

Introducing Jewish Feminist Thought in a

by Deborah Yaffe

Dans cet article, l'auteure médite sur la dynamique de classe du premier cours

One class presentation, a workshop facilitated by three gentile students on building coalitions between Jews and gentiles to resist anti-Semitism, blew up in the facilitators' faces but ultimately proved pivotal in building better relations.

de théorie féministe juive offert par le Département des Études sur les femmes de l'Université de Victoria.

In the outline for my recent course on Jewish Feminist Thought, I warned students, "You'll just have to be prepared to learn more than you intended." Why did I forget to warn myself?

This was to my knowledge the first course on Jewish feminist thought to be taught in any Women's Studies department in Canada and it was certainly the first such course at the University of Victoria. Having previously co-taught the first lesbian course here I was only too well acquainted with the problems of teaching a first-and-only course addressing issues vitally important to those identified by the course: unrealistic expectations; highly charged responses to course themes; a legitimate and pent-up grievance that no other courses were providing the context for exploring the themes; vast differences between the students presumably sharing the identity as well as between those students and me; gulfs of mutual distrust between the students who identify personally with the course topic and those who don't; and the particular problem of trying to "centre the margins" when the majority of the

students have little or no knowledge of the newly-centred topic.

Thinking I could spare myself some *tsures*,¹ I arranged several meetings with a variety of Jewish students and women in the community before creating the course outline asking them "If you were going to take such a course what would you want to know?" This was a good idea. It led to a number of interesting and informative meetings, sparked the generation of a community-based Jewish feminist group that still meets monthly, and helped me to organize course themes. It did not, however spare me *tsures*.

Picture two dozen students (22 women, two men)—including six Jews (five women, one man)—in a discussion-based course meeting three times a week for 45-minute classes to discuss material that the gentile students had never before encountered. It was difficult for the Jewish students to discuss readings and ideas in terms that were meaningful for them without excluding the gentile students from the conversation. It was difficult to include the gentile students in a meaningful way without simultaneously silencing the Jewish students and/or putting them on display. Usually my classroom facilitation skills are rated highly but I was often ineffective in generating useful discussion. The class was frequently tense.

I can easily list a number of mistakes on my part that contributed to the tensions. There were too many required texts, each wonderful in itself (with one exception),² but there was too little time for meaningful discussion given the lack of familiarity of most students with the context, vocabulary, and concerns of the authors. I should have switched from

my usual discussion-based mode of teaching to more lecturing; relying on student input meant that the Jewish students had to contribute disproportionately to their numbers since the gentile students had relatively little to say and were generally too intimidated to say anything. I should have done better follow-up on some class sessions such as the speakout on anti-Semitism and better preparation for other sessions particularly on such emotionally difficult topics as sexual abuse perpetrated by Holocaust survivors. I should have given more thought to helping Jewish students negotiate the differences between themselves as well as the differences between them and the gentile students. There were many more mistakes which I replayed many sleepless nights. I could all too easily teach a course in Jewish guilt with no preparation and myself as course text.

It wasn't until near the end of term that the class started to coalesce into a functional group that could work together. A mixture of working in caucuses and in cross-identity small groups helped some of them to learn to trust each other. One class presentation, a workshop facilitated by three gentile students on building coalitions between Jews and gentiles to resist anti-Semitism, blew up in the facilitators' faces but ultimately proved pivotal in building better relations. The Jewish students totally rejected the terms of reference of the workshop. To their enormous credit, they presented their harsh critique straightforwardly and honestly but also as a positive expression of their position as Jews who could not afford to dabble in resisting anti-Semitism. To their enormous credit, the gentile students got past their pain and sheer fright, admitted the flaws in their plan which they had checked with me beforehand (and I had naively thought sound), and the class began to come

Women's Studies Classroom

to grips with the realities of anti-Semitism in Canada today.

