

Rabbi Jill Jacobs is the rabbi-in-residence at the Jewish Funds for Justice. She writes and speaks frequently about Jewish perspectives on contemporary economic and social concerns; her writings on issues such as housing, *tzedakah* (charity), living wage, and unions have appeared in more than two dozen books, journals, and magazines. Rabbi Jacobs received rabbinic ordination and an MA in Talmud from the Jewish Theological Seminary, an MS in urban affairs from Hunter College, and a BA in comparative literature from Columbia University. She lives in Manhattan with her husband, Guy Austrian.



## Bread, Roses, and Chutzpah

### *Jewish Women in American Social Movements*

RABBI JILL JACOBS

THE STORY OF the major American social movements of the last hundred years can be read as the story of Jewish women's emerging leadership in the United States. Not only do Jewish women appear in disproportionate number among the leadership of the labor, feminist, and civil rights movements, but Jewish women's organizations, such as Hadassah and the National Council of Jewish Women, have engaged in struggles for universal suffrage, reproductive rights, health care, and immigration reform.<sup>1</sup>

Is it just a coincidence that Jewish women have played such prominent roles in major social movements? Is doing social justice work as a Jewish woman fundamentally different from doing social justice work as a man, or as a non-Jewish woman? And should this historical phenomenon have any effect on how contemporary Jewish women think about our own commitments?

To answer these questions, we will explore how three historical Jewish women, involved in three different American social movements, have spoken about the intersection of their female, Jewish, and activist identities. Since feminism has taught us that the personal is political, I will also reflect on my own experiences doing social justice work, with attention to what it means for me to do this work as a Jewish woman. Through these examples, we will explore potential means of constructing a specifically Jewish, female, and justice-centered identity.

### The Labor Organizer

In 1909, tens of thousands of young, mostly Jewish, women stunned New York by striking for three months to protest the dangerous working conditions and low wages of the garment factories that employed many immigrant women. This strike, the culmination of several years of organizing, was notable on at least three accounts. First, women, who had been dismissed by the male union establishment as "unorganizable," thrust themselves into the center of the labor movement. Second, the struggle was primarily an internal Jewish one, with young Jewish women organizing against older Jewish male factory owners. Finally, the strike generated cross-class alliances, as wealthier women stepped in to support the strikers.<sup>2</sup>

Rose Schneiderman was one of the young women who stepped into the limelight during "the Uprising of the Twenty Thousand," as the strike came to be called. She would go on to devote her life to being a professional labor leader. While Schneiderman studiously avoids personal reflection in her autobiography, she does offer a few scattered hints about her self-perception as a Jewish woman.

In recalling her childhood in Russian-occupied Poland, Schneiderman points to a love of learning that will become a constant theme in her life:



I started going to Hebrew school when I was four. Though it was somewhat unusual for girls to study in these primitive schools which were almost always in the home of the *Melamed* or teacher, Mother was determined that I learn Hebrew so I could read and understand the prayers recited at home and in the synagogue.<sup>3</sup>

This ability to read would later serve Schneiderman well when economic pressures forced her into the workforce. Not long after her family immigrated to America, her father died, and the teenage Schneiderman dropped out of school to work in a factory. Determined to continue her education, Schneiderman enrolled in night school, only to find that the teacher was more interested in chatting with students than in educating them. In frustration, she quit night school and began to read at home with her mother:

To my great joy I found there were other ways of acquiring knowledge. Mother, who had always loved books, (although she could read only the Hebrew prayer book), asked me to read the Bible stories in Yiddish to her. We started with the story of Joseph and his brothers which Father had dramatized years before, and we had a wonderful time as I tearfully read about the inhumanity of Joseph's brothers.... Later on I began reading English novels in the ten-cent paperback editions of the day that I somehow managed to buy.... I devoured everything I could lay hands on.<sup>4</sup>

For Schneiderman, biblical text became a gateway to the world of learning and a means of accessing a new world of possibility. Perhaps her tears over the inhumanity of Joseph's brothers reflect her pain at the cruelty of her own "brothers"—the Jewish men who ran the factory in which Schneiderman worked as a cap maker, and who seemed similarly willing to sell their siblings for a small profit. In

reading with her mother after her father's death, Schneiderman also began to develop a sense of herself as a member of a community of Jewish women. Indeed, few men play more than cameo roles in her book.

