

THE INGEBORG, TAMARA & YONINA RENNERT WOMEN IN JUDAISM FORUM

**JEWISH WOMEN CHANGING AMERICA:
CROSS GENERATIONAL-CONVERSATIONS**

SUNDAY, 30 OCTOBER 2005

PANEL DISCUSSION 4: "CHANGING CULTURE"

Janet Jakobsen: Good afternoon. I want to welcome you back to this, our last session of the conference, "Changing Culture." One of the things we wanted to look at is how culture-making works both in Jewish communities and in the wider world. Culture is an important site because it's often the place where things that can't be said in other locations get said first, and so, we're very happy to have with us both a group of artists and scholars and critics who will be able to address these issues.

Once again, we have a really exceptional moderator to help lead us through this conversation. Naomi Scheman is a Barnard graduate, Class of 1968. Since 1975 she has been part of the Long Island Jewish diaspora, living first in Ottawa, and then in Minneapolis-St. Paul, where she is now professor of philosophy and women's studies. A collection of her essays, *Engenderings: Constructions of Knowledge, Authority and Privilege*, was published in 1993.

She teaches and writes on a wide range of topics. She is able to bring philosophical rigor to the most extensive range of topics, all of which invite us to puzzle over the same set of fundamental questions: How can we understand the concepts we use to construct and explain ourselves and each other? This has led her to reflect on her own identity as a secular, non-Zionist yet strongly Jewish-identified, morally committed atheist. She's explored her Jewish identity most directly in two essays, which appear in what would be her second collection with the tentative title, *Shifting Ground: Margins, Diasporas and Reading of Wittgenstein*.

Naomi Scheman.

(applause)

Naomi Scheman: Thank you, Janet. It's wonderful to be back, and not for the first time. I've turned into something of a Barnard recidivist, in addition to sending my goddaughter and other young women to school here.

I want to start with something that a friend and colleague of mine, Toni McNaron, once said, which is that poetry comes before prose. And one of the things I've taken her to mean by that is

that there are things that one can feel the need to say, experiences one needs to talk about—I think when she made that remark, she was thinking specifically about survivors of child sexual abuse—that one just doesn't have the words for.

And when you try to say what happened, either you don't make sense or, in the effort to make sense, you end up betraying what it was you were trying to say. And yet, babbling doesn't do it. Often, in those circumstances, art of one form or another, poetry or other forms of art, is what does it.

By providing a container that doesn't prematurely force sense, but which the mind can hold: that's one of the most important roles that various arts play. And that means that they are of special importance to people who are marginal in a whole range of ways. Because being marginal means, typically, being marginal to the apparatus of sense-making, as well as to things like the economy and political power. Not to mention, there are some of us in this room whose relationship to Judaism is marginal, as my own is.

But Jews have typically been on the margins of various societies that they have lived in, and often have inhabited a position that I've written about, calling it "privileged marginality,"

which is not just this amount of privilege and this amount of marginality; it's a particular kind of privilege that gets constructed specifically on the margins. Being moneylenders to the court was one example of such [privilege]. Being an academic, particularly in liberal arts, is another. It's kind of like being in a zoo: You're protected from predation, but you can't make any difference to the world that you're in.

(laughter)

All of us do this in one way or another, but this afternoon we'll discuss how my fellow panelists occupy different positions within the world of transforming the ways in which sense is made, recapturing forms of sense. I'm struck by the fact that I think there are at least three fluent speakers of Yiddish on this panel.

Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross: Four.

Naomi Scheman: Four? Okay, so you're . . .

Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross: And Hebrew.

Naomi Scheman: And I speak neither. So we have four fluent speakers of Yiddish, which is holding on to a very, very important way of sense-making. What I hope that we'll do is have a very lively conversation.

When I think about the margins, I don't think of that as being pushed out of where the real stuff is. Margins are a real place. And they can be an exciting place. And I think one of the things we need to do is think about what can go on there, on the margins. I will introduce the panelists. I think you're sitting in alphabetical order, but it turned out to be just fine.

To my left is Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross, who lectures internationally and is a motivational speaker with expertise in the Hebraic oral tradition, Hasidic teachings, and practical Kabbalah. I don't know if you've taught Madonna, those others who insist that Kabbalah has nothing to do with Judaism, this weird idea that they have.

Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross: I wouldn't say it has nothing to do with Judaism.

Naomi Scheman: No, no, no—they say.

Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross: We can talk about it. It has to do with sense and nonsense.

Naomi Scheman: Well, when they say it has nothing to do with Judaism, in my book, that's bad nonsense. She comes from an illustrious Hasidic dynasty, is the widow of six prominent rabbis—Is it still six, or has it gone up? Still six.—and is a personal soul trainer to the ultra-Orthodox elite, and elites of other sorts. I'm not sure we fall there, but you will do some soul training with us, elite or not.

On Hadassah's left is Rachel Havrelock. People here have multiple hats on. Rachel is both a professor of Jewish studies at the University of Illinois-Chicago, and is a pioneering member of that university's Jewish-Muslim initiative. She is co-author of *Women on the Biblical Road: Ruth, Naomi and the Female Journey*—I'm always rather dismayed when people haven't heard my name and think that it's strange, sort of seriously Christian people, for example—and also has written articles on Judaism and gender and feminist commentary. But Rachel is also a playwright and a director, and her play *From Tel Aviv to Ramallah: A Beat Box Journey* was nominated as Best New Play by the Helen Hayes Awards. Currently, her hip-hop comedy about urban life,

Soundtrack City Chicago, is enjoying a run at Chicago's Viaduct Theater.

To Rachel's left is Faith Jones. Faith is a librarian and a translator of Yiddish literature. She's translated poetry and, I assume, some prose as well. One can't translate poetry without being a poet, I think.

Faith Jones: I do it all the time.

Naomi Scheman: And she's also written on topics as diverse as McCarthyism, library history, and Yiddish poets, and has co-produced, with Henry Sapoznick, *Live from Klezcamp*, a double-CD anthology of live recordings from the famous annual music retreat. She is also Yiddish editor and contributor to *Bridges*, a Jewish feminist journal.

