

# Jewish Red Diaper Babies 1983

I would like to have some of it. There was something else that I was thinking of that I wanted to say. A great deal of this has to be credited to my parents. My father was a working man all his life but in his off hours he was an intellectual. He played music. He wrote poetry. He gave all of his own hours to the Jewish communist newspaper, the Freiheit, where he worked as a typesetter. When he wasn't working as a typesetter, he was translating things for them. He made us aware that you could be both a working person and an intellectual. In fact, it was good to be both. I think maybe that's one reason I've been able to accept and enjoy working at a full-time day job and pursuing the other activities I'm interested in outside.

Sam: Would anybody like to try and summarize this conversation?

W: Class issues are complicated. [Laughter]

## Gay and Lesbian Red Diaper Babies 1983

This is hard for me to do. That is part of what we talked about: the contradictions between being leftists and being lesbians. We were all lesbians in this workshop; there were no gay men. We talked about not feeling safe in the Left, not feeling safe here coming out as a lesbian or a gay man, not feeling like we necessarily fit in in the Left, not feeling like there is real acceptance of issues of lesbian and gay oppression. Also not feeling that the lesbian-feminist community is where we fit in in terms of the acceptance of our RDB herstories, and the red-baiting within lesbian-feminist communities. We talked about feeling that we needed the safe space that we created today and how hard those contradictions are for us.

We also talked about the differences between the Left now and the Old Left in terms of the fact that the Left now is being changed by the lesbian and gay movement. We talked about the necessity for some of us to integrate back into the Left, that that's critical in terms of opening the Left up to these issues.

We talked a lot about coming out to our parents and the fact that we had great expectations because of our parents' political beliefs. Although in some ways our Red past had made it easier, in other ways we felt we had greater expectations of our parents. It was hard to find that outward political beliefs didn't necessarily carry over when it came to personal experience. We talked also about our parents being isolated, particularly our mothers, in terms of their dealing with our lesbianism and the fact that they didn't have any support networks within which to deal with it.

We also talked about the need for support networks for ourselves. Finally, we talked about feeling very isolated, not feeling like there were enough of us to feel supported.



Sheli: I was raised in a Jewish red diaper family and submerged in the culture of the Jewish Left in the 1940's in the Bronx, N.Y. My family sent me to the International Workers Order/Jewish People's Fraternal Order children's shules. Being around Jewish leftist circles was a large part of my upbringing as a child. I was spoon-fed the culture and the radicalism in such a way that I didn't independently question a lot about who I was. Having grown up in New York and having been very sheltered by this culture, I didn't experience, until much later in my life, interacting with people who were very different from me. Most of my friends and a lot of my parents' friends were Jewish, were from working-class origins, and were New Yorkers. In the '60's, when I became a New Leftist, my focus of identity was as a woman.

I have only recently become aware of the fact that since I left New York, I have not lived in a place that was predominately Jewish. The education I had as a child, this cultural and political upbringing, didn't prepare me to confront some of the stereotypes of Jews and the diversity that Jews have amongst ourselves. With all my leftism and all my Jewish education, I realize I have not been educated to counteract stereotypes about Jewish wealth, about Jewish people being pushy, nosy, and rude.

My vision of being a Jew is very different from a lot of other peoples', Jewish and non-Jewish. I have not communicated sufficiently well to my own children what it means for them to grow up as Jewish people. Since this is a culture that I identified with in the past very strongly, I am asking myself questions now. How much of that culture is meaningful for me to pass on to my children and my children's children? How much of it do I incorporate in myself, in the political work that I do today? I have not thought about this until recently, after having grown up in it and been submerged in it. I would be interested in hearing if people have things to say about confronting the stereotypes, particularly about class and Jewish wealth. Also expressing internationalism in the sense of how being a Jew helps you identify with other peoples' oppression, and fighting against that oppression.

Pearl: My parents, as Jewish communists, felt that religion was divisive. They didn't have any ties with organized religion, not even the shule movement. We used to have a Passover dinner that wasn't a Passover dinner. We'd get together with an uncle; we'd sit down and have a dinner. That was the only holiday we ever celebrated. We didn't even have a Haggadah. My father, who grew up in an orthodox background, snuck off to listen to the cantors at holiday time. I was aware of that. It made an impression upon me. Other than being sent to Camp Kinderland and being given a more international sense of being Jewish, I did not have any Jewish identity other than the fact that had I been born when my father was born, I could be dead. I very much suffered from a fear of the Holocaust, having been shown pictures of the Holocaust as a nine year old, which I've



been very careful not to do with my own children. It was a terrible trauma and it made me feel even more that to be a Jew was a very frightening thing.

