

Book Reviews

LADIES IN HATS AND OTHER JEWISH GENDER SURPRISES

by Ruth Abrams

Hasia Diner, Shira Kohn, & Rachel Kranson, eds., *A JEWISH FEMININE MYSTIQUE? JEWISH WOMEN IN POSTWAR AMERICA*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010. 284p. index. pap., \$25.95, ISBN 978-0813547923.

Harriet Hartman & Moshe Hartman, *GENDER AND AMERICAN JEWS: PATTERNS IN WORK, EDUCATION & FAMILY IN CONTEMPORARY LIFE*. Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2009. (HBI Series on Jewish Women.) 312p. appendix (statistical tables). notes. bibl. index. pap., \$29.95, ISBN 978-1584657569.

How does being Jewish affect American Jewish women's experience of gender? Is that experience the same as or different from other American women's experience? How does gender affect Jewish women's commitment to and understanding of Jewishness? In two recent books, scholars attempt to answer this question from two different methodological perspectives.

Gender and American Jews, a sociology text, asks interesting, gender-inflected questions of the data from the 2000–2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) on issues of education, professional life, salary, beliefs, and affiliation. Authors Harriet and Moshe Hartman reprise their work on the 1990 NJPS in this book and broaden their examination of the data.

The history text, *A Jewish Feminine Mystique? Jewish Women in Postwar America*, is a collection of essays examining the lives of Jewish women in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s and considering how they did and did not conform to the cultural world described in Betty Friedan's foundational feminist work, *The Feminine Mystique*.¹

In both of the books under review here, the definition of Jewishness is

problematic. This is particularly true of *Gender and American Jews*, which attempts to generalize about the role of gender for Jews in the United States as a whole. The problem is not, for the most part, the questions the authors ask of the data — they are, to a non-sociologist, fascinating questions — it's the data set itself. As the Hartmans acknowledge, the NJPS of 2000–2001 was the target of criticism for a variety of reasons.

The Jewish Federations of North America, then called the United Jewish Communities or UJC, paid \$6 million for the study, twice what the study's architects had projected, and had to delay release of the results when some of the data were lost because of storage problems.² UJC commissioned Mark Schulman, an outside consultant, to write a report full of disclaimers about the technical problems of the study. The survey had a twenty-eight-percent response rate, which Schulman's report termed "at the low end for public policy and population studies."³ Some sociologists, including Leonard Saxe, estimated that the response rate for Jews (as opposed to non-Jewish con-

trol respondents or people with Jewish background) was lower, perhaps under twenty percent. The NJPS undercounted the number of Jews in the United States, at least compared to other respected studies like the General Social Survey. Some critics asserted that policymaking based on the NJPS would result in the Jewish community being underserved with Jewish education and other services.⁴

The team that designed the survey decided to give the long-form questionnaire only to people who identified as Jews on two out of three identity questions. Since there were 250 questions on the long form of the survey and many of the random-digit-dialed (RDD) calls were placed during the workday, some critics believed the format skewed the answers toward older Jewish people. The reason there were so many questions was that multiple funders paid for the survey, and different funders requested answers to help formulate policy relevant to their interests.

The NJPS may have undercounted immigrant Jews, especially those from the former Soviet Union.

This too would have an impact on the answers to the questions the Hartmans were asking in their study about gender, Jewish education, and occupation. Furthermore, the NJPS may have had trouble documenting Jewish class diversity. Some believe the study undercounted the Jewish poor by using the Federal Poverty Threshold. That threshold — developed, coincidentally, by Jewish economist Mollie Orshansky in the postwar era — estimates the cost of living based on a nutritionally adequate diet. The cost of living in the cities where the NJPS was conducted is considerably higher than the threshold.