When I was trying to find out about my fellow panelists by going on the Web, Faith Jones is rather hard to Google because you get a whole lot of false hits, until you put in, as you suggested, "Faith Jones Jewish"—then you get the right ones.

(laughter)

To Faith's left is Irena Klepfisz, who is a poet, a Yiddish translator, and a teacher of English literature, Yiddish language and literature, and women's studies at Barnard College. When my goddaughter came to Barnard, one of the things I most envied her was getting to take a class with Irena, who was somebody who was filling in for me important parts of what had been my own identity that I hadn't known much about it, until I read her work. In particular, *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue* and the essays, *Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes*, were very meaningful to me. I read them on a bus trip out West with my mother. Irena has received a National Endowment for the Arts grant in poetry, served for many years as Yiddish editor, again, for *Bridges* magazine, and contributed introductory essays to *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, the first anthology of women's Yiddish prose. As an activist, her work has addressed homophobia in the Jewish community, women and peace in the Middle East, and secular Jewish identity.

And finally, to Irena's left, is Alisa Solomon, who has just become a professor—well, not quite here—across the street, Columbia University. She is director of the arts and culture major and the new MA program at the School of Journalism. And for 20 years, she was professor at Baruch College of the City

College of New York in English and journalism, and at the CUNY Graduate Center PhD programs in theater and English.

She is a theater scholar, critic, and journalist, staff writer for the *Village Voice* for 14 years and still freelances. She has written for *The Nation*, *The Forward*, *The New York Times*, and is just astoundingly prolific and always insightful. She is author of *Redressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender*, and co-edited, with Tony Kushner, *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict*—I carry my copy around—and, with Framji Minwalla, of *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater*. So, we will start and, I hope, have some wonderful conversations.

Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross: Good afternoon. I'm Hadassah Gross. I'm very happy to be here, and thank you, Naomi and Janet and all who have invited me to be here. It's unusual for me to speak on a panel with such distinguished academics. I'm not a graduate of any academic organization.

I grew up in an Orthodox women's world where I learned from my mother, from my many mothers-in-law, from my husbands . . .

(laughter)

. . . in an informal way. When I was invited to talk about the role of *kultur*, or culture and art, I was very honored and interested. I want to share with you stories, because this is really what I do. You asked about Kabbalah. Kabbalah is a long story, of course. What's happening now in the world, with people wanting meaning and spirituality, and finding it in different places.

There is a beautiful Jewish women's history of dealing with Kabbalah. Kabbalah means to receive, to be receptive. If you go to a taxi and you get a receipt—how you call?—in Hebrew, is called "Kabbalah." So, it's to receive. So for us as women, to talk about the art of being receptive, in a spiritual way to what happens, is very important.

But I don't want to talk about that. I was going to talk about something else, but you mentioned the issue of sense. How to make sense? It reminds me of a story. I'll tell you two short stories.

One happened just across the street, many years ago, at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Professor Lieberman was the dean, I think; he was a very important scholar. And he introduced, one

time, Professor Gershom Sholem, who I'm sure you all know, who is a very important scholar of Kabbalah. It fits. Lieberman was rational; he wasn't interested in mysticism so much. So he introduced Sholem. It was a very famous quote. He said, "Nonsense is nonsense. *Narishkeit* is *narishkeit*." He was talking in Yiddish also—privately, he told me about this later—but, "Nonsense is nonsense. But the history of nonsense is scholarship."

(laughter)

And that is how he introduced Sholem. And Sholem was not happy about this.

(laughter)

Anyway, I am mentioning this because I am personally very interested in nonsense. In *narishkeit*. In old stories of old women, of all the things this culture thinks is nonsense. Like art. And we can talk about this and I'm sure we will, but you all know that, you who teach in universities. And others, you know. If you work in a synagogue, the first to go in the budget is the art. It's nonsense; it's for children. And so, I think nonsense is very important.

And I want to tell you one other story that I heard from my third husband. Yankel Gross was, *avalah shalom*, he was a Hasid; all of my husbands were Hasidim, from *Ungarische* background. And he learned this story from the magid of Duvno, who was a storyteller. I think in the 1800s he lived, or something. He was an *Ungarische*, but he was very smart. And he would tell the following story.

He said, "Once upon a time, in the beginning, there was in the world, there was Truth and Parable. This was the beginning of the world, Genesis. And Truth and Parable were walking together in the world. And Truth, she was naked, the naked truth. She wasn't wearing anything. And she was cold, and she was lovely, and nobody was nice to Truth because she was cold and naked.

"Parable was wearing nice *gescheft*, beautiful couture and jewelry, like the way parables do. And so, they went in the world. Truth was lonely. Parable was V.I.P., first-class, Gold Club"—how you call it?

"And then, many years later they meet and Parable is happy and Truth is unhappy. And they talk. And Parable says, 'Come, sister, let me help you.' And so, Parable, she puts on Truth a

little bit of jewelry. A jacket, maybe, some makeup. And from then on, people could look at Truth because she wasn't naked.

"And Truth and Parable, they walked together hand in hand, until today."

So what is this parable? This is about sense and nonsense. People in this world cannot handle truth. The truth is too complicated. It's too hard. It's too-everything. The religious, the right wing, they make all the truth.

The role of art and culture—nonsense—is to tell the truth. And we, especially as women, have to tell the truth today through the parable. This is the role of culture. And in this world, where so little is devoted to the importance of culture and art and story and—how you call?—the margin.

It's very important to invest in the culture, in the arts, in what you call the marginal and the nonsense. And so, as an Orthodox Jewish woman, this is the flag I am carrying. Especially in the Orthodox Jewish world. In the organizational Jewish world, they still think that art and culture, like this, is nonsense.

I want to talk about this more. So this is my—good. Thank you.

(applause)

Naomi Scheman: I knew you were going to get around to clothes and makeup and jewelry.

Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross: Of course.

Rachel Havrelock: And perhaps since I'm to the Rebbetzin's left, this means that some of her jewels will be loaned to me, especially the Lion of Judah pin? I don't think there's any other way I'm going to get one, so you heard it here. I am requesting . . .

Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross: I also received mine as a gift. I'll be happy to pass it on.

Rachel Havrelock: I'd also like to tell a story. My story begins in Torah. Or you can say that my story begins in suburban Detroit, at Hillel Day School of metropolitan Detroit, which is where I began studying Torah for four hours a day, five days a week, at the age of four. And speaking about this issue of changing culture, I can think of a specific moment in my young

Torah study, the moment when the people of Israel are crossing the Jordan River. It's the end of the wandering in the desert. It's the transference to a new generation, a new period of time, a new set of leadership.

And the only commandment given to the people in the midst of that crossing is: Tell your children a story. It isn't said once, it's said two times. This commandment to tell the story, of course, repeats the earlier commandment, when an earlier generation was crossing the Red Sea, which was another transference, another moment of the birth of a new generation, a new period of Jewish history. We could say that the very first commandment of the entire Jewish tradition is to tell the story.

That line—Tell your children a story—spoke to me so directly. And I said this story is being told to me, and in the midst of this commandment, I'm being commanded to be the teller of this Jewish story. Now, there were many ways that I could have seen myself discounted from being a teller of the Jewish story, because actually, if we're being literal, it doesn't say tell your *children*; it says tell your *sons*.

Then there was the fact that, at the moment of studying that passage, I was being raised by a single, working Jewish mother,

whose interfaith marriage had fallen apart. There's many ways in which that discounted me, and my single working Jewish mother decided I should go to said school where we studied Torah, four hours a day, so that I wouldn't be confused about my identity.

But I heard it, loud and clear. It spoke to me. It said tell that story. And the interesting thing about that commandment is that it's a commandment to tell the story, but what's not proscribed is how to tell the story. The structure and content of the story isn't precisely outlined. And so, I saw this tremendous flexibility in what that story would be about and how that story could be told. But at the same time, I also had a very clear sense that that story could not be entirely disconnected from Torah. Because in Torah was that drive. That creative drive, the narrative spark, the idea of receiving something from previous generations and passing something on. So in my commitment to telling that story, it first became a commitment to study the text, to study Torah. My very first career path is that of a Bible scholar, one who studies and tells the stories in the academic sphere to the next generation of transmitters of that story. We know that the custodians of myth, any culture's myth, are the people who form that culture, are the people who influence social practices and mores.

And I thought maybe I'm discounted from being in charge of this myth, but I'm going to be in charge of it anyway. And I take very seriously that project of studying and teaching, and writing academic work. But at the same time, not everyone reads academic work and, to my chagrin, not everyone reads feminist commentary on the Bible.

And the same imperative encoded there, in the beginning of the Book of Joshua, drove me to other endeavors. How to tell this story in the language of my generation, in a way that speaks to people today? So my other serious endeavor is to write plays in the most contemporary idiom. I actually am a playwright of hip-hop plays, and we can talk about what that means, and why you shouldn't be afraid of it, in a little bit.

But the other issue is that, though these plays that aren't plays about the Torah in any direct way, they are still driven from that same sense. That connected, narrative sensibility that comes from Torah. And the first play I wrote, *From Tel Aviv to Ramallah*, is a play about the daily lives of young people in the two fairly secular cities of Tel Aviv and Ramallah. No more than 40 miles apart, but a great distance separating the two. And also two cities where I lived as a graduate student, studying modern Hebrew and modern Arabic.

Once it hit the stage, and I saw that this mode of telling the story was connected to generations of Jewish struggle and productivity and questioning and reforming paradigms, I said this is the way to perform Jewish culture, in a very literal as well as a figurative sense.

I have gone on to create another play that looks at the urban situation, and the role of Jews in it. I'm now at work, looking at this long history of Jewish and African American musical connections over a long period of time.

And just with my last 30 seconds, the other way in which I am quite seriously feeling that imperative to tell the story now is that I find myself with my PhD in biblical studies, having authority in our society, where the Bible is the most abused text, where it is the very tool being used to rob women of their rights, their rights over their own bodies. In fact, female volition and reproductive rights and rights over the body is exactly what I see in Torah. The only relationships that I think come close to marriage pledges that we see in the Torah are those of David and Jonathan and Ruth and Naomi. And in constructing kind of a ritual for my own—I guess we'll call it heterosexual marriage—I actually turned to those texts.

So I'm seeing this very book that gives me authority so misused in our culture that I feel that imperative right now, for those of us who are connected to Torah, who know Torah, who speak it, to stand up in this climate from a position of feminism and from a position of opposition to what's going on, and to speak out this story that we can read and understand in our very tradition.

Faith Jones: I wanted to talk to you today a little bit about *Bridges* magazine. I would be remiss if I did that without mentioning that there's at least one founder of *Bridges* in the room, and that's Carol Anshien, who is not only a co-founder of *Bridges*, but my colleague, my fellow librarian at Mid-Manhattan. And I'm so pleased about both those things, and that you're here.

Bridges isn't a new journal. It's been around for quite a while, and although over the years *Bridges* had published many things from a feminist viewpoint about the Israel-Palestine conflict, when I came on board in 2003 we were just in the middle of putting together the first full issue devoted to it.

I wanted to talk to you a little bit about that issue, how we brought it together, which was not always in the way we had wanted both in terms of process and in terms of product. Sometimes I feel like our failures are as instructive as our successes. Not that we're not proud of the final issue; we are, and I have a copy here if people want to look at it. But it could have been different. And it also could have taken something less than two years to come out, which is a problem. If you're publishing a journal, the only way you get money is by putting out issues so that people buy it. That's how you get money. And if a magazine doesn't publish an issue for two years, what I can tell you, as a librarian, you assume the journal is no longer publishing; the library closes the entry. You stop existing, if you're a journal and you don't publish.

It took us two years to put out this particular issue, over two years, maybe two-and-a-half. I do believe it's a *Bridges* record, even though it's supposed to come out twice a year and I think we've managed 11 issues or so—I don't know how many—in 15 years.

