

Healing the Split at the Root

BY JANET FREEDMAN

Pamela S. Nadell, *America's Jewish Women: A History from Colonial Times to Today*. W.W. Norton, 2019. 336 pp. notes. index. \$28.95, ISBN 978-0393651232.

Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*. NYU Press, 2018. (Goldstein-Goren Series in American Jewish History.) 464 pp. notes. index. \$35.00, ISBN 978-0814707630.

These two complementary, carefully researched, eloquent, and engrossing books belong on the shelves of every academic library. They will be valuable texts in courses in gender and women's studies and key sources for student research on Jewish women in the United States.¹

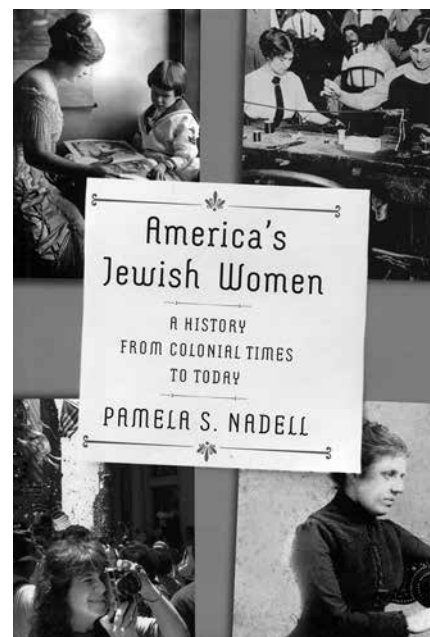
Pamela Nadell is the director of Jewish studies and holds the Patrick Clendenen Chair in Women's and Gender Studies at American University. Her fast-paced chronicle documents the dramatic changes in Jewish women's lives in a way that validates Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's response to the question "What is the difference between a bookkeeper and a Supreme Court Justice?" (Ginsburg's answer: "One generation" [p. xiv].) But Nadell refrains from a "progress" narrative, offering instead a more complex portrait of how a marginalized group negotiates the balance between dedication to tradition and assimilation to a new culture.

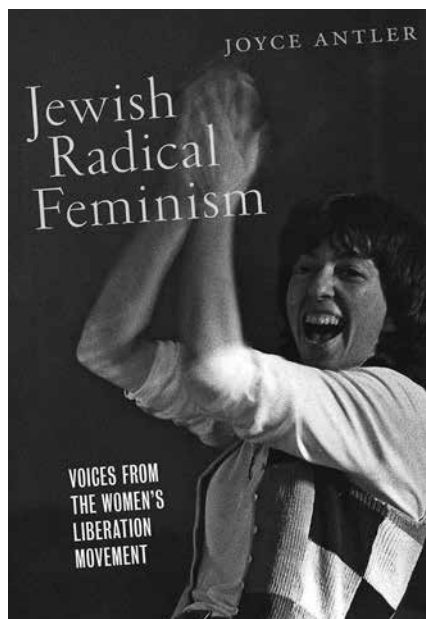
In placing herself and her Jewish family in the sweep of her narrative, Nadell invites readers of all backgrounds to discover and embrace the journeys of their forebears. Early in the volume we meet Nadell's immigrant grandmother, who came to America at the turn of the 20th century. Many associate Jewish women

with that mass migration, but their presence in what became the United States dates to the 17th century.

One of the early Jewish European arrivals on these shores was the mother of Grace Mendes Seixas (1752–1831). Grace became the bride of a British-born merchant, Simon Nathan, who assumed leadership in his synagogue and prominence as a patriotic militiaman in the American Revolution, earning the family a place in the historical record. Nathan's great-granddaughter, poet Emma Lazarus (1849–1887), penned the famous words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." Nadell also introduces us to two cousins of Lazarus who bore the Nathan name. Maud was a suffragist and president of the Consumer's League, an organization that fought to improve conditions of women workers. Her sister Annie attended a "collegiate course for women" and became a writer. Eventually her tireless work for women's higher education led to the founding in 1889 of Barnard College, one of the world's oldest women's colleges.

While celebrating this and other families who modeled Jewish women's contributions to American life within and beyond the Jewish community, Nadell's account captures the variety





of circumstances and roles of Jewish women through the centuries of U.S. history, most of whom did not have the opportunities and recognition of the Nathan family.