Here, then, was the lesson I had not been prepared for. Anti-Semitism both active and passive is a feature of Canadian life to a far greater degree than I had realized. I was stunningly unprepared for the near-total ignorance on the part of my gentile students of Judaism, Jewish history, Jewish culture, Jewish women, and the very existence of Jews in Canada outside pockets of Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg.

For that matter I hadn't realized the level of my own ignorance of Jewish life in Canada since I was brought up in Los Angeles and spent nearly all my adult life in Europe before emigrating to Victoria. I knew of the Lower East Side but not of the North End, of Hester Street but not of Spadina. The presence of Jews is strikingly more visible in the United States than in Canada. Putting together my course outline I was able to draw on bibliographies of vast numbers of American Women's Studies courses on Jewish women, Jewish women writers, Jewish women in the Bible, Jewish women in history, Jewish women in the United States, etc. Scholarship in Canada on Jewish women is as yet far more limited. Many students complained of the paucity of sources for their research papers, as there is little material in our library.

There is a circularity to the problem of visibility. As Jewish women in Canada we are not visible, hence we are not studied and written about, hence we are not visible. Of course visibility is not unrelated to concerns about safety or to assimilation as a response to genocide; to trust that one's presence is desired; to internalized anti-Semitism as a response to the knowledge that one's presence is indeed not desired.

Perhaps I should not have been

quite so surprised at students' ignorance. Last year in a conversation about appropriate use of the term "ghetto," it emerged that for many students ghettos were strictly inner-city areas where people of colour were concentrated. They had no idea that ghettos originated in medieval Europe to contain Jews. They had no idea that ghettos had anything to do with Jews (except, perhaps, as slumlords though this did not emerge in the conversation). I had spent the entire following weekend phoning all my friends, ranting to anybody who would listen to me, practically collaring people waiting in bus queues, repeating hysterically, "They don't know ghettos have anything to do with Jews, they don't know ghettos have anything to do with Jews, how can they not know that? How can they not know that ghettos, real ghettos, with walls and locking gates, were for Jews? How can they not know?"

How indeed? My students, who come mainly from western Canada, learned virtually nothing about Jews in all their elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education until

but knew nothing of their friends' Jewish religion, culture, or history.

Indeed, the fact that many Jewish people have no religion, and identify strictly as cultural Jews, was the first bit of transformative, consciousness-raising information that many gentile students picked up in our class. I hadn't quite realized that the existence of secular Jews was even an issue, much less a groundbreaking issue.

Lest I give the wrong impression, we're not talking about devotees of Jim Keegstra here. My gentile students were not militant anti-Semites nor are they dim, uncritical receptacles of dominant values. These are bright, caring, critical thinkers who would have eagerly placed themselves amongst the ranks of anti-Semitic activists—if only they'd realized there was a need for anti-Semitic activism. By and large this group of students, many of whom I'd taught before and was deeply fond of, were in the position of the fourth daughter at the *seder* table: she who knows not to ask.³

By the end of the term the class was just about to the point where, ideally,

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they took this course in Jewish feminist thought. Those who had learned anything in school about Jews had learned something about Hitler and the Holocaust, and about Jews as passive victims of crazed Nazi terror. Some of them were sure they had never met a Jew before. Some knew particular Jewish people, or rather people who turned out to be Jewish,

we would begin a course on Jewish feminist thought. By that time, I had realized that the situation was roughly analogous to teaching introductory women's studies in a classroom overwhelmingly composed of men. I had stopped excoriating myself for all my insufficiencies and incapacities and started feeling grateful to the students for persevering in the face of all

the difficulties. I had even allowed myself the tiniest drop of satisfaction that I was managing to keep the course together.

What I began struggling with was the fact that, in the end, the gentile students mostly loved the course and the Jewish students mostly didn't. For the gentile students the course provided a wealth of new material, much of it intellectually exciting, much of it also exciting in the way it integrated intellect and emotion. The integration of intellect and emotion strikes me as an aspect of Jewish feminist thought that we can proudly claim and share.