So, as I mentioned, the issue was already in the planning process when I joined the editorial board. And it was very surprising to me to know that there was very little activity actually happening. We work by e-mail because we live in all

different cities. And there was very little activity on our e-mail list for the editorial group. Sometimes there would be five or six e-mails in one day, a sort of flurry of communication. You got the feeling that things were getting going, and then it would just stop, and it would be two weeks—two weeks is deadly if you're trying to keep the momentum going for doing cultural organizing.

And we were just getting further and further behind. I was quite convinced this issue would just never happen. And then, around Rosh Hashanah 2003, our managing editor, Claire Kinberg, who really does most of the work, told us that we were in danger of having to shut down. We really did not have the resources to pay the things you cannot not pay: payroll, federal taxes. We were not able to pay those. We also couldn't pay off the printing bill from the previous issue. You can't print the next issue until you pay the bill for the previous issue. These are some of the very practical concerns of trying to do cultural work.

So we frantically tried to fund-raise for several months, and I have to say that one of the ways we do get punished for being bolshie, left-wing, non-Zionist women is by not getting money from the organized Jewish community.

(applause)

Thank you. It's hard. And I have to say, it's heartening that where we do get a lot of money is from individuals in the Jewish community. But we have yet to get any money from "The Jews," as it were. So that's a problem. And I think if we just dropped the Israel issue, we might be able to. But we don't, so we can't. So what happened is that we had to call on our personal friends, and a number of friends bailed us out—some of you are also in the room, and I want to say thank you—our personal contacts bailed us out enough that we could pay off the bills and keep going forward.

But then that was actually the moment of truth because once we had enough money to publish the issue, we *had* to publish the issue. That is actually what we had been avoiding because the *Bridges* board doesn't have political positions on things. Every single article has to be consensed. *That* was actually the thing that was holding us back, facing each other as a group of . . .

I think when I joined, I was the sixth member of the editorial board. Well, we did everything wrong. We fought via e-mail. Never do this, people. It's a bad way to fight. It's a bad way to work out your political differences. It's just very, very

easy to get it wrong. I know it's painful to come together, and we didn't have the money to bring everybody together in one room, but at least do it on the phone. Do it better. Don't do it by e-mail. There's some more practical advice for cultural activists.

We also did a lot of criticizing each other. We all did this, so it's not one person. We all did this. We would do things like fail to answer the e-mail in which another person had asked for help making a decision. Then, when that person made the decision, we would criticize her for being undemocratic. We were paralyzed. And we paralyzed ourselves and we punished ourselves for doing that. Don't do that! When people ask for the input to make the decision, just say what you really think. Don't be afraid to say it and put it out there and work your way through it.

It was shocking to me how many very basic kinds of arguments we had to have. I was very shocked to have to have a conversation about what constituted racism with longtime feminists, but sometimes you have to revisit those very basic assumptions about shared beliefs and ideas.

During those two-and-a-half years that we were producing the volume, we shrunk. Our editorial board shrunk. I made six. One person dropped out because she felt the issue had gone too far in criticizing Israel, and she just could not be there anymore with us. Another person just stopped responding. We really don't know why she's not with us anymore, but we just had to acknowledge at a certain point, she's not with us anymore. Enid Dane, one of our poetry editors, died during the production of this issue. And so, we were down to three.

What can I say? We don't all agree about what's good and bad about the issue. There are lots of things to discuss about it. If some of you have read the issue, which has been out for almost a year, we can talk about some of the things in it later.

I do want to say that it's very important to us that we keep building from what we did in this issue. And I've brought some of the calls for submission for, not the coming issue, which we're already putting to bed, but the one after that, which is about resistance, which we hope will help us better fight the Bush administration. I have some of the calls for submission and I really do hope many of you will think about helping us think through those issues. And with that, I just want to say, we are a community together making feminist vision, and I hope that you

will think about *Bridges* as a place that we can all do that work together.

Irena wants me to mention that we've just entered a publication agreement with Indiana University Press, which means we can never fall behind on our publication deadline ever again. We will be coming out twice a year from now on.

Irena Klepfisz: I think it's one of the great achievements. I think it's wonderful that *Bridges* is able to last this long and have this wonderful reward where they actually just edit and Indiana just publishes it. They just have to do the battles. I don't trust myself these days to talk ad-lib, so I'm going to read a statement that I wrote.

There was a time when Yiddish criticism had only one aesthetic criteria, and by which a work of art was judged. A criterion embodied in the question, "Is it good for the Jews?" If it was, well, then it was good art. A work of art was good for the Jews if it didn't reinforce Jewish stereotypes, fan flames of anti-Semitism, and if, in general, it showed Jews in the best light possible. In short, Jewish artists were supposed to be the unofficial image protectors of the Jewish people.

Contemporary Yiddish criticism has almost completely abandoned this fear that Jews must always be careful and make sure that what we say and do won't be a *shonda fur di goyim*, a disgrace in front of the gentiles.

But as "ordinary users" of art—I couldn't think of a better term—Jews, on the whole, have not moved far away enough from this aesthetic. To cite a famous Yiddish phrase or saying [speaks in Yiddish], the question itself—"Is it good for the Jews?"—remains as problematic as it ever was, since there's not much agreement on exactly what is good for the Jews.

One of the most destructive and sad effects of maintaining this aesthetic, which, by the way, is a deeply political one that supports the status quo, is that it robs the viewer or the reader of the opportunity and deep pleasure of responding spontaneously and directly with a work of art.

I have seen this operate in the classroom. I have taught Jewish women's studies courses all over the country—California, Michigan, North Carolina, Vermont and now, at Barnard—and repeatedly, I have faced Jewish students who are afraid of engaging directly with the text. The first questions about a work are not, Does it move me? If so, what is its power, its

art? Does it make me see the world and Jews with new eyes? Does it show me something about my own life, or someone else's life that I had not known before? Instead of these questions, I hear, What will non-Jews think about this? Why doesn't this novel portray a typical Jew or a happy Jewish family? Won't this just feed anti-Semitism and show how mean and ugly Jews are?

