

Feminism and Anti-Judaism,” an article that shocked many Christian and non-Christian feminists when it appeared in 1978. The second section also contains articles on Jewish anti-paganism and the need for Jewish feminists to face head on the “hard texts” in the Hebrew Bible, the ones most women at least find “morally repugnant,” like the treatment of Vashti in the Book of Esther or Lot’s offering his virgin daughters to the rape-intent mob in Sodom as a substitute for a male guest in his house. “Creating a Feminist Judaism,” Section III, deals with how Judaism can be changed to be welcoming to women and other minorities. The articles in this section date from 1987 to 2003 and include “Beyond Egalitarianism” (1990), in which Plaskow argues that egalitarianism is not enough and goes on to outline five stages towards “genuine equality.” Another essay in this section deals with the agonizing plight of the *agunot*, “chained women,” abandoned or separated Jewish women whose husbands refuse to give them a Jewish divorce (a *get*) and who therefore cannot remarry. Section IV, “Sexuality, Authority, and Tradition,” concentrates on Jewish and scriptural attitudes to sexuality and homosexuality, with articles dating from 1997 to 2003. Partly as the result of her involvement in the inter-religious and inter-cultural Good Sex Project, Plaskow examines Judaism’s position on sexuality in general and discusses the relationship between compulsory heterosexuality and sexism. Throughout the collection she addresses issues such as the effect of male God language on women, the need to deal with traditional scriptures as male productions, and the problems involved in women’s gaining equality in male religion.

Perhaps the most rewarding article in a volume replete with reward is Plaskow’s warm and self-revelatory introduction to the volume. She calls it “Intersections,” an apt title. She begins by observing that she “cannot separate [her] intellectual journey from [her] personal journey.”

Then she proceeds to demonstrate, through an account of her life from early times to the present, that indeed “the personal is political.” She became a feminist in the fall of 1969, as did so many. At the time she was in her second year of graduate study at Yale University, and the process of consciousness-raising was “life-changing.” As a woman who had cherished an ambition to become a rabbi, she found herself a rabbi’s wife: after one feminist meeting, she “spent half the night weeping, feeling at age twenty-two that [she] had wasted [her] life.” Plaskow lists three main factors that assisted her moving from “an angry sense of powerlessness” to being able to have “a vision of a transformed Judaism.” They were the publication of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s *In Memory of Her*, Plaskow’s coming out as a lesbian, and the decision of the feminist spirituality collective to which she belonged to stop trying to reach consensus “on how to worship together” and rather to draw on differences in developing prayer and liturgy. She concludes the introduction by contemplating the interconnections in her life, a life that she has lived in deep involvement with feminism and Judaism, herself a major force in the development of feminist theology in North America.

Aside from reprinting most of Judith Plaskow’s important articles on feminist and Jewish feminist theology, the collection also makes available a number of short pieces Plaskow wrote from 1990 to 1996 for *Tikkun: A Bimonthly Jewish and Interfaith Critique of Politics, Culture & Society*. Though these pieces are popular and written to be accessible, they nonetheless address difficult subjects like the ambiguity of God, hierarchy, and Jewish anti-paganism. As the editor says in the Foreword, “Judith’s work is not for the faint-hearted.” Indeed it is not, but, as this collection demonstrates, it is certainly worth the read. Not only does it deal with most issues in feminist theology, but it also tackles

what Plaskow calls “the hard stuff” not just of text, but also, among others, of the maleness of the monotheistic god, the otherness of women that is embedded in the monotheistic traditions, authority and hierarchy in religion, sexual ethics, and gay and lesbian rights. Judith Plaskow is one of the most influential feminist theologians living today. This book demonstrates why.

*Johanna Stuckey is the author of numerous learned articles, papers, book reviews, and a textbook on feminist spirituality. Her courses have been popular with students of all ages, and she has appeared often on television and radio. Joanna lives in Toronto and is currently working on a book tentatively entitled, Goddesses and Dying Gods in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean.*

## **BETWEEN FRIENDS: A YEAR IN LETTERS.**

Oonagh Berry and Helen Levine  
Toronto: Second Story Press, 2005

**REVIEWED BY CLARA  
THOMAS**

In an introduction by Joan Turner, a friend of the authors and their editor, we learn that Oonagh, in her 60s, is a counsellor at the Amethyst Women’s Addiction Centre in Ottawa, and Helen, in her 80s, also in Ottawa, is an activist for women’s causes and in 1989 recipient of the Governor General’s Award for outstanding contributions to improving the Status of Women in Canada. Oonagh was born in Dublin and Helen in Ottawa. Both women are gifted and practised speakers, teachers and writers, and both are married to men who accept and encourage their many activities. They began this friendly project in July of 2001, determined to revive the old letter-writing habit,

now threatened by the ubiquitous e-mail. They agreed to send long, hand-written letters to each other every two weeks for a year—to their own great pleasure and pride, in July of 2002 they triumphantly finished their Correspondence Project, CP as they called it.

Helen was born in 1923 and Oonagh in 1938. Until retirement Helen taught in Carleton's Women Studies Department; Oonagh is a social worker and counsellor; she retired from Amethyst during the course of this project. Both women are privileged; their daily lives are interesting and busy because their involvements are many and varied, from days of meetings, social gatherings, and travel—Oonagh to Spain, Ireland, and Mexico; Helen to Mexico and an accustomed holiday group in San Miguel, a kind of cultural commune. Both play tennis in Ottawa and see each other often, lunching together or playing bridge. The letters are an extra avenue of communication between them. Both of them have grown children whom they treasure. Gil Levine, a retired Labour Union worker and a keen tennis player, and two grown daughters, three grandchildren, are Helen's immediate family; Christopher Levenson, poet, three children from her two marriages and two grandchildren, are Oonagh's.

As one who for five years has had a daily correspondence via e-mail with the friend with whom I began school far far back in 1925, I do not share their distrust of e-mail; nor do I believe that there is anything intrinsically better, more complete or more civilized in writing letters than in e-mailing them. They are equally acceptable, though in this day and as age advances inexorably it is often physically more convenient to use e-mail rather than a pen and a computer rather than stamps and the post office. Also I have found from hard experience that in times of crisis, a medical crisis in the family for instance, e-mail communication is absolutely priceless. Levine and

Berry are rather astonishingly and repetitively self-congratulatory about their choice of format for their project. They are also intensely self-conscious about it. Much space is taken up with lauding of their friendship and each other and of the revelatory effect of the correspondence on their self-knowledge. This becomes tiresome, of course. Their spontaneity is somewhat undermined, too, by their reporting of their luncheons. One cannot help surmising about the planning and reviewing of material that they may well have discussed on those occasions.

Both Helen and Oonagh are used to and easy with the language of counselling, group therapy and individual self-examination. The major

benefits they find in the course of their writing year are certainly open to all who can find time and determination to emulate their example. Their method, however, is not necessary—I can assure you that e-mail will do as well and will cost you less effort as well as immediate access to your chosen partner.

*Clara Thomas was one of the two first women to be hired by York. She has been with York since 1961, the year Glendon opened. She is now a retired Professor Emeritus. This year York did her the honour of naming the libraries' Archives and Special Collections the Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, York University.*

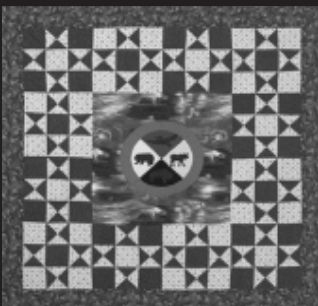
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