For many gentile students the course provoked a profound consciousness-raising experience. They learned about their own ignorance, legitimated by the built-in Christian bias of the mainstream Canadian culture. They learned about their privileged existence as part of the dominant generic, despite other ways in which they are marginalized and oppressed. They learned to confront their guilt, their discomfort, their silence, and the necessity of taking responsibility for change. Some students confronted their unease with their own families' ethnic and religious heritage in response to the European Holocaust or in response to North American hate groups.

By and large, the gentile students appreciated being challenged and being supported in their attempts to learn to grow, to change, to resist, and confront anti-Semitism with the same zeal they had formerly brought to confronting homophobia and racism. They appreciated the chance to overcome their fears of showing ignorance, of giving offense, of making mistakes. It is alarmingly gratifying to a Women's Studies instructor to be appreciated.

My relationship with the Jewish students was much more problematic. They had a different experience of the course, which just did not fulfill their needs, since the very factors that made it profoundly transformative for the gentile students limited its value for the Jews.

Some of the biggest problems, from my perspective, were that we talked relatively little about Jewish women's experiences of sexism, concentrating necessarily on our experiences of anti-Semitism; we didn't get very far discussing class differences between Jews; we didn't piece together a satisfactory analysis of the relationship between anti-Semitism and racism in Canada, or of how Jewish women's relationship to Jewish cultures is both similar to and different from the relationship of women to other endangered cultures; we didn't arrive at a deep analysis of feminism and Zionism; we didn't, in sum, manage to confront and work through the differences between us as Jews.

For such a task, one of the most challenging of Jewish feminism, a classroom may not be the ideal space in any event since the element of grading always looms and since what I think of as a good Jewish argument consists of more shouting and crying and hugging than is generally deemed appropriate in university courses. A classroom in which the Jews are a tiny minority, in which differences must be thrashed out in 45 minutes under the bewildered gaze of the gentile majority, is assuredly not the place for undertaking this task. In particular, when the questions which Jewish women must ask each other, the challenges we must make to each other, evoke anti-Semitic stereotypes—of Jews as a tainted, moneygrubbing, over-proud, and overbearing people and Jewish women as loud, vulgar, manipulative bitches—then we must be able to count on a certain level of understanding in order to be safe enough to argue wholeheartedly.

In general I consider identity politics to be of most value in the way it allows people who share an identity to see how little they have in common. In this respect, I think that the most successful course in Jewish Feminist Thought will necessarily be a course in which Jews constitute the majority as well as the focus of the course. Ideally the course would allow for Jewish students to discuss Jewish feminists' concerns unselfcon-

sciously, *en famille*, without having to break off discussion about class, for example, to inform gentiles about the reasons for Jews' historical associations with money.

The Jewish students did the best they could with it, contributing enormously to whatever degree of success the course achieved by their challenges to me and to the other students, by their extraordinarily generous contributions to class discussion, and particularly by refusing to be driven away. They compensated somewhat for the low level of discussion by organizing themselves to discuss the texts outside of class. They worked hard on their research assignments and enhanced class presentations with their special knowledge. They got together for potluck *Shabbat* dinners and put into practice one of the course themes of reclaiming ritual. They contributed food and music, stories and jokes to the term-end celebration drawing on symbols of *Pesach*.⁴ In spite of the limitations and difficulties, the Jewish students did gain understanding and pride, new knowledge and new ways of connecting to their different Jewish cultures.

Given the demographics of Victoria, when I teach the course again in two years' time, I am unlikely to have a majority of Jewish women in the class. I will ensure the course is taught in the evening so that Jewish women in the community will be able to attend and so that each meeting will be for a longer time period. I will put a lot of thought into structuring the course so that the needs of Jewish students—and particularly of the Jewish women—will be addressed more satisfactorily. I will put more thought into class dynamics and more preparation into lectures, more care into integrating course readings with outside speakers. I'm not sure about paring down the course readings as there is so much wonderful literature by Jewish feminists, more coming out all the time, but I'll probably assign much of it as topics for outside reading and research rather than for class discussion. I'll certainly work to en-

sure deeper class discussion of fewer key readings on selected issues.