Art is dangerous material to these Jews. And one of our many challenges as teachers of Jewish texts, as well as those of us who teach the creation of those texts, is to address this Jewish response to Jewish art. History and personal experience as a Jew and as an artist has shown me that what is dangerous or uglier and not good for the Jews today can become the everyday and the norm ten years later. Sometimes 100 years later.

And so, very reluctantly over the years, I have tried to aspire towards patience, both as an activist, a teacher, an artist. But artists by nature are not patient. And certainly, as a poet, I have shamelessly yearned for recognition, especially recognition from my community of origin.

This has been granted to me only in parts. I say, in parts, because I am aware how compartmentalized responses to Jewish artists can be. We revere what you have to say about the

Holocaust experience: good for the Jews. We like what you have to say about Yiddish, in Yiddish: also, not so bad for the Jews. We're "take it or leave it" about work and class: not really relevant to the Jews. We don't like so much that stuff about feminism and lesbianism, but it's okay. We really hate what you have to say about Israel and the Palestinians: very bad for the Jews. And we despise what you say about the politicization of the Holocaust: *really* bad for the Jews.

Of course, such compartmentalization occurs in the Jewish reader, and not in me. I can, in the same poem, use Yiddish and talk about lesbians and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with total ease. In my mind, there are no compartments or boundaries. They are all connected because I have internalized them. As a Jewish poet, I need to reaffirm that unity or connection whenever I write. I have to dampen my desire for the pat on the head from my community, even my alternative community. As a Jewish artist, I need to struggle with what I believe to be true for Jews and for others, rather than what is good for Jews only.

In doing so, I don't assume I'm infallible. I expect and want to be challenged. I want to be a part of a culture of debate where art does what has always done—at least, good art—which is confront the status quo, rudely, crudely, sometimes very

unmusically. And what I also want is to have a reader who reads my words not through the eyes of some never-to-be-rehabilitated anti-Semite, but rather, who reads them through her open mind and her open heart.

Alisa Solomon: I guess, as the non-artist on the panel, as a critic . . .

Naomi Scheman: The critic has the last word.

(laughter)

Alisa Solomon: I want to start, in a way, where Irena just left off and talk a little bit about a culture of debate and confronting the status quo. And also briefly talk about now, and maybe we can get into some of these themes a little more later, two areas of cultural activity where I see a lot of vitality and Jewish invention, two places, among many, where the Jewish establishment is either not even aware of the great insight and energy and vitality that's going on in these places, or is even openly or covertly hostile to it. In both of these areas, there is grappling with what it means to be Jewish, here and now, and an attempt to find inventive ways to make that meaningful.

So much of institutional Judaism is wringing its hands over the question of continuity and how to keep young people Jewish. The bad answer that many of them have come up with is to send them on a propagandistic trip to Israel, rather than ask the question of not only how to be Jewish here, but also, why? The great unasked question is, why? It's a very threatening question to consider when you are talking about Jewish continuity, which was the only subject of conversation in my household, in my Jewish, single-mother household.

So, here are two alternative places on the margins where these questions are being answered in life, through activity, and through living. One is queer Yiddishkite, or anti-assimilist Diasporism. Or queer neo-bundism. Or what I like to call putting the "camp" in Klezcamp.

(laughter)

An Ashkenazi movement, of course. And informal. Not an official movement with organizations or executive directors or anything like that, but really, just a kind of tropism toward Yiddish among a lot of Jewish queers, and then a revitalization of that culture by virtue of the things that Jewish queers bring into that space. Susan Sontag, *avala shalom*, said in "Notes on Camp"

that the two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony. What postmodern queer Yiddishkite does is join these two forces together, the moral seriousness and the campy perspective.

There are so many examples of these things coming together.

Irena's poetry is certainly one, where, as she just told us and tells us so beautifully in her writing, we can talk in Yiddish about lesbian concerns. There's a scene—it's often cut in production—there's actually a scene in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, written in Yiddish, where Roy Cohn threatens to sue God. And in the revival of klezmer music—the Klezmatics, the Isle of Klezboz, Mikvah—this explosion of new Jewish music that has lots of queer elements in it. It's no accident that the leading queer theorists, the pioneers of the queer theory movement are themselves Jewish: Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and so on. Of course, the people who would be making theory would sort of walk into the space of identity politics and scholarly questions about identity with a queer sensibility and start talking about how the doer is constructed by the deed. Of course those would be Jews. Because Judaism is the ur-identity of someone who is constructed by the doing of something, not a pre-existing identity.

Another impulse in queer Yiddishkrite has to do with claiming Yiddish as a language of landlessness. In the same kind of way that queers have reclaimed the word "queer," Jewish queers have reclaimed Yiddish as a strong and positive and wonderful part of an alternative heritage. That's not to say that life in the shtetl wasn't patriarchal, but that the contemporary sensibility is taking this language and its literatures, its art forms, and making something new from the proudly proclaimed margins.

Institutional Jewish life is not particularly interested in this. Maybe in the music a little bit—sure, they're happy that Jewish kids are flocking to Jewish music at the Knitting Factory or wherever. But when you really get into the critique that queer Yiddishkrite is making, it's a little bit scary, especially as Jewish institutions are in bed with the Christian right, for whom queers are the number-one enemy.

We can come back to this because I'm running out of time, and I want to leap to my other example, which is in a completely different place. Another seemingly unlikely place for the explosion of a new Jewish culture, namely in Krakow, Poland. A year-and-a-half or so ago, I was there and I met a group of young people—kids 17, 18, 19, 20 years old—who have formed a group together called Cholent. Perfect name: the long-simmering shabbas stew that throws in all kinds of different ingredients.

These are kids from Krakow or other parts of Poland who have gravitated to Krakow, who come from families where they've recently learned that a parent or a grandparent or somebody in their family was Jewish. They are interested in finding out what that means, and they have a great kind of postmodern idea of identity. They are seeking identity, and they are post-identitarian at the same time. They don't think that there's any single definition of what it means to be Jewish. They want to learn about it and explore it together.

Somebody on one of the earlier panels said that things are dead when they're in a museum. Krakow is very much like that. There is a museum, and there is theme park. After the fall of the Soviet Union, things started to open up a little bit. Jews started to travel, mostly to make pilgrimages to the death camps. Auschwitz is just an hour-and-a-half away from Krakow. Then Krakow became a tourist center for Jews. And I will just leave it there.