Although the Hartmans acknowledge many of these data problems in their text — and implicitly through their bibliography — they also call the NJPS “the largest survey of a national sample of American Jews ever conducted” (p. 6). Since the Jewish Federations of North America chose not to sponsor another nationwide survey in 2010, future sociologists of gender in the Jewish community will have to rely on local surveys of individual Jewish communities.⁵

It is frustrating that the Hartmans have applied such interesting questions to what is now a decade-old data set with serious reliability issues. They

use marriage data with occupation, education, and income to show Jewish attitudes toward gender equality — a neat idea, but it would be more interesting if readers could be confident that the sample was representative. In

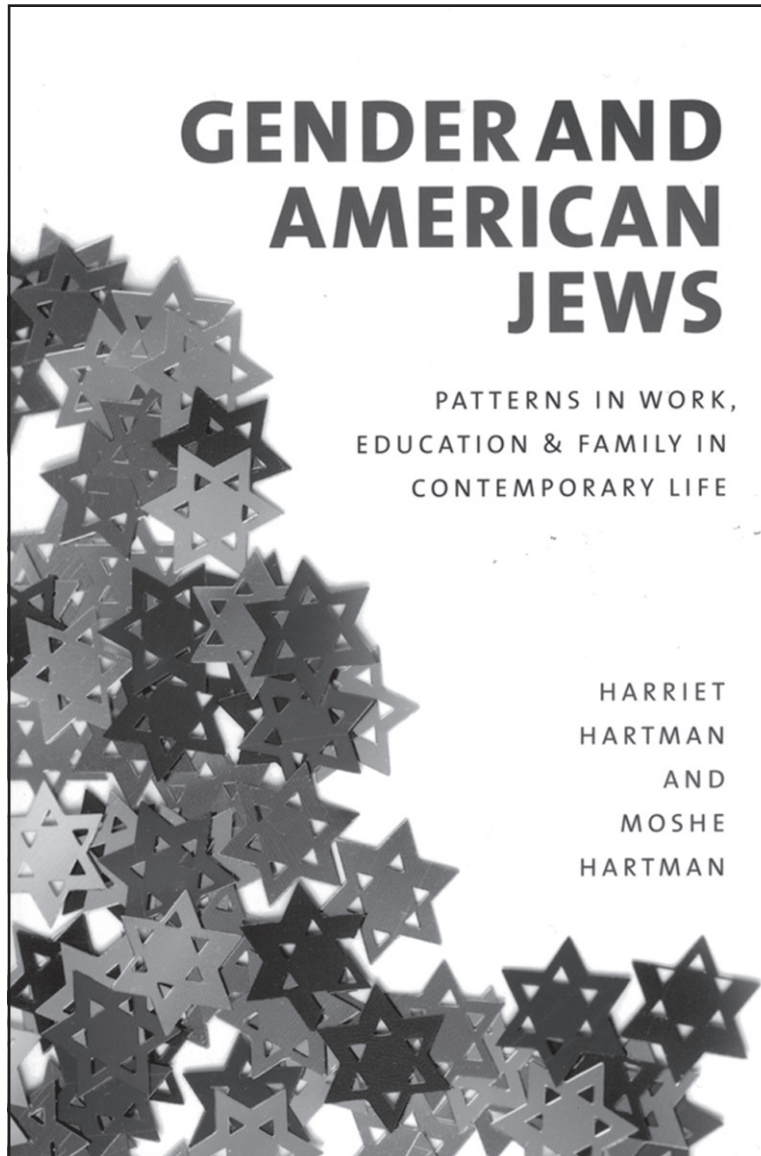
Conservative or Reconstructionist), but do not belong to a synagogue (p. 132). Would that percentage have been higher if a larger number of low-income Jews had responded?

The Hartmans also perform some nifty statistics tricks, like figuring out which denominations Jews are likely to join according to whether they are male or female; married, widowed or divorced; and parents or non-parents (p. 155). It’s certainly significant that Jewish women are most likely to be unaffiliated if they are childless, but it would be difficult to determine the causal relationship — perhaps it’s because Orthodox Jewish men are most likely to marry.

