

# Introduction

## Jewcy: Jewish Queer Lesbian Feminisms for the Twenty-First Century

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In a tribute to, and enacting of, the diasporic, this volume presents the rich diversity of US Jewish life from a perspective centering lesbian and queer Jewish feminist issues. *Jewcy* addresses readers from an array of communities and should be particularly interesting for those who know little about this subject. In the 1970s, the field of Jewish lesbian studies launched a few exciting decades of extensive publishing, after which it basically went silent in the early 2000s. Too few works in queer studies have focused on Jewish women, feminists, or lesbians. *Jewcy* seeks to redirect an otherwise welcome fecundity in queer studies that has problematically left a dearth of new works explicitly by or about lesbians and/or women of various gender identities, as well as of works centering Jews and Jewish matters of import. Additionally, despite efforts in both Jewish and queer studies, whiteness and Ashkenazi voices continue to define these fields. This work presents a vibrant diversity of authors speaking to a fresh slate of Jewish feminist lesbian queer issues.

In the past few years, we have seen a resurgence of interest in published works in the area. Correcting a twenty-first-century shift away from explicitly feminist and lesbian investigations in Jewish queer studies and in LBGTQ+ studies, *Jewcy* signals a new trend of original works in the field that is explicitly lesbian, queer, Jewish, and feminist. The founding

period of out Jewish lesbian collective action and publishing emerged at a time of various lacunae. In the 1970s, the field of Jewish studies was not yet publishing many women, let alone presenting feminist, lesbian, and/or queer work. Feminist studies was nearly devoid of work on Jewish subjects as well as of lesbian writings. The then-new field of lesbian studies did not reflect Jewish activity. As queer activism and publishing began to develop, Jewish women and lesbian issues were largely left out. In addition, all these fields lacked diversity in terms of communities and modes of critical analysis such as race, ethnicity, religion, and class. Any underrepresentation of BIPOC in these fields also will generally mean that there is a dearth of Jews, as Jews are present in each of these communities.

The recent revival that *Jewcy* highlights does not merely begin where the earlier vibrant period stopped. The new works inherit the significant legacy of the founding period of dynamic Jewish lesbian activism and writing as well as the ensuing decades of Jewish queering. For example, *Jewcy* innovates in not bifurcating the categories of lesbian and queer, as more activists and thinkers are now claiming self-definition in ways that were difficult or deemed unacceptable in our communities for some time, as well as in exciting new ways. Additionally, *Jewcy* embraces diversity in numerous vectors, not merely adding “other” elements to the existent conceptualizations and imagined horizons of what are and can be Jewish and lesbian and queer feminisms; we ground ourselves in diversity as we explore our Jewish lesbian queer feminist lives and worlds. What might a Jewish, lesbian, queer, feminist world be like without essentialist foundations—as Hannah Arendt called it, without banisters? In *Jewcy*, we hope to continue such experimentation, deepening and broadening not only our field but all its mutually constitutive fields of Jewish, queer, feminist, critical race and ethnicity, decolonial, and class-based studies and all of their corresponding communities. How might this expand our experiences, possibilities, and activism?

Those interested in a brief overview of work of Jewish lesbian relevance from earlier periods ranging from antiquity to modernity may find the entry “Lesbianism” in *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women* helpful.<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Alpert and I contributed to this succinct yet wide-ranging entry that covers not only modernity but also, given Alpert’s expertise, biblical times (1000–165 BCE), rabbinic times (165 BCE–900 CE), and the Middle Ages (900–1700). In our discussion of the late modern era (1800–1945), we introduce Sholem Asch’s Yiddish *Got fun Nekome*

(God of vengeance), which was the first play with a lesbian theme to be performed on the US stage; Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas; anarchist activist Pauline Newman; and social reformer Lillian Wald.