Naomi Scheman: That was wonderful, all of you. And we are very short on time. I didn't give the wonderful microphone runners warning that we are going to do this.

Audience Speaker #1: First of all, thank you so much. Me and a bunch of folks are representing a younger community that people were talking about not being here. We are here from Philly and other places. And personally I feel so reflected by the work that you all are sharing; I feel like we are all sitting here grabbing our hearts and feeling like, yay, this feels really good.

We are not only cultural Jews. A lot of us are also involved in institutions. But the cultural reflection feels really meaningful. I want to ask—I know Hadassah Gross has been involved in some reclamation of Jewish religious ritual experiences that have been, for me, very powerful to be part of, including Purim spiels. I would love to hear you all talk about some of the queer reinterpretations that have been taking place, which I think are really a beautiful vision of the future Jewish ritual and performance.

Naomi Scheman: Should we take a few questions and then get some responses?

Audience Speaker #2: First of all, thank you for a fabulous, unbelievable set of presentations. It was a real piece of art. Thank you. And it hit me, as I was listening to everybody on the

panel, that one of the things that's interesting now is that we really all live in a world in which we feel marginalized. As the world is changing so radically, the biggest institutions are feeling irrelevant. They don't always acknowledge it, but the same conversations that were taking place at your dinner table are taking place at their board tables. They all feel like there's a certain who's-listening-and-who's-hearing-and-how-are-we-being-acknowledged? And I wonder about the opportunity to really have a sense of reinvigoration of all of Jewish life that really comes from the notion that the margins are going to be all of our natural habitats now.

Audience Speaker #3: Thank you for a wonderful panel. I want to pick up on something. In a way, several of you spoke about silencing, whether it's back to the Israeli-Palestinian question. Alisa just spoke about it—the way that it only appears in terms of this Auschwitz-to-Israel kind of propaganda, the mainstream's lack of interest in talking about anything else. Irena, you talked about the way that people celebrate your poetry, but don't want to hear certain parts of it. Faith talked about the way in which even the editorial board of *Bridges* could not really talk about it. And we're not talking about it. It's still the elephant in the room. It's been the elephant in the room all day. So I think maybe we ought to talk—although Naomi

brought it up in the question period last time—I think we ought to talk about the positive way in which Jewish women have been changing things with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We ought to talk about the wonderful work, for instance, that Irena did in creating the Jewish Women's Committee to End the Occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem.

(applause)

We ought to talk about Women in Black, which despite all sorts of difficulties, is continuing on all over the world. We have three different Women in Black vigils right here in New York City. We ought to talk about the content of the *Bridges* issue on Israel, and the many Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Israelis who have written about positive ways of making peace. And we ought to talk about that as a central way of our Jewish identity, of being Jewish, and of Jewish women changing the world.

Naomi Scheman: Thank you. I think we should move on now to panelists' responses. I see the first two questions as clearly fitting together around revival and transformation in Jewish

ritual and celebration. And then, sources of the reinvigoration of Jewish life, recognizing that we are all on one or more margins.

And if people can connect that to Sherry's question about Israel, go ahead. Otherwise, we'll move on to that next.

Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross: Thank you for your beautiful words about the ritual. I will take Purim as an example of ritual that I've been personally invested in and involved with for many years, as a wonderful way to reclaim ritual with a heroine whose story of transformation is significant. And this goes to the Madonna/Esther thing, but that's a side thing.

Purim is an opportunity not just to create culture through ritual—we are all starving for ritual on our terms—it's also a time where you can address the shadow and the elephant, like you say. Because Purim is about getting drunk and being happy and being upside down and putting on costume, mask, but it is also about the shadow of genocide and marginalization, if I say this correctly. And the Other, hating the Other.

Don't you remember, at the end of the Esther story, 75,000 Persians are killed by the Jews? And I, growing up on Purim in

shuls, was never aware of this until some time in the nineties, when on Purim Day Baruch Goldstein in Israel opened fire on innocent Palestinians.

So Purim is an interesting opportunity to talk about a ritual that is in the religious arena, but that is also cultural, which is a way to address the issues that the community will not address—the shadows, the skeletons we have on our closet.

I want to readdress that, for me, culture is not just the beautiful magazine, the plays, and music, but going into the synagogue to create culture in the synagogue in a new way in which ritual really impacts the conversation. This is where I connect all these things together, where I call us to the challenge of really using culture and ritual, in a way, to wake up the silence.

There's something I want to say about Yiddish and the Holocaust, but I may save that for later. It's something that was connected.

Naomi Scheman: I need to apologize for doubting this panel's ability to make connections.

Rachel Havrelock: I guess I'm next in line. I have something to say, and I'll take this opportunity to speak about the reinvigoration and also about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There are wildly productive and interesting ways to address this issue.

If we can for a second drop our assumptions that opening up such conversation and hearing new ideas is anti-Zionism. From all of the early Zionist archives that I look through, there were multiple competing opinions over which the early Zionists, including some really tough women, fought vehemently. None of them ever said, "Are you against us, are you not for us?" There were creative ideas. And we have somehow, in this country, erected a kind of a Zionism that is so myopic and close-minded that we are not including the greatest, most creative Jewish and Arab minds to engage on this issue.

This is really something to speak about, my personal work in creating *Tel Aviv to Ramallah*, which is not about me in any way, shape or form. It's about the young people I met and sat in cafes with and on the beach in Tel Aviv and Ramallah, people that the performer Yuri Lane absorbed in himself.

And it's interesting, as we take this show across the country and to campuses, the first thing that happens is this incredible defensiveness. Is it ideological? Are you against us? Are you attacking it? But I have seen Israelis, Palestinians, Arabs, Americans come in and out of that show and walk out of it talking to each other. Talking to each other.

But the defensiveness on this issue and the anger associated with it is shutting down the very conversations that we need to be having. Not only among Jews, but also between Jews and Arabs and Muslims and leftists of all stripes.