Knowing that the Hartmans used a sample that may have been skewed toward older people, I have doubts about the conclusions they draw about interfaith marriage. For example, in the NJPS sample, more interfaith marriages were remarriages (p. 237), and intermarried Jews tended to have lower indices of Jewish identification. But is this true

another example, the Hartmans discuss the question of denominational affiliation. They quote another sociologist’s finding that twenty-two percent of the Jewish respondents identify with a Jewish denomination (Orthodox, Reform,

of intermarried Jews from Generation X, whose responses may have been undercounted? Are a higher percentage of younger Jews choosing interfaith partnerships for their first marriage? The authors declare, “It is not surprising that intermarried Jews tend to be



less identified with Jewishness, in terms of both religion and ethnicity.” In *Still Jewish, A History of Women and Inter-marriage in America* (New York Univ. Press, 2009), Keren McGinity interviewed intermarried Jewish women and found that they *increased* their Jewish identification in interfaith marriages. Is that a widespread phenomenon among Jewish women? Did the survey accurately count interfaith marriages if it skewed toward older Jews?

Of course, this book does not attempt to capture the experiences of single Jews, nor does it acknowledge Jews in same-sex relationships who identify strongly with Jewishness or Judaism. The NJPS survey instrument, downloadable as a PDF on the www.jewishfederations.org website, contains a vague question about gender and relationships:

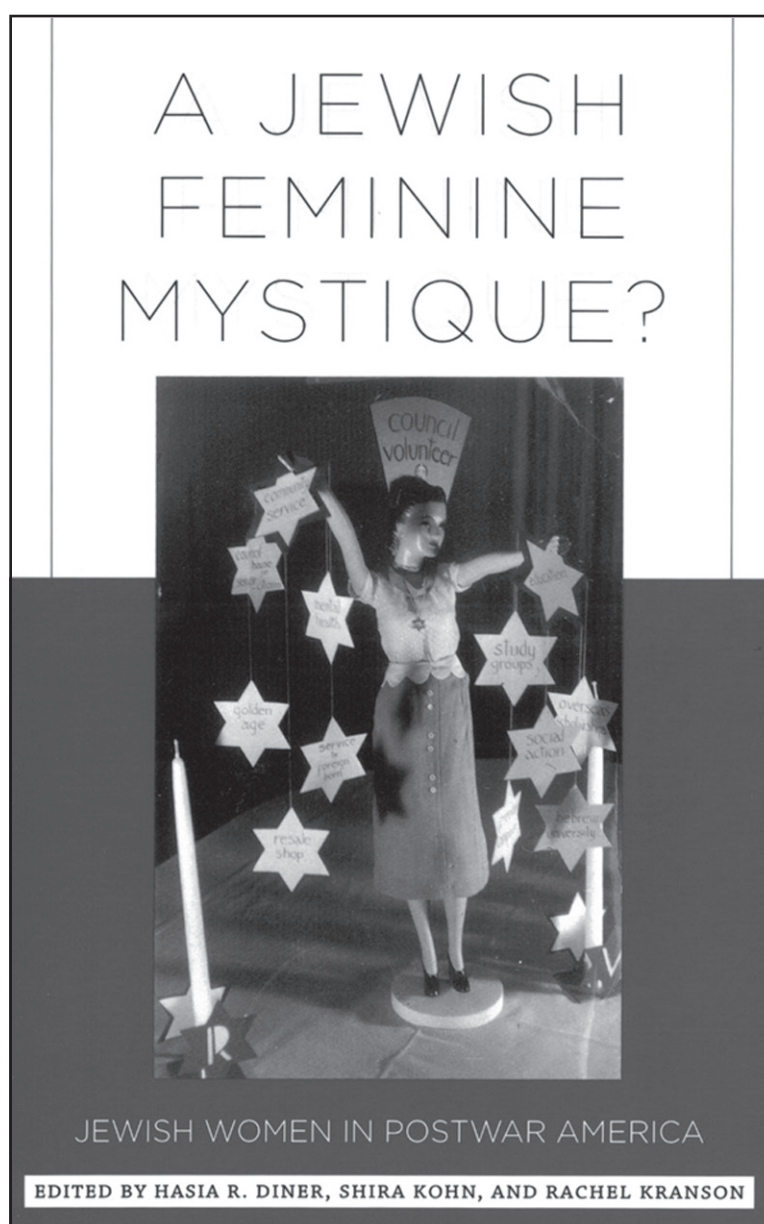
SEX WILL BE CODED BY COMPUTER FOR ALL OBVIOUS RELATIONSHIPS. ENTER IF PERSON IS MALE OR FEMALE; IF NOT EVIDENT FROM RELATIONSHIP, ASK: Is your (RELATIONSHIP) male or female?⁶