Schneiderman's introduction to biblical justice and injustice gave way to more practical lessons as she discovered the world of labor organizing, also through a community of Jewish women:

Early in 1903, a young woman named Bessie Braut came to work with us.... She wasted no time in giving us the facts of life—that the men in our trade belonged to a union and were therefore able to better their conditions.... As her words began to sink in, we formed of a committee.... bravely, we ventured into the office of the United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers Union and told the man in charge that we would like to be organized.... A new life opened up for me. All of a sudden I was not lonely anymore.<sup>5</sup>

Schneiderman rarely reflects on her place as a Jewish woman. From time to time, she does acknowledge the social service infrastructure of the Jewish community, commenting at one point that United Hebrew Charities helped her to get her first job, and that "in those days poor Jews looked to them for everything."<sup>6</sup> For the most part, though, Schneiderman identifies with other members of her class, most of whom, given the Lower East Side milieu, happen to be Jewish. Unlike later activists, she did not choose to affiliate with a women's movement; the exclusion of women from the mainstream trade unions left her no other real option. Later, Schneiderman would reach out to women of other class backgrounds, but her early efforts took place within the context of her immediate community.

A few elements of her Jewish background did, however, inform Schneiderman's activism. First of all, her immigration experience gave Schneiderman an early taste of struggle and survival. Later generations of Jews, both men and women, claim their parents' and



grandparents' immigration stories as the inspiration for their own activism; Schneiderman and others of her generation needed no help in imagining the experience of being an outsider. Second, Schneiderman's early Jewish education ultimately offered her the possibility of escaping the harsh reality of the factory. In the biblical narrative, she could find models of justice and injustice, and in reading other books, she could envision a different life.

## The Freedom Rider<sup>7</sup>

In a 1962 issue of the *Reconstructionist*, Betty Alschuler reflects on her experience traveling to Albany, Georgia, with a group of ministers in an attempt to desegregate the city:

A Jew, as I am, heading south, led by a Christian minister on a Christian mission, has a crowd of memories. My head was teeming: "And the Egyptians dealt ill with us," "And a stranger shalt thou not oppress for ye know the heart of a stranger seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt..."

The Unitarian is glad there is a Jew with the party. He feels less like an outsider. The Catholics are glad; they feel less like outsiders, too. The Negro is glad there is a Jew; we have been slaves. The Protestants are glad, I don't know why....

Freedom songs sung by beautiful rich colored voices. Clapping, rhythmic melody. "We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder," Gospel songs. But I am not a soldier of the cross. I close my mouth, for I can't sing this. As I do, I think some part of me is shut off from this war. I can't be wholehearted about it. How can I fight a war which does not engage my whole self? Because I am Jewish?...

My daughter and I speak with two members of the Jewish Congregation in Albany. Two men of dignity and status. My daughter tries to convince them that

integration is a must. I listen. We hear frightened men, confused men, say "This is not a Jewish problem. This is not for outsiders...." They are charming, gallant, well-assimilated southerners who know the art of speaking to women.... I see these gentlemen, Jews, under their southern manners, trapped. If the Klan marches, and they are gathering, if violence breaks, they know they will get it.... My sympathy goes to them, even though their speeches are absurd.<sup>8</sup>

Alschuler simultaneously struggles to understand how she, as a Jew, fits into the integration struggle, and how she, as an integrationist, can relate to the Albany Jewish community. She finds precedent for her own involvement in the biblical story of the Exodus from Egypt, but also is confused by the juxtaposition of the Torah's image of Jacob's ladder with lyrics celebrating soldiers of the cross. She sympathizes with the Jewish "gentlemen," whom she knows to be as vulnerable to anti-Semitism as she herself is, but cannot sympathize with a viewpoint that does not consider integration to be a "Jewish problem." Alschuler searches for a way to "engage [her] whole self" in the effort, but finds no place for her whole self among either Jews or Christians.

In the South, Alschuler is an outsider on multiple levels: she is a Jew among Christians, a northern integrationist among southern Jews committed to the status quo, and a Jewish woman arguing with "men of dignity and status" in a time before women occupied positions of Jewish communal leadership. Alschuler's apparent lack of anger at the Jewish men who condescend to her and her daughter may emanate from her awareness of herself as a triple outsider. She recognizes the men as fellow outsiders, but also realizes that they are not quite sufficiently outside to see the ways in which their own fate is tied to that of southern African Americans.

Unlike Schneiderman, Alschuler did not organize around an issue that primarily affected her own community. While the civil



rights movement would result in tangible benefits for the Jewish community, Alschuler went south to champion integration, not principally to benefit herself or other Jews. At the same time, she appreciated the history of oppression and the threat of discrimination that she shared with the African American communities at the center of the struggle.

