Winter 1980

A Note on Jewish Women's Studies in the United States

S.F.

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/470
And that is the state of feminist publishing in Israel.

We are probably in a situation not very different from that of most small countries removed geographically and by language from the major centers of feminist activity. Israeli feminists are a small, isolated, and alienated group, surviving from year to year in spite of widespread distrust and fear of our nonconformity. The committed can be counted in the tens. There is no women's studies here, though there are a handful of women struggling to teach at least one women's course a year. There are no large organizations or widespread grass-roots support giving us legitimacy. We fight, always, with our backs against the ropes, not because we have been driven there, but because, really, we have not yet managed to come out of our corner. However, those of us that are today actively committed to writing, translating, publishing, and distributing feminist literature believe that that is the key to raising consciousness and to developing a broadly-based grass-roots movement. At the opening of Woman's Voice in Haifa, one of the speakers declared the moment “historic.” But, as the speaker who followed commented (a 92-year-old feminist, Rachel Kagan): “Let’s wait a few years and see.”

Marcia Freedman, former member of the Knesset (Israeli parliament) and founder of the Women's Party, lives in Haifa.

**A Note on Jewish Women's Studies in the United States**

As Israeli feminists attempt to connect with the women's movement outside Israel, Jewish feminists in the United States are attempting to connect with them and with the Jewish heritage both groups share. Due to the peculiarities inherent in that heritage, "Jewish Women's Studies" in the United States is as much in its infancy as feminist publishing in Israel. This past year, however, at the First Annual NWSA Convention, a session on Jewish Women's Studies: Theory and Practice took place, as well as a roundtable discussion on Feminism and Judaism, and a spontaneously organized Shabbat service that was inspiring for those who attended.

One of the participants in the session has been collecting syllabi for Jewish women's studies courses that have been offered thus far in various colleges and universities. A booklet containing these syllabi can be obtained, for $2.50 postpaid, by writing to Edward R. Levenson, Dept of Religious Studies, Villanova University, Villanova, PA 19085.

Probably the most valuable source available for those attempting to pursue Jewish women's studies and needing a place to begin is the latest edition of Aviva Cantor's classic *Bibliography on the Jewish Woman*, available for $3.00, postpaid, from Biblio Press, PO Box 22, Fresh Meadows, NY 11365. The bibliography is divided into sections listing nonfiction books, articles and book chapters, and works of fiction on such subjects as Jewish Women's History; Religious Life and Law; the United States and Canada; Israel; and the Holocaust. There are also sections for Children's Books and for Poetry.

—S.F.

---

**BOOKS NEW AND RECOMMENDED:**

**Introducing Manushi: An Indian Feminist Journal**

By Tobe Levin

‘Liquor, the slaying of women and Shudras . . . are all minor offences,’ according to Manu, the Hindu lawgiver. “To rape is human,” asserts Mr. Joshi, Chief Minister of the province of Madhya Pradesh.

V. Meera calls on these voices of tradition to open her article, “Prisoners of Inequality: Sexual Abuse of Dalit Women,” in an excellent new feminist bimonthly magazine called *Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society*. *Manushi*, whose title means “woman” in Hindi, first appeared in January 1979, as the pioneer publication of its kind in India. It is produced in Delhi by an independent feminist collective committed to breaking the long silence of Indian women, who are among the most brutally oppressed in the world today. They are victims not only of sexism, but also of caste divisions, class hatred, poverty, and feudal social relations. For the uninitiated Western reader, a journey through the pages of this journal may be an excruciating experience.

For in India to talk about women's oppression is to talk, literally, about death: torture, starvation, infanticide, suicide, murder. Here we find young brides sprinkled with kerosene by their mothers-in-law and set ablaze if they fail to bring a sufficient amount of money and goods as dowry for the groom's family. We read the "Letters Written at Death's Door," three suicide notes from a young woman who, as the fourth daughter in a family of limited means, was unable to produce a dowry large enough to satisfy her husband's greed. His incessant reproaches drove her, on July 21, 1978, to douse herself in kerosene and light the match. The custom of burning widows alive has been outlawed for more than a century, but fire still seems to be a favorite tool of vindictive inlaws. As Shabha Sadagopan and Radha Kumar report in their article on marriage customs: "In 1975, three hundred and fifty women were burnt to death in Delhi alone. These were reported as suicides to the police. But in reality they were dowry deaths. . . ."

Gynocide, however, is not restricted to young brides. In an article on sexism in the family planning movement, we learn that among female infants the mortality rate is significantly higher than for male babies. A greater incidence of malnutrition also occurs among women, which in turn contributes to the ill-health of both mother and child. Hospitals, too, fail to provide a sufficient number of maternity beds, which increases the risk of death for parturient women. In fact, the life expectancy for females in India has not risen at the same rate as it has for males, and India is one of the few countries in the world where the ratio of women to men has actually been shrinking: at present,