

MJF—Lonely in Toronto

by Michele Landsberg

L'auteure réfléchit sur l'essor du féminisme juif des récentes années à Toronto. Elle soutient que ce féminisme

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existe en marge de la communauté juive et qu'il est trop fragmenté pour avoir de l'impact.

"Lonely in Toronto": I could almost have framed my dilemma as a lonely-hearts ad the year I moved home from New York. There, in the capital city and wellspring of feminism, I had found a kind of promised land of Jewish activism. In feminist *seders*,¹ on picket lines, in pro-choice marches and massive peace-in-Israel demonstrations, in parlour meetings and public lecture halls, I'd found a sisterhood of women whose activism for social justice sprang directly from their strong identity as progressive Jews.

I'd also undergone some wrenching changes. At home in Toronto, a city I had experienced as unremittingly anti-Semitic during my '40s childhood—all the more so because I lived outside the snug and protective parochialism of the Jewish community—my early Zionism was rigidly unbending. Even during the war in Lebanon, buffeted by attacks from both my left-wing friends and the politely "anti-Israel" Canadian mainstream, I had refused to criticize publicly any action by the Israeli government. My attitudes were as inflexible and armoured as those of any beleaguered, friendless minority

with its back to the wall. That's how it had felt to be Jewish in Toronto during World War II and after.

But in New York in the '80s—what a gust of freedom! Imagine living in a city where the *New York Times* routinely announces that "alternate side of the street parking rules are suspended today for *Shemini Atzeret*."² Surrounded by so much breathtaking Jewish self-confidence, exposed to hundreds of

progressive people whose loyalty (or Jewishness) was unquestioned even when they criticized Israel's policies, I began to rethink. I peeled away my defensiveness, layer by painful layer. I looked hard and clearly at the *intifada*—and at Israel's "force, might, beatings." My Zionism shivered through a sea-change: I began to believe that only with a two-state solution could we forge a safe and progressive future in the Middle East. The occupation and the *intifada* were poisoning our soul.

New friends in New York—writers like Gloria Steinem, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, and Esther Broner—were far ahead of me in boldly supporting Israel's pro-peace activists.

In cautious, conservative, don't-rock-the-boat Toronto, I'd never unearthed such a cadre of the like-minded. I came home in '88 determined to reach out to all those wonderful feminists I knew—in academe, the health professions, social work, politics, education—who had long since drifted away from Jewish affiliation, since there seemed no plausible way in Toronto to act on one's political principles in a context that was both Jewish and feminist.

Now, eight years later, the scene has changed. Several Jewish social justice groups, led by young

progressives and feminists, have sprung up to challenge the neo-conservative tide in Ontario politics. There have been two major Jewish feminist conferences in recent years, each an overflowing cornucopia of art, music, scholarship, and political passion, and each attended by more than 500 enthusiastic women. Feminist *seders*, almost unheard of in this city in the years before I moved to New York, are proliferating by the dozen. *Found Treasures*, a freshly translated collection of Yiddish women's writing, was hatched in Toronto and scored a major success internationally.

And the *Succah-by-the-Water*, a Feminist Celebration for Women, is heading into its fifth year. I first proposed the idea of such an event to the New Israel Fund (NIF) in 1991, as a way to celebrate Jewish feminism, to reach out to the Jewishly-alienated with a festival of great aesthetic beauty and pleasure, and to raise money for women's causes in Israel. Our founding committee, most of us strangers to each other, but all supports of the progressive NIF, leaped into the task. Nora Gold, now an international vice-president of the NIF, fired us up to approach our friends unashamedly, to solicit donations for rape crisis lines, battered women's shelters, and grassroots self-help groups in Israel. We agreed, knowing we would be helping to create the kind of Israel in which we could believe.

The event itself was almost intoxicatingly beautiful. In a huge blue-and-white tent at Harbourfront, an all-woman crew built a gorgeous, flower-bedecked *succah* under the leadership of Chari Cohen. Vivid feminist art-works on silk panels formed the *succah's* airily floating walls—work specially created by Toronto women under the guidance of noted artist Rochelle Rubinstein Kaplan. Three women rabbis partici-

pated in the service and orthodox feminist scholar Norma Joseph thrilled us with a *midrash*³ about our great foremothers, many of them completely unknown to us. At the height of the ceremony, the 350 women present that first time formed into small circles of ten, introduced themselves by their matrilineage, and took turns waving the *lulav*⁴ and reciting the blessing.

To orchestrate the thousand details of such an event was brutally demanding and exhilarating, and it was an instant success. By now, 500 tickets are snapped up every fall, without advertising. In four years, we've raised close to \$100,000 for our sisters in Israel. New artists and performers, musicians like Batsheva and Galia Shaked, came on board to enrich the artistry of the celebration. Estherelke Kaplan organized an exquisite array of harvest fruits and berries.

