clustering markers
(re)configuring a self

by Sharon Rosenberg

In a recent gathering of Jewish intellectuals, we were discussing the dominant markers of "Jewishness" that others use to identify "us." I was reminded of an experience from when I was first in Canada, in which I mentioned to a woman I had been working with for some months that I was Jewish. I remember still her shock—her exclamation that "I must be lying," that I couldn't possibly be Jewish, I was after all, British!

Having grown up in a highly assimilated family, I did not know then how to respond to her. Some 15 years later, I continue to grapple with what I do mean when I evoke the category "Jewish"—what markers might I want to matter.

Naming myself, an Ashkenazi Jew: deeply cognizant of how I am—and am not—figured within this identity: the child of a Jewish mother and a Jewish father; themselves children of Jewish parents with Jewish parents (at least I believe this to be so; there is not much of the telling of history in my family). This heritage accords to me an "authenticity" within dominant discourses of religious Judaism that I do not strive for; accords me an identity in which I do not find space for myself as Jewish for most of my life (but I "came out" as a Jewish lesbian, hand-in-hand, and I came to this self-naming Jewish in learning about the Shoah). And now I am beginning to face the limitations of an identity I know through horror—with little sense of the joy it might (still) carry.

The author wishes to thank Lorie Rosenberg and Roger Simon who have, differently, offered ways to think about what it might mean to be Jewish now. And thanks to the Mifgash Toronto members with whom I am finding ways to enjoy it!

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1 I have borrowed the form of this coupling from Ann Decter in an essay where she writes through some of the complexity of being Jewish (father’s lineage) and not-jewish (mother’s lineage), articulating the doubleness of an identity in which she figures, differently, as "not Jewish" and "not-Jewish."

2 The Hebrew name for the Holocaust.

References