The twin themes of biblical inspiration and identification with the outsider recur throughout the history of American Jewish activism in general, and of Jewish women's activism in particular. Judith Rosenbaum comments, "The otherness that many Jewish women felt as Jews in postwar America dovetailed with their experiences of otherness as women. Though often painful, the parallelism of these experiences bolstered their determination to fight for inclusion and equality."<sup>9</sup> Alschuler's own experience of being an outsider enabled her and others like her to identify with the marginalized, and inspired these women to fight for equality.

## The Feminist

Betty Friedan had already well established herself as a feminist leader when she began to speak also as a Jew. In a 1988 interview with *Tikkun* magazine, she reflects on the ways that her Jewish upbringing and later Jewish encounters guided her feminism:

I remember very distinctly that [being Jewish] was first oppressive to me when I was in high school. Sororities and fraternities dominated social life in this Midwestern town. All my friends got into sororities and fraternities and I didn't because I was Jewish.... So being Jewish made me an observer, a marginal person, and I made one of those unconscious vows to myself: "they may not *like* me but they're going to look up to me." Although it was many years before I identified in any way with feminism, I think my passion against injustice came from my experience of being a Jew in Peoria....

Traditionally Jewish women received their self-definition solely in terms of the family. And yet, the little girls, like the little boys, are brought up to respect the culture of the book and get all A's.... But once we broke through to authenticity as women, which our generation began to do, we said we would not buy someone else's definition of what being a woman is. I am a person, and what I am as a woman is all of me, not just the part of me that will give birth.... We didn't have that sense of authenticity from our Jewish experience if we grew up as I did in an assimilated, almost anti-Jewish community. There was the fixing of noses, the changing of names....

My experience as a Jew informed, though unconsciously, a lot of the insights that I applied to women, and the passion that I applied to the situation of women. But then, conversely, the sense of breaking through to your authentic self as a woman prepared me when I began to experience the new form of anti-Semitism in the international women's conferences.... I began to make the links with my Jewish experience and my own identity, and I began to get more interested even in theology.... My feminism has led me to an unabashed sense of the unity of spirit and political values.<sup>10</sup>

Friedan, like Schneiderman and Alschuler, sees herself as an outsider, both within the male-dominated Jewish community and within the white Christian Midwest. As a Jewish woman, she received mixed messages about whether to aspire to motherhood or to academic achievement. Growing up in a secular family, with a mother she describes later as "an anti-Semitic Jew," Friedan experienced Judaism primarily as a social handicap and a cause for embarrassment. In a community in which nose jobs are the norm for teenage girls, one could not even be "out" as a Jew to oneself.



Her childhood as an outsider instilled in Friedan a passion for bringing the margins into the mainstream. This commitment led her first to feminism, where she helped to change the place of women in American life. Later, the same experience of being an outsider led Friedan to reclaim her Judaism, as she encountered anti-Semitism in the women's movement. As of this 1988 interview, parts of the Jewish community remained closed to women, and the women's movement had not fully grappled with anti-Semitism. Friedan remained an outsider, in important ways, to both communities, but recognized that only an integration of both parts of her identity would allow her to lead an authentic life.

## My Own Story

My own Jewish feminist social justice awakening came in two stages. As a teenager, I became enraged when my high school principal declared to the local newspaper that teen pregnancy was not an issue at Framingham High School. Walking the halls every day, I saw quite a different reality. With a bit of research, I learned that my school in fact had one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy and venereal disease in the state. Several friends and I began a campaign to persuade the school board to implement a sex education program, and to allow the distribution of free condoms. Needless to say, this proposal did not go over well in our predominantly Catholic suburb of Boston. More surprising to me, my non-Jewish friends slowly started dropping off the campaign, under pressure from parents and priests.

I did not know then how many Jewish women had preceded me in fighting for birth control, nor did I quite perceive the issue as a feminist one, even though few boys chose to get involved. It was not, however, lost on me that the Jewish parents and the local rabbis chose either to support the movement or to stay quiet. Though I could not have articulated why, I knew that my activism was somehow Jewish.