Clearly, we answered a deep-felt yearning for a woman-centred Jewish observance. Those who fail to get their tickets on time have been known to cry, threaten, and arrive unannounced to bang at the doors of the organizers. Every year sees a two-thirds turnover of attendees, with one-third repeat customers.

In 1996, exhausted, the founding committee turned over the entire *Succah-by-the-Water* event to a new and younger committee. The fifth annual event, as it turned out, was as popular and successful as ever, with a theme celebrating Jewish women's music.

For all its financial, social, and spiritual success, the *Succah* has not translated into much ongoing Jewish feminist activism. For one thing, we learned that it was gruellingly difficult to persuade women to donate money, even when they had lots of it. The tradition of philanthropy is a

shrivelled prune in Canada, compared to the ripe and juicy plum of the United States. The struggle wore us out.

Furthermore, it was an uphill battle to convert that responsive, shining-eyed audience of women into more fully engaged activists. In its first year, the event sparked a follow-up meeting of 70 women eager to launch a new organization, which we tentatively called the Toronto Feminist Jewish Community. Aims, methods, and backgrounds, however, proved too diverse. The group fragmented into sub-groups, some focussed on "woman-centred ritual," and one on political activism. That smaller group, of which I was a member, had an exciting first year in which we hotly debated the *Showboat* issue and decide to censure the choice of that racially stereotyped (and repulsively sexist) old war-horse as the opening presentation of a publicly-funded theatre. Some of our members faithfully picketed the theatre in solidarity with black protesters. For many of our group, that issue drove deep, forced some difficult self-examination, and transformed our perceptions of racism.

So the *Succah-by-the-Water* has fed many little rivulets of feminist awareness and activity in the Toronto area, if not exactly a rushing torrent. Clearly, there's a strong hunger for feminist connection, and an untapped cohort of women who want to find a feminist-friendly, not necessarily religious, way to be Jewish. The mainstream Jewish organizations, however, remain obdurately centre-right, traditional and oblivious to feminist analysis.

In fact, the official Toronto Jewish community remains as stingily conventional as a small-



Sophia Rosenberg, "Shma" (Listen), acrylic on paper, 22" x 30", 1995. Photo: Sonja Bridge

town congregation of the 1950s. I blame Canadian anti-Semitism. If Canada had embraced the fleeing intellectuals and artists of Europe, instead of declaring that "None is Too Many,"⁵ we might have a more intellectually vigorous, challenging, and open-minded community. Instead, progressive Jews, including feminists, will have to continue to create their own small enclaves and events. We won't have any home other than the ones we can create by ourselves—and that will demand far more energy and commitment than most have been willing to dedicate up till now.

Michele Landsberg has been an award-winning feminist columnist in The Toronto Star since 1978, with a three year stint in The Globe and Mail in the '80s while she lived in New York. She is the author of three books: Women and Children First (Penguin, 1983); Michele Landsberg's Guide to Children's Books (Penguin 1986); and "This is New York, Honey!" A Homage to Manhattan with Love and

Rage (McClelland and Stewart, 1989).

¹The festive meal on the first or second night of Passover during which the story of the flight from slavery to freedom is read from the *Hagada*.

²The holiday that comes at the end of *Succot* and the beginning of *Simchat Torah*.

³A rabbinic commentary on the *Torah*.

⁴A set of branches of three specific plants waved during the *Succot*. Each branch is symbolic of different personality traits.

⁵Between 1933 and 1945, Canada's politely anti-Semitic government admitted fewer than 5,000 Jewish refugees when it could have rescued tens of thousands. MacKenzie King's deputy minister of immigration, when pressed by desperate Jewish petitioners as to how many Jewish refugees would be acceptable, replied "none is too many." This notorious remark was revealed by historians Harold Troper and Irving Abella in their award-winning book which used the phrase as its title.

ROS SCHWARTZ

Prelude

your quiet breathing
soothes and relaxes me
as you lie across my knees
early in sleep

little movements of your
hands and fingers
as the dreams begin

What do you dream of?
my little one
so near to your memories of
the womb

What do you dream of?
as your world and mine
slowly become on

On the Threshold

Midnight March 23rd, 1982
in memory as bright as day:
my mother standing on the
front porch waving
my father turning back to give
her
"one last kiss before we
become grandparents"

My mother would never have
understood
why my father detoured
past the tennis courts
to see if they were dry

This was his security:
something solid in a world
of change and
transformation

He'd never before
driven a daughter
to the hospital in labour
but he had played tennis
many times.

Ros Schwartz has been writing poetry since she was three years old.

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