As fate had it, I married somebody who came from an orthodox Jewish background. As a result, I began to rethink my feelings about being Jewish. I have become very interested in passing the heritage on to my children. My difficulty is that I have only been able to do it in a very traditional way, by sending them to Hebrew School, to a conservative synagogue, to have a regular Bar Mitzvah with a band. I haven't been able to integrate my own political feeling with the traditional Jewish thing. I feel a sense of sorrow that my children are growing-up as traditional Jewish kids without a sense of being Jewish radicals.

I feel very hostile toward Jews who are ready to apologize for being Jewish. I have great contempt for Jewish radicals who are willing to align with groups, Black groups for example, who are anti-Semitic. If one doesn't love oneself first, you have a big problem. My parents made a big mistake in thinking that we all could just melt into one. A lot of people who maintain a leftist ideology are still in that camp where it's best to blend, rather than be proud of who you are and carry on that heritage.

Peter: I was brought up in a Jewish Left family in New Haven, not religious at all. Went to the Yiddish shule until I was about twelve, although I never wanted to. I left New Haven in 1970 and have lived primarily in rural places, in Maine and in a cabin high up in the Rocky Mountains, where there have been few if any other Jewish people around. It's become less and less of a meaningful identity in my life. For many years I felt that being Jewish wasn't relevant to my life, to the things that I was doing. It wasn't brought up by other people, never seemed to mean anything to me. In the last year or two, I've started to come to grips with parts of myself that are a result of my Jewish upbringing, wanting to recognize them for what they are and decide what in me I recognize as Jewish and what I recognize as being brought up in a humanist, left-oriented family. Love of books, love of culture, certain basic human values: I associate them in my mind with being Jewish because of the milieu in which I was brought up. But there are plenty of other people who have those same values who aren't Jewish.

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Miriam: I grew up in a radical family without a very strong religious sense at all, but with a very strong cultural identity. My parents spoke Yiddish when they didn't want my sister and I to understand. My grandma read the Freiheit and went to meetings and sang songs in Yiddish. I was always curious about that. I can remember asking

her to translate songs and feeling a very close kinship with that culture. By the time we were growing up, what a friend of mine referred to as "the little red shule" wasn't available anymore, but Judaism was still a very clear part of my history and connection to my family. Family gatherings at Rosh Hashonah or Passover tended to have lots of political arguments and discussions that were not related to the holiday at all.

When I first heard about New Jewish Agenda, a lot of bells rang in the back of my head. One of the things that we had been raised with at camp and in discussions at home was to worry about the rest of the world and to have a real concern that you had to do your part to make it better. One of the phrases in one of the first pieces of Agenda literature that I read talked about tikun olam, the moral rightening of the world. I said, "Wow! That's what I've been worrying about all of my life." And not finding the same type of kinship even with other radical friends who were not Jewish, who were not red diaper babies. They didn't have the same kind of anxiety, worry, mishegoss. It seemed that how you read the newspaper and how you decided which march to go on or what worry to handle first had to do with being a red diaper baby, but also had to do with being Jewish. I have often sat at Agenda meetings and been aware that not everybody had the same series of worries. When I was reading about El Salvador and Nicaragua, I wanted us to take action. Other people in the group didn't feel it was a major Jewish issue. I would struggle to explain that it was a major human issue and that as Jews we had to take a position.

After I left New York, almost twelve years ago, I met people who were not working class, who assumed that all Jews were very wealthy. One of my professors at the university asked why I wasn't a princess and I said, "We couldn't afford it." He had never met somebody from New York, from a Jewish background, who had a working-class family and working-class values. I think it's important to be at peace with that. My father worked for thirty years on the railroad. We didn't have the kind of situation where that sort of value system was tolerated or permitted or encouraged. I know what it's like for those of us from a sheltered red diaper baby Jewish background to go out into the world and find that everybody assumes that all Jews are rich and, in many cases, reactionary. It's something that takes a little bit of work to understand.

