

Introduction



Nourish beginnings, let us nourish beginnings. Not all things are blest, but the seeds of all things are blest. The blessing is in the seed.

These lines were written by Muriel Rukeyser, a politically active, passionate Jewish American woman whose poetry and life spanned the twentieth century. As young Jewish women in the twenty-first century, we find deep meaning in her words. If the blessing is indeed “in the seed,” as Rukeyser suggests, then we believe that this anthology is our seed. In it, we plant the spirit of struggles, celebrations, and our stories.

This anthology is a window on the lives of young Jewish women, in their own words. Through poetry and personal essays, these authors describe the paths they have taken in their search for both personal and universal truths. None of these journeys takes a linear route. Each woman is affected by a multiplicity of influences, inspirations, and frustrations as she tries to determine what it means to be Jewish and female in the twenty-first century. The negotiation of identity illustrated throughout the essays and poetry in *Joining the Sisterhood* is age-old and is also unique to this generation of Jewish women.

In the pages of this anthology, each author reflects upon her process of growth and development, and upon the choices she makes about her life and future as a Jewish woman. These young authors write about rejecting, reclaiming, and wrestling with Jewish tradition and history. They write about their bodies, and reveal their experiences of abuse and healing. In these pages, young women write about their philosophies, their politics, and their dreams. They share lessons they’ve learned from their travels across continents and cultures. They discuss their relationships with Jews and non-Jews, men and women.

Their roles—as daughters, sisters, lovers, and wives—are described and analyzed. They write about their passions: about dancing, storytelling, and singing. They record their struggles with self-esteem and self-criticism. And they acknowledge the many influences—mentors, books, communities, friends, and families—that brought them to where they are today.

Though many of the challenges facing young Jewish women today are not new, our stories and experiences represent major shifts in the landscape of Jewish and feminist history. We grew up enjoying the achievements and advances made during the Jewish feminist movement. Ours is the first generation where women can serve as executives and professionals in both Jewish and non-Jewish workplaces. For many young Jewish women, bat mizvah ceremonies are common. Naming ceremonies, often called “Brit Bat,” now welcome baby girls into the Jewish covenant the way their brothers have always been welcomed. *Lilith: The Independent Jewish Women’s Magazine* has been available since most of us could read. The modern State of Israel has been an assumed and constant presence in the world throughout our lives. We grew up knowing that women can be rabbis, and have come to learn that Orthodox women can be feminists.

Unlike our predecessors, we have access to a large body of literature by and about Jewish women, which has grown steadily throughout our lives. In the last thirty years, a proliferation of books and articles has emerged addressing issues surrounding Judaism and gender from across academic disciplines and in almost every literary genre. In our lifetimes, feminist scholars have sought to redress the inadequacy of Jewish history, which generally failed to include Jewish women’s thoughts and experiences, or only included them circuitously. Biographers are reshaping history by uncovering Jewish women’s untold life stories. Theologians are adding women’s voices to the study and critique of religious doctrines. In addition, Jewish women’s experiences and beliefs have been expressed in ethnographies and social histories.

It is a crucial historical moment to add *young* Jewish women’s voices to this process of personal and social change. The authors in *Joining the Sisterhood* offer an early glimpse at the powerful ways in which we will be able to impact the Jewish future. Today, there are young Jewish women who engage in almost every aspect of religious and cultural Jewish life, yet our unique perspectives have remained

largely invisible. Technology has availed young Jewish women with unprecedented opportunities for virtual and actual global cultural exchange, yet a 1995 study by The National Commission on American Jewish Women made young Jewish women (ages 21-35) one of their foci, because so little is known about this population. While Jewish organizations have recognized the need for engagement and outreach to this group, they continue to talk *about* young Jewish women, rather than *with* us.

Like our predecessors, we, as young Jewish women, are eager to tell our stories. From Jewish culture, we learned the invaluable lesson of communal memory by means of oral and written storytelling. Our sacred texts were passed down from one generation to the next, relying almost entirely on the artful discipline of storytelling. Jewish history teaches us that storytelling is a way of explaining our origins, sharing our beliefs about the world, and connecting us to one another. It is also the way in which we pass the torch of tradition onto the next generation.

Storytelling is also our inheritance from the discipline of feminism. From feminist discourse, we learn that sharing one's truth can be a tool for personal empowerment and social change. As feminist poet and activist Audre Lorde writes in her book, *Sister, Outsider*:

Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation (Lorde, 43).