Historically, the often-unsung work of Jewish women and women in other immigrant groups was not limited to the home. Many had roles like that of my fraternal grandmother, who worked alongside her husband in his butcher shop, or my maternal grandmother, who ran a small business — a front porch grocery shop — while her husband traveled as an itinerant peddler.

Nadell celebrates the contributions of Jewish women of all classes and emphasizes their major role in shaping the labor movement. She also documents the sexism that resulted in men taking over leadership positions once unions were established. After Bessie Abramowitz and Sidney Hillman — leaders in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America — married, they agreed that only one of them should receive a salary; Bessie worked for 30 years without pay.

Two stereotypes of Jewish women are validated in Nadell's story — the focus on nurturing — and sacrificing — for children, and the desire to build a better world, not only for the Jewish community but for all people. The volume chronicles Jewish women's involvement in every aspect of American life: in war efforts as nurses and service women, in countless voluntary associations to aid Jews and all people in need of financial, emotional and spiritual support, and in social and political movements for social justice.

Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement begins where Nadell's fascinat-

ing account ends; it also illustrates the dynamic between universalism and particularism that has characterized Jewish women's lives. Nadell notes that the American feminist movement would be "unimaginable without Jewish women on its front lines," but also observes, "At the time many of these women downplayed or ignored their Jewishness; sisterhood among all women mattered, not religion or ethnicity" (pp. 235-236).

That phenomenon intrigued Joyce Antler, who succeeds admirably in her goal to illuminate the Jewish component of the radical feminist movement and the feminist contribution to the dramatic reshaping of traditional Jewish institutions by Jewish women. Antler used a feminist process to begin her work, bringing 40 pioneers in the Women's Liberation Movement to a conference in New York City to share their stories. That event and her subsequent extensive interviews led to an assessment of the unique role of Jewish women in feminist activism, a reclaiming that is continuing today.

Antler, a prolific author and professor emerita of American history and culture and women's, gender, and sexuality Studies at Brandeis University, has a thorough knowledge of the scholarly histories of the feminist movement and a deep familiarity with the grassroots organizations, journals, books, and broadsides that spread the ideals and ideas of the Women's Liberation Movement beginning in the late 1960s. Her readable, jargon-free prose style brings the excitement of those times to today's readers. During the time when Antler was writing *Jewish Radical Feminism*, I was privileged to be included in a year-long monthly discussion group with other Bos-

ton-area Jewish women who became feminist activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s.²

The first part of *Jewish Radical Feminism* focuses on women who did not think their Jewish backgrounds had anything to do with their involvement in feminism and “never talked about it” (p. 29). Among them are Robin Morgan, a founding member of New York Radical Women, whose anthology of writings from the burgeoning women’s movement, *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970), was used as a text in some of the early women’s studies courses, including one I team-taught; Susan Brownmiller, author of *Against our Will* (1975), a book that revealed how rape, historically and currently, has been used as a conscious tool to keep women fearful and powerless; Heather Booth, civil rights and feminist activist and founding member of the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union and its underground abortion counseling service, known as Jane, that helped women get abortions before *Roe v. Wade*; and Evelyn Torton Beck, a founding member of the National Women’s Studies Association and its Jewish Caucus, and author of *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (1982). Antler also interviews members of the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, which compiled a newsprint guide to “women and their bodies” (1970) that was subsequently published as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (OBOS) and eventually adapted into 31 languages.

The chapter devoted to the Boston Health Book Collective, titled “Our Bodies and Our Jewish Selves,” provides an excellent transition to the portion of Antler’s book focusing on women who conjoined their

Jewish and feminist identities. Even the three non-Jews among the dozen members of the collective acknowledge that Jewish values of devotion to family, critical thinking, and social justice affected their work.

If “Jewish” played a part in the way feminism was expressed in the creation of OBOS, feminism utterly transformed the lives of the Jewish women who challenged patriarchal practices within traditional Judaism. Antler captures this reality in the epigraph that introduces the second half of *Jewish Radical Feminism*: “Feminism enabled me to be a Jew” (p. 203). Earlier reforms had allowed Jewish girls access to study opportunities. In-depth knowledge of their tradition, coupled with the insights and activism of the growing feminist movement, led to demands for equality from women across the four denominations of Jewish observance: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. The thrilling transformations included women reading from the Torah, the holy scrolls that are the foundation of Judaism; the ordination of women rabbis; inclusive liturgical language; and the recovery and creation of rituals celebrating girls, women, and members of the LGBTQ community. Jewish and non-Jewish readers alike will admire the courage and clarity of Joyce’s interviewees, from Orthodox women like Blu Greenberg to liberal activists Laura Geller, Rebecca Alpert, and Judith Plaskow, among many others.