Right, it's a crisis. It's a tragedy. But let's use culture as a means to explore it and to create these dialogues. And that, to me, is actually—without using the dirty word for different reasons—that's in the spirit of Zionism. It was creative, it was dynamic, and I've been in those archives. They were taxed by this question of imagining a Jewish state, and what did that mean in terms of being neighbors with Arabs? They were *taxed*, and we should be taxed as well, not defensive.

(applause)

Faith Jones: I'm also going to agree that these are very much connected issues because when somebody said earlier, after bar mitzvah, 60 percent of boys drop out of Jewish life, and after bat mitzvah, 40 percent of girls, or something like that—I actually think one of the reasons they drop out is because they're not allowed to talk critically about Israel.

(applause)

Irena Klepfisz: I'm sort of stumped about what to say. One of the things that we should maybe think about is, Who is invested in this dialogue not taking place? What is the payoff for this silence within the Jewish community? We never think about that. In some ways, tragically, Jews have a history of being pawns in various situations. And to some degree, that's playing a part in this conflict, because I'm not very optimistic about officially Jewish institutions allowing this dialogue to take place, either through cultural events or just very openly and directly on the issue itself.

There's a reason for that. And we have to really look at it in a much larger context than just within the Jewish community. There's some kind of payoff here, for us not being able to resolve this conflict, even if there is an absurdity about it.

That it's gone on this long, that it's been this bloody. And it doesn't look to me very optimistic about the future. Like I said in my talk, I think we compartmentalize to such a degree that we divorce ourselves from being able to even see connections between issues.

You're allowed to talk about this, but you can't talk about that. I want to give a personal example: I was invited, a number of years ago, to do a reading someplace, in an academic setting. There was a Judaic studies teacher there who I learned was very interested in my poetry on the Holocaust and wanted to read with me. I said, fine, let's do a reading together. You bring in your people, I'll bring in my people; it will be a good event. Then I got the message that that *would* be great, except he had to ask me not to mention Israel. And I thought, here's somebody who taught my work, he discussed my work, and he put that kind of a condition on my appearing at this university?

Of course, I said no. I ended up reading alone. But it was very interesting to me that somebody who could take these poems and not take these poems, could be so strict in separating things out, when in fact, how could you talk about Israel and not talk about the Holocaust? The connections are very important. And we

need to learn to make the connections. I don't know, this is not ending anywhere, but I'm going to stop.

Alisa Solomon: I'll try a couple of quick things. In the previous panel, the plea was made to support Hillel and not Chabad. And one of the distinctions that was made was that part of Chabad's appeal is that everything is worked out, it's clear, every question has an answer, everyone knows her place.

I'm sure this differs from Hillel to Hillel group, because they vary depending on who's in charge, but if you look at the material that Hillel puts out for their organizations—and I can't say that I've looked at it within the last year, but I did look at it at great length before that—they've got it all worked out on Israel. There's very little space, at least in the official material. Again, there are individual Hillel heads who maybe do other kinds of programming, but I have a great fear that kids who have questions—I'm not talking about far-left, radical anti-Zionists—but a kid who has questions, who thinks that occupation is maybe not such a good thing, doesn't have a lot of places to be Jewish on campus.

(applause)

And I think that's officially there. There's a pro-Palestine movement on campus, where some Jewish kids affiliate. And then there's the so-called pro-Israel movement on campus that brooks no conversation or critique. And this is extremely dangerous when our institutional establishment furthers that state of affairs.

The other thing, to relate it to a question someone raised much earlier about America: Why aren't we talking more about America? One of the things that most riles me right now, as an American, is of course the war generally. And specifically, that we are a country that now practices and officially condones torture. I can't believe it. I can hardly get the words out. And that the Jewish institutions are not raising a cry against torture is also just shocking to me. Where are the AJC's? Where is the ADL on torture? Where is the Conference of Presidents?

Paula Hyman: One of the things that we've been trying to do is to avoid stereotyping. And the American Jewish community that you are describing is not the American Jewish community that I live in. There are a wide variety of American Jewish communities.

We are not all members of the Zionist Organization of America, which has been marginalized in the Jewish community. I speak from my experience at Yale University and also as an activist in the non-academic Jewish community of New Haven. We bring a wide variety of speakers about Israel to the community.

If anything, I would say that people who are to the right on Israel feel that their voices, their needs are not being met; and we've tried to bring in people who represent all political movements. Eric Asherman did very well when he visited. He is the head of Rabbis for Human Rights located, in Israel, and he visited New Haven, speaking all over the community.

The notion that there is only one American Jewish voice on Israel that is being heard in our communities—I don't think you know our communities very well.

Alisa Solomon: I don't think that's what we are saying, if I may. At least, that's not what I am saying. I'm trying to make a distinction. I agree with you, and I applaud that work. The distinction I'm trying to make is that the official Jewish leadership is putting out a message that does not reflect where most American Jews are on these issues.

Paula Hyman: I would say that maybe we should avoid talking about official Jewish leadership. There are many leaderships in the American Jewish community. Please, let me finish. The Reform movement, which is now the largest movement of affiliated American Jews, has in fact spoken out about the occupation, has spoken out also about torture, spoken out against the nomination of anti-choice Supreme Court justices. That's an important voice within the American Jewish community.

I don't think that Israel—yes, I was very happy to hear it mentioned that Jewish feminists have been involved in sponsoring efforts of dialogue. I heard, and maybe I'm just being paranoid, I heard a kind of comfortable Israel-bashing here that was being applauded.

Faith Jones: I would like to ask you if your organization would be willing to send money to *Bridges*—www.bridgesjournal.org? I would really, really appreciate getting money, which we really need to do our work. We cannot keep doing our work without money, and I would appreciate getting that kind of support from an organization, instead of just from a bunch of individuals who feel like it's too hard to work within their synagogue committee to get the entire synagogue to put money into this. I would like the organizations to take on doing that work.