In college, I got my first taste of community organizing through a different group of Jewish women. Frustrated with the Orthodox- and male-dominated life on campus, I found my way to Lights In Action (LIA), a national Jewish student organization that was creating pluralist materials and experiences for Jewish college students. This organization, which disbanded in 2001, was one of the last vestiges of the American Jewish student movement. Like all good student movements, it assumed that students should do for students, rather than let older adults determine our Jewish experiences. We challenged the boundaries of acceptability within the Jewish world of the 1990s by running conferences and leadership-training workshops for Jewish gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) students, children of intermarriage, and campus social justice activists. We also mailed provocative materials to one hundred thousand college students, protested at the United Jewish Communities General Assembly, and ran programs about Israel that considered all sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Though LIA was not, by design, a women's group, the core activists were always women. I do not think that it is accidental that this female-dominated group, whose members ran the gamut from traditionalist Orthodox to avowedly secular, grappled more successfully with controversial issues than any Jewish group I have since encountered. For us, the personal was absolutely political. Our cardinal rule was that we could not make a decision that would force someone to leave the group. From within this context, we debated gender and sexuality, intermarriage, politics, and Israel. While our politics differed, our commitments to one another remained primary. This group of women remains my closest community. Many of us still have professional relationships with one another, and we continue to collaborate on writing projects, educational materials, and programming. This group of women has also come back together to celebrate marriages, babies, and multiple graduate degrees, as well as to support one another in divorce, the death of a parent, and most tragically, the untimely loss of one of our own



circle to breast cancer. The fluidity between the personal and the political has enabled close personal relationships, difficult ideological conversations, and ultimately groundbreaking work.

### What Is Jewish and Feminist about Jewish Women's Activism?

Rose Schneiderman, Betty Alschuler, Betty Friedan, and I came to activism out of different combinations of need, responsibility, anger, and hope. For all of us, Judaism offered inspiration, community, and a glimpse of possibility. The accident of being born a Jewish woman forced on all of us the experience of being an outsider several times over. All of us found in activism a chance to integrate the different parts of ourselves, while also creating a different reality for the future.

Today, many Jews—men and women—who devote themselves to social justice work explain their commitment to justice work in terms of their Jewish textual and historical heritage. We plumb the Jewish textual tradition for passages that will inspire and inform our work. We remember our families' immigration journeys, and appreciate their struggles to make it in America. We speak proudly of earlier generations of Jews who risked their reputations and sometimes their lives in the pursuit of justice.

While many of us can name women such as Schneiderman, Alschuler, and Friedan as our heroes, we rarely speak of economic or social justice work as a feminist endeavor. We often define "women's issues" as limited to reproductive choice, breast and ovarian cancer, and equal rights. And we tend to define "Jewish issues" as those relating to Israel, school vouchers, hate crimes, and other policies that directly affect the Jewish community.

What, then, does it mean to do social justice work as a Jewish woman?

Rose Schneiderman knew that without a union of their own, women would continue to be paid less than men and to work under

unsafe conditions. She also knew that working-class women alone would not garner the attention that a cross-class women's alliance would attract; she therefore cultivated relationships with upper-class women, including Eleanor Roosevelt, with whom Schneiderman grew extremely close. Today, women are still paid less than men for equal work, and low-income women fare worst of all. From Schneiderman, we can learn to build alliances across class boundaries and to ground these alliances in the recognition that women of weaker economic and educational backgrounds remain vulnerable to workplace discrimination.

From Alschuler, we learn that the experience of being an outsider multiple times over can and should lead us to greater compassion, both for those who recognize themselves—and are recognized by society—to be outsiders, and for those whose outsider status is not yet apparent. We also learn from her that social justice work should begin not with a desire to do for others, but with an understanding of the extent to which our well-being is entwined with that of others.

Betty Friedan challenges us to reclaim Jewish text and history as a means of reclaiming power. Whereas men previously controlled definitions of and access to "authentic" Judaism, women can now reinterpret and reimagine texts and tradition, thereby creating a new narrative of Jewish social change in which women play a central role. Through interpretation, the outsider becomes an insider and begins to be able to use texts and traditions as a means of promoting social change, rather than as tools for maintaining the status quo.

From my own experience, I have learned the importance of developing relationships strong enough to allow individuals to transcend ideological, cultural, and religious boundaries. Women's socialization into a culture of relationships may contribute to the willingness of Jewish women's organizations to take positions and to form alliances that many male-dominated organizations would find too radical.



Finally, all of the women discussed in these pages teach us that the personal is profoundly political. Our various relationships with Judaism, experiences of power or disempowerment, and commitments to others color our understanding of the world and instill in us the passion and the ability to make change.

AFTER  
Judais  
Is the  
the an  
against