Starting in the 1970s, the new field of Jewish lesbian studies burst onto the English-language scene and enabled a plethora of Jewish queer volumes. These works followed closely on the burgeoning fields of feminist, lesbian, gay, bi, trans, intersex, and queer studies, and they joined emerging challenges to the white Christo-normativity of these fields.

Adrienne Rich published actively as a lesbian starting in the mid-1970s; Judith Plaskow and her coeditor, Carol Christ, released their key feminist spirituality reader, *Womanspirit Rising*, in 1979;<sup>2</sup> and in 1982 Evelyn Torton Beck's pivotal *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* came out. Savina Teubal published the path-clearing *Sarah the Priestess* in 1984, and Irena Klepfisz and Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz released their groundbreaking *The Tribe of Dina* in 1986. In 1989, Plaskow and Christ put out their follow-up, *Weaving the Visions*. In this period, Jewish lesbian groups and communities were quickly multiplying and flourishing in religious movements, the arts, politics, and writings of all genres.<sup>3</sup> By the 2000s, however, Jewish lesbian publishing mostly fell silent, although we find a welcome exception in some outstanding works in Jewish trans studies.

Even during the period of greatest activity, Jewish lesbians continued to face exclusion in organizational and academic life as Jews, feminists, women, lesbians, and/or BIPOC, and this exclusion has continued. Jewish lesbian work is still rarely published in lesbian and feminist academic journals outside of Jewish studies, and lesbian-focused articles tend not to appear in the top ten Jewish studies journals. Additionally, as Jewish lesbians have sought to overcome exclusions over time, these efforts have themselves produced new forms of exclusion. Speaking in the name of Jewish lesbians and dykes often excludes or marginalizes bisexuals, trans lesbians, and others. Although some volumes feature non-Ashkenazi and non-white Jewish lesbian feminists, racial, ethnic, and other forms of diversity remain largely lacking in most Jewish lesbian feminist writing, as does scholarly work on Jewish lesbian queer diversity.

In the last few years, the field of Jewish lesbian studies has begun to reemerge with the publication of a few important volumes. A special issue of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies (JoLS)* called *Jewish Lesbians: New Work in the Field*, a project initiated by Esther Rothblum, was the first effort in this revaluing of Jewish lesbian work.<sup>4</sup> Published in January 2019 and

edited by me, this was the first volume in Jewish lesbian studies in about a decade. It is academic in style and was then adapted and later published as a book, *Jewish Lesbian Scholarship in a Time of Change*, in 2023.<sup>5</sup>

Soon after work on the *JoLS* issue was completed, I began working on this volume. At that time, Joy Ladin published her 2018 *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective*.<sup>6</sup> In this project, the poet and scholar reads well-known Torah stories—that assume human beings are neither male nor female—through her transgender experience and critical perspective. She demonstrates how these stories and new readings speak to practical transgender challenges today and to new understandings of the Torah's portrayals of God. After some years of creative work, veteran Jewish lesbian writers Elana Dykewomon and Judith Katz produced *To Be a Jewish Dyke in the 21st Century*, a special issue of *Sinister Wisdom: A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal*, in 2021.<sup>7</sup> This work responds to the critical loss of Jewish lesbian voices and provides an ode and update to *Sinister Wisdom's* landmark *The Tribe of Dina*, edited by Kaye/Kantrowitz and Klepfisz thirty-five years prior. More wide-ranging in style than the *JoLS* issue, this work is an important contribution. Of further interest in these new paths in queer lesbian feminist work, including trans and intersex studies, in 2022 Jane Rachel Litman and Jakob Hero-Shaw published *Liberating Gender for Jews and Allies: The Wisdom of Transkeit*.<sup>8</sup> Feminist and diverse, the edited work centers trans Jewish life in short chapters that make a valuable contribution. Also in 2022, Max Strassfeld published his *Trans Talmud: Androgynes and Eunuchs in Rabbinic Literature*.<sup>9</sup> His work centers texts in rabbinic literature that also support the project of transgender history; in *Trans Talmud*, Strassfeld's work beyond a gender binary in these ancient Jewish texts helps us to transform law and the boundaries of our communities today, significant for queers, lesbians, transfolk, feminists, Jews, and us all. Most recently, in 2023, Sarra Lev published her book-length work *And the Sages Did Not Know: Early Rabbinic Approaches to Intersex*.<sup>10</sup> Here, the rabbi and Talmud scholar places intersex readings of rabbinic texts in ways that both contribute to high scholarship and, as in her contribution to this volume, will be exciting for activists and nonspecialists.