Irena Klepfisz: I want to respectfully disagree, Paula. I don't think what you've heard here has been bashing of Israel. I think what you heard here—and I know that there are a lot of congregations and places where people who are working for peace can appear and dialogue takes place. I know that. But I also know, and this is really true, that for the most part it is very difficult to have this discussion. So, what you're hearing here is not Israel-bashing; it's a frustration, and a frustration about not being able to have the dialogue. That's a reality.

We can point to places where the conversation does take place. But for every place that you point to, you can find dozens where it can't take place. Where people won't allow it to take place. I have to say, even as a teacher, I know this is one of the most difficult subjects to take up in the classroom.

What does it mean to be fair, as a teacher? To present this subject in a fair way? It is one of the thorniest issues that a teacher faces. So I don't think anybody here is particularly interested in Israel-bashing. But the frustration about how to do the dialogue, where the dialogue can play, is palpable.

Naomi Scheman: We really need to be wrapping up soon, but Hadassah has been waiting to say something. Then there's one—and there was someone there—two. And there was a hand there. But please, be quick.

Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross: I would just like to share a frustrated observation. This panel—I was invited to talk about culture, Jewish culture, Jewish women, changing Jewish culture. I am fascinated that the dynamics in the room changed when Israel is discussed, and with contention. Israel for me is, yes, it's a country. But Israel means to wrestle with God. It's a state of mind. And I want to say that it is not incidental that, in a conversation about culture, we avoid talking about how to change what's happening here at home, and we talk about the big elephant, Israel.

It's a big issue, Israel. It's a big responsibility. But this conversation, interestingly, went from talking about us here at home, to something else. And our responsibility is looking at our own *kishkas* first. The Israel inside.

(applause)

This is what I wanted to talk about tonight, with all due respect to the important human work on making Israel a better place, and us a better home.

Audience Speaker #4: My comment seems to fit in with what Hadassah was just saying. I wanted to start with a very quick story from an organization that I've done a lot of work with, Jews Against the Occupation. And we used to do a lot of historical and cultural education of ourselves within that organization. And I remember one of the younger members at one point describing his previous Jewish education at a fairly standard, large Reform synagogue, as going directly from the Talmud to the Holocaust, and taking in absolutely nothing in between.

One of the things that I really took away from that, and from the experience of doing in-house education within JATO, was the need for many of us, as American Jews, to ground our understanding of Jewishness, culturally and socially, in something larger than Israel and the Holocaust. Something that does not center on the question of nationalism, but that can take in something bigger. And something that I really enjoyed in the panel was the way that many of you spoke about things that are happening within American Jewish culture that are very

Jewishly grounded, and that I think would inform discussions of Israel, would inform discussions of torture and U.S. foreign policy and U.S. domestic policy, things that don't begin or end with nationalism and Israel.

Audience Speaker #5: I had a thought and comment after I heard someone in the audience say that we are all being marginalized because the world is changing so quickly. That made me feel that everything is moving away from the individual. And that could be a good thing or a bad thing. It could result in tribal living attempting to be egalitarian, or it could result in Nazism or slavery. Or maybe, something new and unknown and good.

Audience Speaker #6: I know we are talking a lot about how to bring the youth into the room or into the conversation or whatever, and I feel that there's been so much queer representation at this conference, I just want to thank you because I have never experienced anything quite like this before. It's been really incredible for me.

I don't know how to talk about homophobia in my family Jewish community and in my synagogue Jewish community. I know how to talk about it with my friends. I know how to talk about it as an artist. I know that I have found a queer Jewish community, but

how to be queer within a mainstream Jewish community is something I haven't quite figured out. I was wondering if anyone on the panel could talk about that? What gives you hope to give you the work you do? And if anyone is driving to western Massachusetts later, I need a ride.

(laughter)

Naomi Scheman: One last comment or question and then any closing remarks from panelists.

Audience Speaker #7: I am the president of a Chabad house at a very, very large university in New Jersey. I am also a scholar at the Institute for Women's Leadership at that university. I've often been asked how I can negotiate those two titles, and I think it's very easy.

I think the reason why our Chabad and our Hillel hate each other, and why the Jewish studies department hates Chabad and Hillel, and the hatred is spread around among all three at this university of 50,000 people, is because we've forgotten about Judaism and focused on money and power. And *that*, in large part, is due to the male control of these organizations in these departments.

I think it's just great that women are finding creative modes to bring it back to Judaism and to get away from the power. And it's interesting that someone mentioned that it's always art that gets cut from the budget, because it's really the culture that reminds people that Judaism is a tradition and a way of life, and not just a way to get power and funds.

(applause)

Naomi Scheman: Anyone on the panel have closing thoughts about homophobia and the Jewish community?

Faith Jones: I feel like we just can't leave the homophobia issue floating. I have absolutely no answers except to say that there are lots of organizations out there, and there are lots of rather cool, hip, younger organizations (and some of them might be in Massachusetts). I'm a librarian and I can try and help you find them, but I do have to say, and this also goes back to something somebody said earlier, which is there are alternative ways of being Jewish. Sometimes we need to look around and try and figure out different ways of doing that.

And I can tell you, I have absolutely no Jewish practice at all, and I feel extremely connected to being a Jew. There are people who do it the other way: become more Jewish as they become more queer. I have no answers, but I think it's an extremely real thing and if you want to talk about it later, I'll be right here.

Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross: Just do it, darling. Just do it. Very simple. You can call me later.

(laughter)

Naomi Scheman: And on that note . . .

Audience Speaker #8: Just one quick response to the young woman from Massachusetts. Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and Transgender, here in New York—I know that the New York City chapter is made up of a lot of people from Jewish families and parents who are Jewish and people who are parts of various Jewish organizations, et cetera. They're dealing with all the issues around being lesbian and gay and queer and transgender, however one wants to think of oneself. And if you're in Massachusetts, there are chapters there too. That might be a source.

Janet Jakobsen: I just want to say thank you to everyone, because I think not only should we just do it, but we've just done it. It's been very impressive.

(applause)

People's willingness to engage with each other, to say what they thought, but to do so in a respectful way, has just been wonderful. I want to thank our organizers, our co-sponsor Hillel, and everybody who has been here. I invite you to continue the conversation upstairs, with food and drink. And I also ask you to continue the conversation as we go forward.