Each of these books offers a deserved paean to the achievements of Jewish women. Yet in preparing this review at a time when hostility toward Jews is again a daily occurrence, it is impossible to avoid the presence of

Feminism utterly transformed the lives of the Jewish women who challenged patriarchal practices within traditional Judaism.

BOOKS

anti-Semitism that clouds even these celebratory volumes. I found myself repeatedly thinking of Adrienne Rich's powerful 1982 essay "Split at the Root," in which the author acknowledges the impossibility of denying any aspect of her identity: "white, Jewish, anti-Semite, racist, anti-racist, once married, lesbian, middle-class, expatriate southerner, split at the root."³ Her father had concealed his — and thus Adrienne's — Jewish heritage, embracing his wife's Southern gentile culture in the mistaken notion that has haunted Jews for millennia: "Be more like us and you can be almost one of us."⁴

The suppression of Jewish identity in order to be included in groups opposing class privilege has been just as pervasive, as Antler chronicles in her discussion of Letty Pogrebin's classic article on anti-Semitism in *Ms.* magazine in 1982 and Evelyn Torton Beck's revelations of anti-Semitism within the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA).⁵

Joyce Antler and I continue our connection through a study group on feminism, Zionism, and anti-Semitism. At our last meeting, members decided to share a special Jewish feminist experience that had occurred since we had last met several

months earlier. Joyce spoke about a dinner she had attended at the home of Orthodox feminist Blu Greenberg. The occasion was to honor Heather Booth, one of the "secular" feminists discussed in *Radical Jewish Feminism*.⁶ The two had met through Joyce's work. That gathering signifies that Jewish feminists, despite very different ways of expressing their commitments to their faith and to the women's movement, are joined at the root. I hope their experiences as portrayed in these two wonderful books will enlighten readers and generate coalitions within and beyond the Jewish feminist community.

Notes

1. In 1999, Brandeis University published Tobin Belzer's study, *The Status of Jewish Women's Studies in the United States and Canada: A Survey of Courses* (<https://www.brandeis.edu/hbi/research-projects/legacy-projects/workingpapers/docs/belzer.pdf>). At that time there were 188 Jewish women's studies courses taught by 143 different faculty members. Although I have not located a comparable recent study, what was then considered to be a growing phenomenon had perhaps reached its apex, another reason to welcome these important volumes that can encourage a renewal of courses or portions of courses that cover Jewish women.
2. These meetings were sponsored by the Jewish Women's Archive (<https://jwa.org>), whose extensive online collection, highlighting most of the women discussed in these books and many other Jewish women who contributed to the history of this country and to the feminist movement, is a valuable resource for women's and gender studies (WGS) courses.
3. Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root," in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (W.W. Norton, 1986), p. 122.
4. Rich, p. 114.
5. Shortly after its founding in 1977, in its mission statement opposing racism and other forms of oppression, NWSA named anti-Semitism as one of those forms of oppression only after modifying the definition of the term to include oppression against Arabs. This decision contradicted the origins of the term, which was coined (in the 1870s by the German political writer and avowed racist Wilhelm Marr) to denote hatred specifically of Jews as a particular racial group and has carried that explicit meaning ever since. The marginalization of Jews continues to be debated within NWSA. For example, the organization's leadership quickly issued a statement excoriating the racism of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in August 2017, but did not specifically address the anti-Semitic chants of the white supremacists ("Jews will not replace us") until after some members demanded that the statement be amended.
6. Booth, described as "the most influential person you never heard of," is the subject of a recent film by Lilly Rivlin, *Heather Booth: Changing the World* — which is also a recommended resource for WGS courses.

[Janet Freedman is a resident scholar at the Brandeis University Women's Studies Research Center. She previously served as the dean of library services and professor of education and women's studies at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, where she was also an active participant and volunteer co-director of the Center for Jewish Culture.]