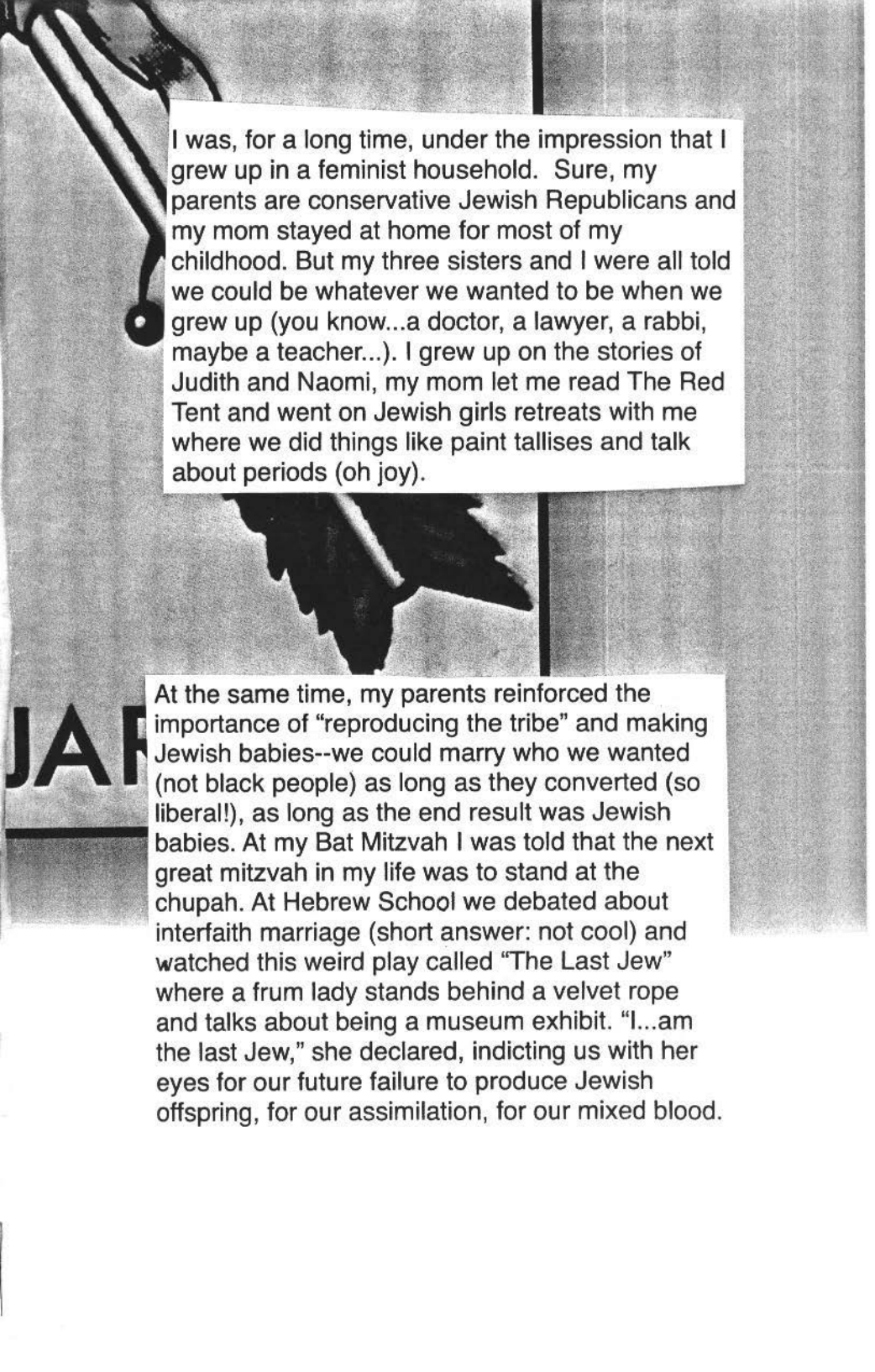
Alexander Portnoy and Emma Goldman had a baby...
by Jenna J.Bee Brager

*"All a Jewish daughter needs to know is how to
prepare gefüllte fish, cut noodles fine, and give the
man plenty of children," --Abraham Goldman*

Have you ever been told (even jokingly) that you
need to repopulate the tribe? Have you ever been
asked, "But is your mother Jewish?" Have you
ever been told, "You're not really Jewish because
your mother converted"? Have you been asked "Is
he Jewish?" or told, "Date who you want but marry
a Jew"? I want to write about something that has
been causing me a lot of anxiety. This isn't going
to be particularly eloquent or theory-driven, which
I apologize for (another anxiety I need to get
over).

TM

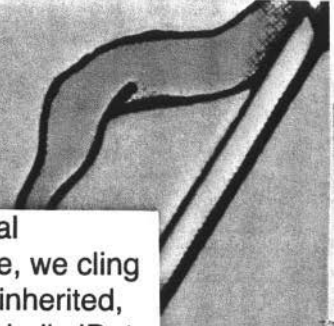





I was, for a long time, under the impression that I grew up in a feminist household. Sure, my parents are conservative Jewish Republicans and my mom stayed at home for most of my childhood. But my three sisters and I were all told we could be whatever we wanted to be when we grew up (you know...a doctor, a lawyer, a rabbi, maybe a teacher...). I grew up on the stories of Judith and Naomi, my mom let me read *The Red Tent* and went on Jewish girls retreats with me where we did things like paint tallises and talk about periods (oh joy).