It's not clear whether this question enabled the interviewers to count same-sex relationships, or instructed them to identify anyone with a female partner as male and vice versa! One Jewish journalist pointed out that the survey company, RoperASW, had a track record of using vague, misleading questions before it was commissioned to do the NJPS.⁷ People who work with GLBT Jews see this population increasing its Jewish identification and commitment. Is that an accurate assumption, and does it apply equally to Jewish women as to Jewish men?

Could the Hartmans have deduced this from the NJPS questionnaire if they had tried? In the end, their choices about how to interrogate the data were limited.

The editors of *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?* have set themselves an easier task than that of the Hartmans. Instead of trying to answer a set of gender questions definitively, Diner, Kohn, and Kranson attempt to com-

plicate the picture of postwar Jewish women's lives through the lens of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* — a book so powerful in its own time that historians and other keepers of cultural memory have embraced its narrative, which described women of the so-called Silent Generation retreating from the public to the private sector in the postwar period, leaving the revival of the feminist movement to the Baby Boom generation. During the 1950s



and 1960s, when the societal ideal was the one-income family, many Jewish families moved from urban to suburban areas. In the narrative of Jewish life, the period is supposed to have been one of suburban assimilationism,⁸ and to have been ended, again, by the Baby Boomers, partly in response to the Six-Day War of 1967 and partly to the emerging Civil Rights movement. The editors argue, however, that Jewish women were neither as politically quiescent nor as assimilationist as these popular narratives suggest.

A Jewish Feminine Mystique? both begins and ends by discussing politically active Jewish women. The first two chapters focus on individual activists: three anti-racist women who worked to end segregation in the Miami public schools, and Lucy Davidowicz, a well-known anti-communist. This is a departure from covering only the better-known leftist activists in northern cities. The left-wing activists and, ironically, the neo-conservative were all raised in Jewish socialist circles and shaped by the Old Left.

The editors acknowledge that the majority of active Jewish women in this period were more likely to work through politically liberal Jewish organizations. The three chapters on the National Council of Jewish Women, Hadassah, and women's involvement in the burgeoning Reconstructionist movement are the center of the book. The photos of the ladies in their pumps, dresses, and lovely little hats seem typical of the old narrative of this era, the atmosphere one of proper femininity. In the context of the activism described in the chapters, though, the photos read differently: In one, the impeccably turned-out ladies are meeting with President Kennedy as part of the National Council of Jewish

Women's participation in the Commission on the Status of Women; in another, an even more formally dressed group of Reconstructionist ladies is apparently discussing their ability to lift the Torah scrolls and their right to educate their daughters to read from the Torah. The Hadassah hat lady is a cartoon from the cover of a 1953 membership packet, encoded with many political symbols. All of these images look demure and ladylike, but the narratives that accompany them make the case that their organizations were consciously anti-assimilationist, part of broader political movements, and, in the case of the Reconstructionist women, explicitly feminist. As early as 1945, Reconstructionist Jews began discussions of calling girls to the Torah for their bat mitzvah rites of passage (p. 92).

This section of the book, significantly, is the only part to make claims about the overall normative experience of Jewish women in the period, rather than enumerating very specific kinds of exceptions to that experience. Large numbers of Jewish women were involved in the National Council of Jewish Women, which was part of a coalition of liberal groups that opposed McCarthyism and racial discrimination. Hadassah, the women's Zionist organization, had fewer than the 300,000 members it claimed (and still claims today!), but the chapter author cites between 260,000 and 280,000 Hadassah members during the postwar period. If the Reconstructionist women were a relatively small group within the broader Jewish community, Jewish women in Reform and Conservative synagogue sisterhoods were not. This isn't a new idea in feminist scholarship — that women's organizations were up to more than fundraising luncheons and cookbooks — but it does seem a

significant theme in a collection of essays that mainly picks up on more marginal Jewish experiences and cultural phenomena in order to trouble the overwhelming image of middle-class, highly educated Ashkenazi housewives.