I can hardly believe that I was so recently counting the weeks until the term ended and now I am so enthusiastically looking ahead to teaching another course on Jewish Feminist Thought. I would love to share my course outline and to swap information and experience with others interested in teaching similar courses or in incorporating material on Jewish women into other courses. It's not that long ago that Jews were never hired to teach in Canadian universities. Jewish women are part of the feminist movement way beyond our numbers in the population and many of us are now teaching in Women's Studies programs across the country. We need to make ourselves more visible as Jews and to make Jewish women's presence in this country more visible.

I have personally found it very frightening to come out as Jewish in my classes and to press for Jewish content, Jewish visibility in our department of Women's Studies, even

though my colleagues are all friendly and supportive. There is more of a context to be out as a lesbian prof than as a Jewish prof. Each time, I have to push myself to speak out: for example, when feminist authors are mentioned but their Jewishness isn't; when cosmetic surgery is discussed with no reference to Jewish women's "nose jobs"; when gender norms are discussed with reference only to Anglo-Saxon norms, and then challenged with reference only to women of colour; when systemic interlocking oppressions are discussed with no reference to anti-Semitism, which instead is lumped vaguely into "all the other isms"; when all Jews are assumed to be white and all whites are simultaneously assumed to belong equally to the mainstream; when the words "rich" and "Jewish" are put next to each other in sentences as though they belong together.

We have work to do and it is good work, exciting and honourable and necessary as well as painfully challenging. Reflecting on the successes and failures of the first Jewish Feminist Thought course in Canada, I understand and honour the angry impatience of the Jewish students who found themselves having to educate their gentile classmates on the basic facts of their existence as Jews, as well as their Jewish prof on some basic facts of life outside her cushioned and cosy existence. At the same time I am glad that I was able to provide them a platform and a context to articulate their anger and to explore their ideas collectively. The world now has 18 more enlightened gentiles and seven more committed Jews. So, what are you waiting for? Let's get to work.

¹Yiddish for troubles or problems.

²*Written Out of History* which had I read it more carefully would never have included; in spite of giving useful information about a range of Jewish women it is not of an intellectual calibre suitable for a university course. The other

required texts were: *Women as Ritual Experts*, a marvellous ethnographic study of elderly Middle Eastern, mainly Kurdish, Jewish women in Jerusalem that effectively shatters all North American Ashkenazi preconceptions about Jewish women; *Below the Price of Rubies* about Eastern European left-wing Jewish women radicals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; *Nice Jewish Girls* and *The Tribe of Dina*, classic anthologies of North American Jewish feminist identity politics; and *Fireweed* #35 the first Canadian Jewish feminist anthology. Students were uniformly enthusiastic about the readings.

³The *seder* is the festive meal during which the story of the flight from slavery in Egypt towards freedom is read from the *Hagada*. A traditional *seder* is structured around the metaphor of four sons' responses to Jewish community, illustrating different approaches to the challenge of Jewish history. Jewish feminists have feminized the metaphor as part of our reappropriation of traditional forms. The four approaches consist of the wise daughter who includes herself within the community and desires more knowledge about the history; the wicked daughter who distances herself from the community and refuses knowledge; the simple daughter who seeks knowledge only at a superficial level; and the daughter who lacks even the knowledge that there exists something about which to be knowledgeable.

⁴The spring holiday commemorating the exodus from Egypt.

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Sophia Rosenberg, "The Book," acrylic on paper, 21" x 29", 1994. Collection of Alvin and Gloria Rosenberg. Photo: Sonja Bridge

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