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Religion, Activism, & Social Change

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For more information:
Journal of Religion and Culture
Department of Religions and Cultures (FA-101)
Concordia University
1455 de Maisonneuve O.,
Montreal, Quebec
H3G 1M8

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Book Reviews

Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement. Joyce Antler. NYU Press 2018. vii+452 pages. \$44.25 CND (Hardcover).

Throughout American Jewish history, Jewish women have often assumed a prominent role in activism and protesting injustice. Jewish women were on the frontlines of organizing the kosher meat boycott and protesting rent increases and mistreatment in the garment industry in New York City throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Jewish women have also been actively involved in activism on a broader scale, as protestors during the civil rights movement, for birth control and reproductive rights, and in antiwar demonstrations, to name a few examples. Jewish women's activism extended to the women's liberation movement, where Jewish women were disproportionately represented as members in many radical feminist groups. In *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*, Joyce Antler examines the role of Jewish women in two seemingly divergent but interconnected avenues of the feminist movement of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s: radical feminism and Jewish feminism. Antler weaves together archival sources, biographies, and interviews to examine how activism has been a consistent force in the lives of American Jewish women, and how their Jewish identities have been a central part of their activist efforts.

The first part of *Jewish Radical Feminism* (comprised of the first four chapters) examines the Jewish identities of radical feminists who refrained from publicly acknowledging their Jewishness. For Jewish radical feminists, their feminism was focused on challenging the universal issues of sexism and patriarchy, to which their religion and ethnicity seemingly bore no significance. Antler begins the book with the burgeoning radical feminist movement in Chicago during the 1960s and 1970s, where Amy Kesselman, Heather Booth, Naomi Weisstein, and Vivian Rothstein, also known as the "Gang of Four," became prominent leaders. Even though they actively avoided

talking about their Jewish identities, their Jewish identities served as a common denominator between the four women and provided a strong foundation for their future activist endeavors. The conspicuous absence of discussing their Jewishness was not unique to the Gang of Four; other groups such as New York Radical Women (chapter 2), Bread and Roses (chapter 3), and the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (chapter 4) were populated with Jewish women who actively avoided talking about their Jewishness. Antler argues, however, that the unique experiences of growing up in Jewish homes with activist parents, attending Jewish day schools and summer camps (which instilled the value of questioning and critique), the legacy of the Holocaust, and experiencing anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism planted the seeds of activist roots and propelled the activism of Jewish radical feminists. Despite their efforts to relegate their Jewishness to the margins, the Jewish identities and pasts of these women played an essential role in their ability and drive to mobilize, organize, and initiate their activist work.

The second part of the book (chapters 5 to 8) shifts to analyzing Jewish feminism. In contrast to radical feminists who were Jewish, Jewish feminists tackled patriarchy and sexism from within the Jewish community and publicly identified as Jewish. Chapter 5 examines how Jewish feminists advocated for and sought equality in Jewish religious life. Beginning with the National Conference for Jewish Women in 1973, Antler profiles the lives and contributions of Martha Ackelsberg, Judith Plaskow, Blu Greenberg, Arlene Agus, Laura Geller, and Rebecca Alpert. The efforts of these women (and many others not named in this book) greatly transformed Jewish religious life and practice. Through their efforts advocating for change within traditional religious spaces, women started becoming ordained rabbis, new liturgies and rituals were created to include women, and educational opportunities within the Jewish community expanded significantly. Secular Jewish feminists, on the other hand, targeted sexism within Jewish left organizations and the Jewish establishment. Women such as Aviva Cantor, Susan Weildman Schneider, Cheryl Moch, Ruth Balser, Susan Schechter, and Maralee Gordon embraced identity politics, categorized themselves as a unique ethnic group

as Jews, and also challenged the impulse of minority groups to assimilate into American culture (chapter 6). Chapter 7 examines the activism of Jewish lesbians such as Evelyn Torton Beck, Gloria Greenfield, Irena Klepfisz, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, and Adrienne Rich. Excluded from feminist and lesbian circles, Jewish lesbians created their own niche, working together to carve out a space in the Jewish community. Jewish lesbian activism has worked to shed light on the multiple forms of discrimination Jewish women face.

The final chapter of part two examines the way international events impacted Jewish women's identities in the 1970s and 1980s. Encountering anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism on an international scale led some women, who previously neglected to address their Jewishness, to publicly identify as Jewish feminists and Zionists. For example, Antler profiles the shifts in self-representation experienced by Marcia Freedman, Galia Golan, Betty Friedan, Phyllis Chesler, Letty Cobin Pogrebin, and Esther Broner. Antler concludes the book with a brief examination of a handful of contemporary Jewish feminists: Tamara Cohen, Judith Rosenbaum, Jaclyn Friedman, Nona Willis Aronowitz, Collier Meyerson and Irin Carmon.

Antler's thorough and meticulously researched study examines the convergence of Jewishness and activism through a nuanced analysis of Jewish radical feminism and Jewish feminism. Antler demonstrates how these two streams of feminist activism are simultaneously distinct and intricately woven together. Regardless of each woman's efforts to separate her Jewishness from her activist work, growing up Jewish, encountering anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, having activist parents, and being instilled with the values of questioning and debate from a very young age provided a strong foundation upon which feminist activism could be established.

Lindsey Jackson
Concordia University