After the period of creativity in Jewish lesbian publishing in the late twentieth century and the silence of the past few decades, these recent works indicate a renewed interest in Jewish lesbian, queer, intersex, and trans feminist issues. These works are complementary to each other, and

*Jewcy* will be the first book in this regenerating field to focus on lesbian and women's experience with multiple genders and in a queer way. We hope that this book will also be able to reach a more expansive readership. *Jewcy* purposely brings together older and younger contributors, and also those with more experience in publishing and those with less. Reflecting the lived experience of the Jewish feminist queer habitus today, *Jewcy* combines accessible scholarly chapters with more literary styles including memoir, poetry, oral history, and spoken word. Some of these styles are relatively traditional, while others are alternative and experimental.

*Jewcy* stands on the shoulders of the important historical figures in Jewish lesbian writing and also reintroduces some historical works and writers to contemporary readers. This volume presents the most comprehensive analyses in Jewish lesbian queer studies to date. The chapters span an array of genres. Together, they present the vivid diversity of Jewish lesbian feminists as well as of Jewish queer lesbian feminist scholarship today, including fresh interdisciplinary offerings. This collection makes an innovative contribution to Jewish studies; lesbian and queer studies; women's and gender studies; theology and religion; literature; oral history, politics, sociology, and anthropology; and racial, ethnic, Indigenous, and cultural diversity studies. We share accessible and incisive scholarship, memoir, poetry, spoken word, and midrash (a distinctive form of Jewish storytelling based on the Hebrew Bible). As such, *Jewcy* contains both academic and more popular analyses of ancient Jewish texts relevant for contemporary issues; poetry and scholarship on poetry, including both historical and contemporary; memoir from senior and younger Jewish lesbians; and experimental new forms that cross and defy genre. The work includes authors and subjects with stated Jewish lesbian identities and an array of additional contributors. In bringing them together we hope to model new modes of community building where identity need not be policed at the entryway. Similarly, the project offers perspectives by and on a range of Jewish ethnicities, including African American, Northern European (US) American, Indigenous, Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrahi. Moreover, at a time when fewer Jewish families are exclusively Jewish, the book offers visions from contributors of mixed heritage, such as contributors who are Jewish and Muslim, Jewish and Kurdish, and Jewish and Chamoru. We hope that the vivacity and multifaceted diversity of *Jewcy* will help launch a significant reorientation of the field and among activists to one deeply grounded in diversity.

## Chapter Briefs

We begin with a complex work by an amazing new writer. In “Henna Night Dyke,” this mixed Albanian, Turkish, Muslim, and Ashkenazi Jewish thinker and activist explores the push and pull of her multicultural heritages, her peoples, and her changing self to create new communities to remind us that “traditions start when someone makes a new one” as she imagines herself as part of a first generation of henna night dykes.

Next, we have Sarra Lev’s “Deconstructing the Binary, or Not? On a Discourse of Intersex in Early Rabbinic Literature.” Unlike much current practice, which erases intersex bodies from the landscape through surgery, scattered throughout rabbinic literature are references to an *androgynos* and a *tumtum*—one who has both male and female genitals and one whose genitals are decisively one or the other but are somehow concealed. The ancient, early rabbis had multiple approaches to understanding how intersex bodies fit into their otherwise-binary sex and gender system. This chapter, addressed to both the scholar and layperson, explores one of those approaches, which appears in the most elaborate treatment of intersex in this literature, the second chapter of Tosefta Bikkurim.