By writing about our thoughts and experiences, the young Jewish women in this anthology are planting our seeds firmly in the soil of both feminist and Jewish traditions. In this spirit, we join the sisterhood of women who work toward justice in their homes, synagogues, and communities: who tell their stories to illustrate the ways in which the personal and the political intersect in their lives. We join the sisterhood of Jewish women who recognize the vital need for their stories to be told. We honor the generations of women who came before us, and we honor those who walk beside us. And we provide a glimpse into our own lives and subcultures, setting the stage for our futures.

Joining the Sisterhood was born from a collaboration between two friends who shared a common vision. This project is based on our conviction that young Jewish women's stories provide a vital contribution to modern Jewish history, and that the very process of telling our stories is empowering. As such, the story of our collaboration and the creation of this anthology is precious to us.

We met in 1996, when we were participants in Kol Isha, the Young Jewish Women's Leadership Seminar sponsored by the World Union of Jewish Students. For one month, we toured Israel with twenty other young Jewish women from around the world. As we traveled through the country, we shared stories about the unique joys and challenges of growing up Jewish and female. We discovered that each of us, in her own way, had struggled to find a community that would honor and celebrate her identity as a Jewish woman.

Throughout that summer, we shared resources and discovered that we were connected across space and time through the books we had read. As avid readers and writers, we lamented the dearth of writing by young women in the quickly growing canon of Jewish women's literature. Our discussions helped us to realize that the time had come for our generation to join the sisterhood of Jewish women writers. We compiled *Joining the Sisterhood* as a form of activism. We heeded the guidance of Rabbi Nachman of Bratislava, who once said, "[She] who is able to write a book and does not write it is as one who has lost a child." We resolved to become midwives, and together, we created a forum for young Jewish women's autobiographical writing.

The anthology we envisioned would highlight the thoughtful, complicated, and provocative lives of women in our generation. It would include the voices of young Jewish women from diverse cultures, religious denominations, political viewpoints, and sexual orientations. It would bring forward their thoughts and experiences through autobiographical essays and poetry.

As editors of such an anthology, our first challenge was to find these women and their communities. We sent an open call for essays to Jewish Studies departments, Women's Studies departments, and Hillels at colleges and universities across North America. We solicited writers using both Jewish and feminist magazines, journals, newspapers, e-mail lists, and web sites. We also contacted more than forty national Jewish organizations and over a hundred feminist bookstores in the United States and Canada. The response was overwhelming.

Reading the submissions from young Jewish women across North America felt like a continuation of the exchange of life narratives that we had begun in Israel. Often, something in one author's writing would remind us of another essay or poem. We became matchmakers, connecting women across the United States and Canada, who shared life experiences or reflected on common themes. In collecting the essays our deep belief in the value of telling stories has redoubled.

We selected essays and poetry that complemented each other, and contributed to our image of *Joining the Sisterhood* as a cross-section of young Jewish women's experiences in North America. We did not endeavor to create a wholly representative sample, but we attempted to bring as many diverse voices to the conversation as possible.

We are a highly mobile group, and staying connected with one another throughout the process of writing and editing this anthology was an ongoing challenge since the contributors live in cities and towns throughout the United States and in two Canadian provinces. Our ages range from 16 to 33. Some of us have finished our educations, while others attend high school, college, graduate programs, and rabbinic school. We are scientists, environmentalists, artists, activists, storytellers, and teachers. We are gay and straight; single, divorced, and married. Since authors come from different ethnic backgrounds, we use different words and pronunciations to express our Jewish ethnic identities, reflecting our Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrahi cultures. This is the first publication for some of the contributors, while others will include this among a long list of their other literary accomplishments.

From both the poetry and prose, the impassioned voices of the next generation distinctly resonate. Each piece in *Joining the Sisterhood* describes the experience of being young, Jewish, and female from the author's own unique vantage point. Yet, in each poem and essay, there also exists a spark of universality.

The anthology is divided into three sections: "*Ruach*: Ourselves in Relation to Others and the Environment"; "*Nefesh*: Ourselves in Relation to Our Bodies"; and "*Neshamah*: Our Emotional and Intellectual Selves." *Ruach*, *nefesh*, and *neshamah* are Hebrew words that describe the spirit or soul. Each term evokes a subtle meaning: *ruach*, which means "wind," is associated with the sources of spirit outside of ourselves; *nefesh* means the physical state of being alive; and *neshamah*, meaning "breath" or "soul," speaks to the vitality of our emotional and intellectual lives. While every essay is imbued with elements of

each type of spirit, we have categorized the pieces according to the type of spirit that is voiced most prominently by each author. The poems too, are categorized according to this method, and are tucked between the essays, like hidden jewels that are waiting to be discovered.