JAF

At the same time, my parents reinforced the importance of "reproducing the tribe" and making Jewish babies--we could marry who we wanted (not black people) as long as they converted (so liberal!), as long as the end result was Jewish babies. At my Bat Mitzvah I was told that the next great mitzvah in my life was to stand at the chupah. At Hebrew School we debated about interfaith marriage (short answer: not cool) and watched this weird play called "The Last Jew" where a frum lady stands behind a velvet rope and talks about being a museum exhibit. "I...am the last Jew," she declared, indicting us with her eyes for our future failure to produce Jewish offspring, for our assimilation, for our mixed blood.



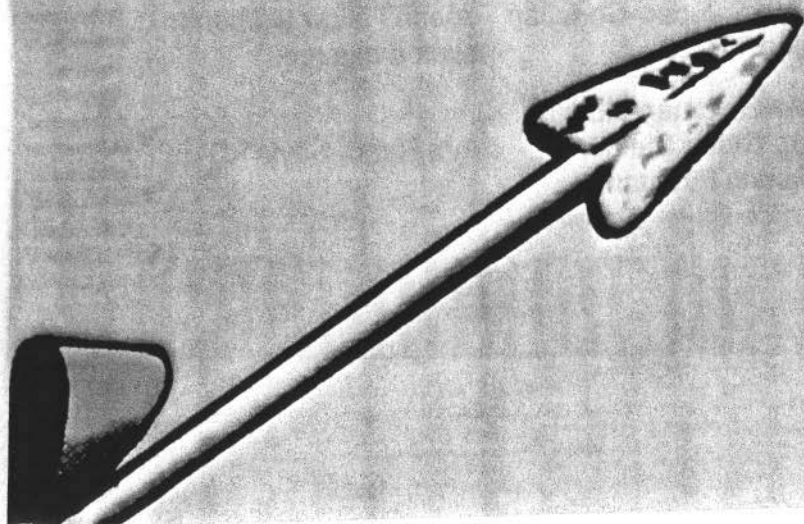
Jewish women are defined by matrilineal responsibility. Irrational though it may be, we cling to Judaism as bloodline, as genetically inherited, as generational trauma. Our rabbis buy bulk JDate subscriptions and scrutinize our empty wombs. Maybe my extreme anxiety just makes me a Woody Allen-esque stereotype. But Jesus Christ (if you forgive the encroachment), I need to process this shit, because the truth is I have internalized so much of it. This "we are the chosen people" Chaim Potok bullshit. This make-Jewish-babies-or-perish imperative.



To inelegantly make plain the stakes: I am a genderqueer, politically radical (anti-Zionist), intellectual Jew. I disagree strongly with the institution of marriage and heteronormative family structures. I have a tattoo of Emma Goldman on my arm. And sometimes I worry that my partner won't convert (when we...get married?). I think about finding a Jewish sperm donor (a whole new anxious can of worms). I worry that if I adopt, my children won't really be Jewish. These are creeping anxieties, they sneak up on me, like my lingering guilt at eating traife or my emotional reaction to nationalistic Jewish songs.

Have you ever, dear reader, had the thought that if you don't personally produce Jewish children, raise Jewish children, that you are dishonoring the memory of your family members who died in the Holocaust? Because of me, Hitler will have won! Have you ever committed mental and emotional energy internally debating circumcision in regards to your theoretical possibly-Jewish-sperm-donored or possibly-adopted-and-converted (oh god what if they're from another culture and I am disrespecting their culture by forcing my culture on them oh god) children with your maybe-converted goyisha maybe-husband? It's so fucked up. But we have a covenant! What the fuck does that even mean!

31



והנה

V.

pros and cons of being a feminist
in Orthodox Judaism

Pros

Jewish pop culture role models like Barbra Streisand and Bette Midler.

Small schools with unskilled athletes guaranteed me a spot on any sports team.

I didn't have to be called to the bimah (podium) to read torah on my Bat Mitzvah.

Judaism is so much better about abortion than any other Judeo-Christian religion.

Emma Goldman. Judith Butler. Gloria Steinem. Shulamith Firestone. Gertrude Stein. Et cetera.

Cons

Jewish pop culture role models like Adam Sandler make offensive rape jokes.

Girls' sports teams had to wear sweat pants because shorts weren't modest enough.

If I had wanted to read torah on my Bat Mitzvah, I wouldn't have been allowed to.

The traditional ketubah (marriage document) doesn't allow women to seek a divorce.

Ayn Rand. Sayin'.

This zine would not have been possible if not for the help and inspiration of the following people:

Lizz M.
Jenna B.
Holli M.
Fil
Rachel H.
Ellen F.
Leah C.
Meg L.
Anne H.
Jordan O.
Jen T.

and all the neurotic, self-hating Jews out there!

In the maybe near-ish kinda hopefully sorta soon future, look out for my submission-based zine, Home. Also read my piece in *Femme a Barbe 3*, compiled by Jenna Brager. But whatever you do, please don't try to find any other zines I may have contributed to in the past! It will be a disappointing waste of time, I assure you.

Possible future issues of Shira Mario to look forward to:

My trip to China! Sci fi convention experiences!

Diary entries from my childhood!

Portraits of animals I love! Recipes!

Living in a city you hate because it has the best people!

The Buffy issue! My abusive relationship!

wanna email me? ssshira@gmail.com

wanna snail mail me? email me for my address