Following these first two pieces is “At the Intersection of Sephardic, Mizrahi, and LGBTQ+: The Story of a Community Emerging out of the Margins,” by Ruben Shimonov and Marielle Tawil. In this article, the authors describe the origin and development of the Sephardic Mizrahi Q Network (SMQN)—a one-of-a-kind organization serving LGBTQ+ Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, a less-represented segment of the Jewish population. Written by the founding executive director and a board member of the organization with the participation of various community members, the chapter is part oral history and part ethnography. It shares SMQN’s community-building approach, core values, and theory of change as it tells the story of the growth of SMQN. This story serves as a remarkable case study in social innovation and community leadership. The authors argue that it is imperative to elevate stories of intersectional Jewish communities on the periphery. Lifting up and highlighting these experiences not only empowers these marginalized communities but also deepens our collective understanding of the rich diversity and mosaic of the Jewish people.

Vinny Calvo Prell’s chapter examines identity policing, internalized oppression, and making space for difference. For this piece, he focuses on the dynamics of exclusion that can happen in the lesbian community as we often erase one another for the sake of purity of identity. A Chamoru

Jew, Calvo Prell brings her own experiences of not feeling Jewish enough or “of color” enough to bear in her analysis. Calvo Prell argues that such dynamics both harm us as individuals and limit our collective political efficacy.

Lauren Hakimi offers a provocative read on the controversial Chelly Wilson, a Sephardi and Ladino-speaking Greek Jew from Salonika. Wilson was a lesbian who is noted to have loved the second of her two husbands. Raised orthodox, Wilson was a porn-theater owner who’d managed to leave Athens weeks after World War II broke out. She was also one of the creators of gay porn in the US. Wilson has recently been reintroduced to the public as an inspiring figure, but Hakimi also wonders if there might be other, less savory lessons to learn from this foremother.

Yeshiva University’s Joy Ladin shares with us new poems. “Anniversaries” is a sequence of four love poems to her wife written “as gifts for one of our two wedding anniversaries—the public wedding, which took place in August, or the private ceremony held on the stoop of Emily Dickinson’s house in January—for the years 2018 through 2022, years during which my health declined precipitously due to an incurable and largely untreatable illness. The poems reflect the counterpoint between our joy in one another and my increasing disability, and the love that encompasses both.”

In “The Sephardic Palimpsests of Emma Lazarus,” Leonard Stein explores an intersectional expression in the literary career of Emma Lazarus, the nineteenth-century Jewish (US) American poet and activist. Reading, translating, and rewriting Hebrew literature from medieval Spain afforded Lazarus, a Sephardic Jew, an ancestral literary heritage for writing about same-sex desire, especially as reflected in Andalusian conventions of homoeroticism. Lazarus’s reliance on previous German translations, in addition to the appropriation of medieval texts in her original homoerotic poetry, produces literary palimpsests that help bridge layers of time and space between a medieval homeland and a modern diasporic identity.

Sabrina Sojourner offers us her innovative “Remembering Sinai: A Spoken-Word Midrash.” Here, Sojourner provides a midrash on the biblical primary source Sh’mot/Exodus 6:1–20:23. Sojourner’s beautiful work in this piece is a complex project incorporating Jewish identity, feminism, race, queerness, spoken-word poetics, and midrash.

A. S. Hakkâri further opens up the field with “Life on the Borderlands: Mizrahiut, Transfemininity, and Stateless Diasporas.” In this work, Mizrahi, Kurdish, and trans female author Hakkâri develops Jew-

ish, transfeminist, and Mizrahi borderland theorizing. Most writers view these identities as distinct narrative lenses through which one can read a life, but for Hakkâri each of these disparate selves can exist only in relation to the others, and any attempt to extricate them from one another leaves behind a mess. Only by taking these aspects of herself together as a broader whole can she begin to uncover a helpful and unifying experience among them. These identities exist in the borderlands of their communities. This leaves them—Hakkâri, and others with similar identities—stranded from their communities and seeking support with difficulty, despite fully sharing the experience every one of those communities has of hatred and marginalization.

