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THE NWSA CONVENTION: CR SESSIONS

A CR Group for Jewish Women

Annette Kolodny

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Though I have tried to give some sense of the variety of people and attitudes in my CR group, I alone must take full responsibility for the opinions and viewpoint expressed here. I do not wish to suggest that everyone in the group responded as I did; nor do I wish to suggest that our group was in any way representative of the two other CR groups for Jewish women, since I have no knowledge of what transpired in those groups.

We began as a group of sixteen, ranging in age from twenty-two to sixty-five, and including one mother-daughter pair. Though we varied in our sexual orientation (about half the women identified themselves as lesbian, half as heterosexual), our places of birth and upbringing, our religious training (if any), and our economic and social origins, all but one was college-educated, and most were (or had been) affiliated with a college or university in the course of their professional careers. This last may perhaps explain the sense of intimacy that quickly developed; or it may have been due to the fact that a number of women in the group already knew one or two others. In my view, however, what drew us closely together was what was revealed in our first hour: that each, in her own way, acknowledged that she *needed* to be there.

It wasn't as simple as that, of course. At first, a number of us wondered aloud *why* we had chosen a Jewish CR group. Many of our Jewish friends, after all, had signed up for the CR group for "white women." But, as we began formally introducing ourselves, it became clear that almost every woman in the room suffered some sense of isolation or invisibility within her specific workplace or within the larger culture *because she was Jewish*. One woman pointed even to the opening session of NWSA, where a well-intentioned speaker, seeking only to raise money for the organization, had asked us "all" to "pass the hat, the way we do in church." The Jewish woman explained that she had then felt momentarily invisible within her own organization, because "in the orthodox synagogue, we don't pass the hat" (and orthodox Jews refrain from any

handling of money on the Sabbath). . . . Thus, even though woman after woman said she wasn't a "good" or observing Jew, it nonetheless became apparent that, in most cases, the fact of being Jewish lay at the core of how each woman defined herself (or felt herself defined by others), and how she perceived (or even feared) the world around her.

When toward the end of our first hour together, in soft voice and muted accent, another in the group identified herself as Belgian and a refugee from Nazism, many of us let flow tears that previously had been held back, recognizing in her story the single historical event that, at some profound level, still had the power to galvanize Jewish self-consciousness. From that moment on, the CR group became what one woman later characterized as the only "truly safe place" in the Convention.

For the next three days, we grew closer, eating together, dancing together, stopping to chat with one another en route to dorms or panels. . . . In the CR sessions we began to talk about feelings of hurt and confusion at finding ourselves, because Jewish, an especial target of Black rage. For those of us with a long history of political activism that included fair housing campaigns in our local communities, summers in the South to work on voter registration, and years of civil rights marches and organizing, there was a painful sense of doubled isolation: from a Black political community that sometimes seemed to identify us as the enemy because to them we were simply "white," or, worse still, stereotypical "rich Jews"; and from the mainstream Jewish community which now opposes affirmative action.

Equally difficult to confront were our conflicted feelings about Israel. One woman told us how, on a recent visit to Israel, she experienced—for the first time in her life—the sense that she "belonged" someplace, that she was at last "at home." No one in the room, I think, condoned much of current Israeli policy, nor, of course, the sexism of Israeli society. Even so, as another woman acknowledged, she wanted Israel to exist because upon that depended her sense, as a Jew, of being "safe in the world."

Whatever their ostensible subject matter, for me at least, our CR meetings were shot through with shocks of recognition. When, for example, one of our members told us to look around the room and observe how different we all looked from one another, we

couldn't help but note that few in the room had any distinctively "Semitic" features. "We are the daughters of generations of Jewish women raped in the pogroms of Eastern Europe," she made us realize. "How else do you think some of us got blue eyes and blond hair?" Later that evening, I shared these remarks with a Black woman. In response, she put her hand on my arm and said quietly, "Now you know what we have always known, what we live with every day."

Our last CR session went on well past the noon hour, as we tried to sum up what had transpired. Though most felt the experience to have been extremely valuable, and all felt a special closeness, there were still discontents. We hadn't, in fact, spent sufficient time on exploring our own racism, nor had we explored workable techniques for interrupting racism. What had been labeled a CR group, moreover, often functioned instead as a support group.

For this observer, to understand the ways in which we fell short of our intended purposes requires that we accept the hard fact that, for Jewish women, there is a rather special agenda for such work. First, we seem to need a safe space in which to confront both what it means to be Jewish within largely white, Anglo-Saxon American culture, and what it means to be a feminist within a predominantly patriarchal Jewish tradition. Then, we need as much to understand the ways in which we have been victimized by anti-Semitism as we need to root out our own racisms and prejudices; and we need to understand the many interfaces between those two. No less important, we need to understand what Israel means to us who are feminist, antiracist, politically progressive—and also Jewish. This is no easy agenda, and it is little wonder that our brief time together did not allow for concerted CR on any or all of these difficult issues. What it did allow, happily, was the supportive space in which to identify what we now need to understand and, with that, it generated the necessary courage and conviction to continue at home what we only began at Storrs.

Annette Kolodny, currently Adjunct Research Scholar at the University of New Hampshire, is now completing Westering Women, her examination of American pioneer women's fantasies of the frontier.