The essays and poetry in “*Ruach*” offer glimpses into the lives of women as they navigate both Jewish and secular worlds. *Ruach* is the “wind” that connects our internal selves with the external world. Authors delve deeply into their negotiation of identity in response to their social environment. They write passionately about their struggle to understand their place in the world in relation to their beliefs about politics, history, North American culture, and the organized Jewish community.

In “Bais Yaakov Girl,” Eve Rosenbaum writes about her journey toward, and then away from, religious observance in reaction to her family’s embrace of right-wing Orthodox Judaism during her early adolescence. She charts this path through her experience as a “Bais Yaakov girl,” to her awakening in college, when she finds her way back to the woman she was meant to become.

Leah Berger writes about her political commitments to humanistic causes, and her personal revelations about Judaism and God in “Ground Contemplation Prayer.” Her journey takes her to the redwood forests of California and to the deserts of Arizona, where she describes the sanctuary she finds in nature, as she struggles to find wholeness amid a social world that favors the categorization and compartmentalization of identity.

In “Singing Praises,” Shoshana M. Friedman, the youngest essayist represented in the anthology, writes about growing up as part of a Jewish Renewal community. She writes about how her love of music enabled her to expand her world, while drawing upon the supportive foundation of her family and community.

In “God Lives in the Himalayas,” Leanne Lieberman describes the places she travels—both literally and metaphorically—on her search for God. She laments her childhood experience of Conservative Judaism, where God was rarely mentioned, and she begins a spiritual quest. Her exploration of Asian countries and traditions, her studies in a liberal Orthodox yeshiva in Jerusalem, and her relationship with her non-Jewish boyfriend all factor into her journey, which ends where it began: with her family.

Professional storyteller Vered Hankin, writes about how her life has been influenced by her strong sense of place in “Where the

Mountain Touches the Sky.” Her journey carries her through experiences in Israel, Kansas, and New York. Her discovery of feminism, her experience of anti-Semitism at her college sorority, and the healing work done after a debilitating car accident, all lead her toward a greater understanding of her place in the world.

The final essay in the section is that of Charlotte Green Honigman-Smith, whose journey occurs in relation with, and in reaction to, the organized Jewish community. In “*Mazel: The Luck of the Irish*,” she writes, “According to decades of prediction, statistical research, and inspired sermons—I am not supposed to exist. I am the Jewish and Jewishly committed daughter of an intermarriage. My Ashkenazi mother and Irish-Catholic father raised me in a Jewish home.”

Charlotte describes her lifetime of Jewish observances and commitments, her year of rabbinic school in the Reform movement, and her passion for social justice work—all supported and inspired by her Irish-Catholic father’s religious commitments. Throughout her essay, she describes her struggle to find a place for herself within the organized Jewish community that would honor and respects all parts of her life and history.

In the second section of the anthology, “*Nefesh*,” the authors write about their journeys as related to their physical and spiritual health. They describe their processes of identity formation and self-exploration as they explore their sexuality, their religious observance, and as they begin healing from emotional and physical pain. By providing a glimpse at how these authors relate to their bodies, this section gives voice to the standards of beauty and success that many young Jewish women use to measure their self-worth.

In “Blessings in Boxes,” Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer describes how her practice of wearing the *tefillin* ultimately resulted in a decision that profoundly changed her life, her health, and her understanding of a chronic illness that she has lived since childhood. She writes, “I thought about my *tefillin*, of the way these ancient brown boxes connect to my body, how they fit, and what richness they bring me . . . so why not an insulin pump that could help to lengthen my life?” Her religious observance enabled her to create a life for herself based upon the marriage between her health and her experiences as a Jewish woman.

Clara Thaler, in “At Home in My Own Skin,” describes her process of growth from girlhood to womanhood with attentive details toward which rites of passage were celebrated and which were ignored. She attributes her renewed interest in her Jewish identity to her ultimate acceptance of her body, and to her lesbianism.