Two of the most valuable chapters of *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?* are about the postwar immigrant experience: one on the interaction of German Jewish displaced persons and the class issues involved in their interactions with American Jewish social workers, and the other on the migration of Egyptian Jews in the 1950s and 1960s. Most Jews in the United States are descended from Eastern European immigrants of the largest wave, from 1880 to 1920, many of whom were poor or working-class before their immigration. The German Jews who survived the war and the Egyptian Jews who were displaced by the rise of Nasser were wealthy people who had servants and social position. The author of the chapter on Egyptian Jewish women relied on oral histories, bringing to the fore experiences previously ignored even by historians of Sephardic Jews in America (pp. 140–141, n. 6).

The chapters on the image of Jewish women in popular culture include one titled “The Bad Girls of Jewish Comedy,” referring to the precursors to Joan Rivers who told blue jokes with childlike innocence. But these “transgressive, trickster-like figures” (p. 155) are hardly representative of Jewish women's lives — except to the extent that they sold Yiddish-inflected “party albums” to Jewish families. Like “Judy Holliday's Urban Working-Girl Characters in 1950s Hollywood Film,” the “bad girls” spoke to the working-class and, to some degree, Yiddish-speaking origins of the majority of upwardly mobile Jews. Two other cultural chapters provide contemporary Jewish

women's readings of Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar* and the cultural significance of Jennie Grossinger as a prototypical Jewish mother.

The book ends with two chapters on feminism in the 1960s and Jewish women's participation in it: one on the radical feminists of the Baby Boom generation (including my personal favorite under-sung boomer feminist, Naomi Weisstein), and one on Betty Friedan herself. It's hard to decide whether these essays, which are excellent, undercut or support the main themes of the book. This is the advantage a historical approach has over a sociological one. If the reader doesn't find its thesis completely cohesive, the essays still provide interesting archival research. This might be a good text to assign for a course on Jewish life since 1945, or on Jewish women's history. The individual chapters are interesting, and the granularity of the essays works in the book's favor. The riotous diversity of the Jewish community and the multiplicity of definitions of Jewishness support the ideas in the text, rather than — as in the case of the NJPS results — casting doubt on the validity of the book.

Notes

1. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963.

2. Gary Rosenblatt, "Critics Question Value of Population Study," *New York Jewish Week*, August 29, 2003.

3. Mark A. Schulman, *National Jewish Population Survey 2000–2001 Study Review Memo*, September 19, 2003.

4. Leonard Saxe, Elizabeth Tighe, Benjamin Phillips, Charles Kadushin, et. al., "Reconsidering the Size and Characteristics of the American Jewish Population: New Estimates of a Larger and More Diverse Community," Steinhart Social Research Institute, 2007.

5. Debra Nussbaum Cohen, "Critics Say It Will Be Harder To Spot Trends with No National Jewish Survey," *The Forward*, April 2, 2010.

6. Audits and Surveys Worldwide, *National Jewish Population Survey, 2000–2001*. October, 2002. Survey questions may be downloaded at http://www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/downloads/1982.pdf

7. Joshua Hammerman, "Tough Questions about the NJPS," *Jewish Week*, January 10, 2003. Hammerman cites a 1992 study in which a confusing survey question with double negatives made it appear that 20% of Americans doubted the Holocaust had happened!

8. Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum's study, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier* (New York: Basic Books, 1967), was one of the first to

make the case that suburban Jews were assimilating, although feminist and Hadassah member Trude Weiss-Rosmarin doubted this characterization in her contemporary review of the book in *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2 (April 1968), pp. 118–121.

[Ruth Abrams is a freelance writer, an editor, and an enthusiastic researcher. She completed a B.A. at Oberlin College in 1988 and a Ph.D. at Brandeis University in 1997. The subject of her dissertation was the role of Jewish women in European feminism from 1880 to 1920. She has wide-ranging experience as a Jewish educator, from teaching Judaic Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in the late 1990s to managing the website at www.interfaithfamily.com.]