“Meeting Cicely, or Love and Politics: A Black Jewish Lesbian Memoir” is an excerpt Carol Conaway prepared for this volume from her political memoir-in-progress. In it, she examines her experiences as an African American lesbian living her dream of becoming a Jew. The chapter focuses on her 1973 move from Philadelphia to Boston just as racial unrest in the city reached an apex. Conaway shares her challenges as a Black Jewish lesbian at the time with a telling of the racism she faced, particularly in a group of professional and educated lesbians. Despite the racism in the group generally, it was there that Conaway met the woman who would become her lifelong partner and with whom she would navigate a relationship as a Black Jew partnered with a white non-Jew. With exquisite sensitivity, Conaway deftly brings readers along into her initial naïveté about the prejudices she encountered in response to her combination of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and mental illness.

Marla Brettschneider’s “Leslie Feinberg’s Complex Jewish Lesbian Feminism” analyzes Leslie Feinberg’s writing, activism, life, and political commitments within a Jewish context. Scholarship on Feinberg often overlooks her Jewish identity and its role in her work. Centering Jewishness, we can interrupt this silencing and better understand Feinberg and the histories of progressive movements. Given the complexity of Feinberg’s focus, the analysis brings gender, sexuality, class, and race and their very multiplicity into relief as related inherently to their justice politics. The chapter situates each aspect of his identity and justice politics in the Jewish historical context of his time and place. From this, Brettschneider concludes that while we should appreciate the radicalness of her signal contribution, we should also recognize Feinberg as relatively aligned with US Jewry.

We close the volume with Rona Matlow’s “Postmodern Concepts of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality in the Framework of the Jewish Lesbian.” This



work explores the concepts of sex and gender, starting with biblical and rabbinic texts and then moving on to contemporary analytic frameworks. Here Matlow shows that sex and gender are not, and never have been, binary. These constructs have been misconstrued by society for millennia. Once the author has reframed sex and gender as nonbinary, the work then shifts focus to the language of sexuality, where Matlow explores the perspectives of Jewish lesbians and how to define that group from a standpoint that incorporates a new framework of nonbinary gender.

## Notes

1. Rebecca T. Alpert and Marla Brettschneider, “Lesbianism,” *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, updated June 23, 2021, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/lesbianism>.

2. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1979); see also Judith Plaskow, “Blaming the Jews for the Birth of Patriarchy,” in *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, ed. Evelyn Torton Beck (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1982), 250–54.

3. For a more detailed history of these periods and fields, readers may be interested in Marla Brettschneider, “Jewish Lesbians: Contemporary Activism and Its Challenges,” in *Jewish Women’s History from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Federica Francesconi and Rebecca Lynn Winer, 419–40 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021).

4. See Marla Brettschneider, “Jewish Lesbians: New Work in the Field,” introduction to *Journal of Lesbian Studies* special issue, ed. Marla Brettschneider, 23, no. 1 (2019): 2–20, which was dedicated to the memory of Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz.

5. Marla Brettschneider, ed., *Jewish Lesbian Scholarship in a Time of Change* (London: Routledge, 2023).

6. Joy Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018).

7. Elena Dykewomon and Judith Katz, eds., *To Be a Jewish Dyke in the 21st Century*, special issue of *Sinister Wisdom* 119 (Winter 2021).

8. Jane Litman and Jakob Hero-Shaw, eds., *Liberating Gender for Jews and Allies: The Wisdom of Transkeit* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022).

9. Max Strassfeld, *Trans Talmud: Androgynes and Eunuchs in Rabbinic Literature* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022).

10. Sarra Lev, *And the Sages Did Not Know: Early Rabbinic Approaches to Intersex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming).

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