In “Who Is a Jew?” Loolwa Khazzoom writes about her experience of growing up in a biracial, Mizrahi Jewish home. She is adamant in her refusal to compartmentalize any aspect of herself, as she skillfully articulates her encounters with sexual abuse, racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism. In this essay, she affirms her commitment to her Jewish and feminist identities, as she struggles to find a place where she can honor her multiple identities in both body and spirit.

Jessie Heller-Frank’s awareness of the connection between mind, body, and spirit was awakened in Israel. In “When You’re Looking for G-d, Go Home,” she shares the story of her transformation from a secular Jew who was raised without a strong Jewish identity or community, to a *baalat teshuvah*, who finds meaning in observant Jewish life. She writes about how her transformation affected her relationship with men, her body, her community, and her conception of God.

In “A Woman of Valor, Who Can Find?” Julie Pelc describes her discovery of a healing spiritual practice, after a debilitating repetitive strain injury in her hands halted the pace of her previously hectic life. Through a dance methodology called “Five Rhythms,” she finds a way to honor the rhythms of her body and soul, and is able to reconnect with the Divine presence on the dance floor.

In the final section of the anthology, “*Neshamah*” the authors write about their pleasures and struggles surrounding life cycle events. Essays highlight the way in which young Jewish women deal with issues such as marriage, divorce, sexual orientation, and dating. This section provides insight into how young Jewish women navigate the personal, social, and familial norms of growing up in North America.

In “*Chutzpah* and *Menschlichkeit*: Negotiating Identity in Jerusalem,” Caryn Aviv juxtaposes her own experience of marriage, divorce, and coming out as a lesbian with her doctoral research in Jerusalem. While conducting her research about the dating patterns of young American immigrants, she discovers the complicated interplay between gender, religion, sexuality, and the rules of interpersonal relationships among young American Jews living in Israel. She describes the social scene, Shabbat observances, norms of heterosexuality, and the role of formal and informal matchmakers in the Jewish community. She also relates her own painful feelings of invisibility and isolation as a queer Jew in Jerusalem.

Lynne Meredith Schreiber, in “Meeting in the Middle,” describes how her relationship with a Catholic man eventually led her to live an Orthodox Jewish lifestyle. She describes interactions with both

Jews and non-Jews that challenged her to define her own beliefs. She struggles to find her own religious voice amid the many pulls to compromise some aspect of her identity and to “meet in the middle.” In the process, she discovers her Jewish identity.

In “Ira Glass, Where Are You?” Tobin Belzer juxtaposes her fantasy of her perfect Jewish man with her real-life experience of being young, Jewish, and single. Using a sociological lens, she writes about the many stereotypes attached to singlehood in the twenty-first century North American Jewish community. She describes Aish HaTorah’s widespread Speed Dating program, and the craze of on-line dating. Throughout her essay, she affirms her beliefs about feminism and the social construction of sexuality, while acknowledging the contradiction in her desire to exclusively date Jewish men.

In “Stepping Eastward,” Daveena Tauber describes her early perceptions about Jews, family, and money, which she learned while growing up in a commune in rural California. She relates her culture shock when she moves east for the first time. She struggles with class and cultural differences as she searches for a home on the East Coast that reflects her vision of what it means to be a Jewish woman.

This section ends with “Making Love on the *Deutsche Bahn*.” Ruth A. Abusch-Magder touches upon issues of family history, memory, and feminist scholarship in the context of her time living and studying in Germany. As a grandchild of Holocaust survivors, she reflects on how her familial experience affected her attraction to, and repulsion from, the subject of the *Shoah*. She records her experiences as a young, pregnant, Jewish woman living with her husband in a country filled with associations from her childhood landscape. In doing so, she illuminates her own internal struggle to make meaning of her history and to cope with the past while continuing to dedicate herself to living life in the present.

Together, the essays and poems in this anthology illustrate the inspiring ways in which young Jewish women are joining and creating sisterhoods in every corner of their lives. We are using our strength of spirit to transform our environments, our intimate relationships, and ourselves.

We are eternally grateful to each of the authors whose story is printed in the pages of this anthology. Each invested her time, emotional energy, and faith to help us create *Joining the Sisterhood*. We draw strength from them and from the generations of those whose lives and words proceed our own. We believe that this book is a

bridge connecting one generation to the next. With this anthology, we offer our stories as a legacy for the Jewish women who will follow. We pray that they will find the strength, courage, and inspiration to tell their own stories and define for themselves what it means to be a young Jewish woman.

References

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