Amy: My parents are Holocaust survivors and came over in '49. They sent me to a Workmen's Circle shule. All through my childhood, I had a secular Jewish education. I joined the Socialist Zionist youth group and after graduating high school, I went to Israel to work for two years.

I have very negative feelings about the Jewish religion. I find it difficult to find anything positive in it because of its blatant sexism and backwardness in so many aspects. I wonder if there is such a thing as a secular Judaism. Although a lot of people would like to say that there is a Jewish culture aside from the Jewish religion, I have real doubts about whether there is. I'm an active member in Agenda and I have been coming to think lately that the kind of values we're talking about are not so much a result of the Jewishness in our background as the



red diaper-ness. I'm coming into contact more and more, in my profession and in other organizations I belong to, with Jews who have extreme right-wing viewpoints. They're becoming much, much more of a majority than we are in the Jewish community. They're more authentically Jewish in that they observe all the cultural and religious traditions. I don't know if any of this concern with the world comes from being Jewish as much as it comes from being leftists and radicals.

I have strong feelings about being Jewish, but I find that they are mostly motivated by anti-Semitism. The times I feel most strongly about being Jewish are from a negative point of view, when I am being attacked for being Jewish, not personally, but I sense anti-Semitism all around me. I see this fairly recent phenomenon of being proud of your ethnic group as more of a ploy by capitalists to divide us. It's good to be proud of what you are, but I think behind all that is a plan to keep us so divided that we'll never get together, because we're gonna be so proud of what we are.

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## **A lot of the values I considered red diaper or leftist values were confused with Jewish values.**

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Aaron: I am not a red diaper baby. Both my parents survived the Holocaust in Europe. They grew up in Poland. My identity of being Jewish comes basically from my parents' experiences, even though they did send me to Hebrew School. Growing up, I had very few friends whose parents were in the Holocaust. My parents spoke little about it, but it seemed to dominate much of my life and my thoughts.

I think my parents' going through the Holocaust dampened any political activities they had done in Europe. My father was quite active in Europe in the Socialist Zionist groups. Before the war, my mother flirted with the Polish Communist Party, basically because that was the only gentile group that supported Jews in Poland. When they got to this country in '49, '50, that got washed away. Maybe the political climate in the United States had a lot to do with it. The whole thing with the Rosenbergs might have told them: stay back, keep quiet, don't do anything. Even though they didn't take any political stands in this country, and they didn't even vote, they seemed to give me and my brother certain political values. As we got into adolescence and beyond, we moved into progressive and activist circles. I remember in high school we were talking about the Dominican Republic and Bosch and Vietnam. I found myself-- I had no real reason--taking a progressive position. Maybe there are certain things in Judaism that are just naturally progressive. My parents got these values in Poland and they passed them on to us.

Rosa: I still don't know what my position is as a human being, much less as a Jew. I do know one thing, that most of the Jews I know have an identity problem. I believe that it is because we are members of a minority group and because there was a holocaust in which six million people were killed for no other reason than that they shared

something in common with us. I think that we're still apologizing for being alive. I feel this in fellow Jews, especially in Jews from the Left. Jews who have been raised within religious circles have no question. It's automatic to them. They were raised as religious Jews and they accept that part of their identity, just as Catholics and Baptists accept that part of their identity. None of them seem to feel like they have to apologize for what they have been raised. If a Catholic becomes a communist or a leftist, they say, "This is what I became and this is what I was." Nobody seems to have to feel ashamed, to have to go through statistics and show how many Catholics are reactionary and how many ran from the neighborhood when the Blacks moved in. Jews somehow have to behave in a manner that is more humanistic than any other group of people. I find it very difficult to come to grips with this especially since, even though I grew up in New York City, I have moved to an area where maybe there's fifty Jews in a hundred mile-radius.

I'm sure your professor knew that not all Jews are rich. There is anti-Semitism out there and it's not because of anything that we Jews have done. It just exists; it's a phenomenon outside of ourselves. I think this is something that we have to accept. A lot of us have a tendency to try to make Jews appear acceptable to the rest of the world. We want to show that yes, we are humanistic. We are trying to do things for everybody, not just Jews. We are criticizing Israel. Even though we're Jews, we're not accepting Israel down the line. When the Six Day War occurred, I was still supporting the Arabs. A close friend said, "How can you do that? My ancestors come from England and I don't care who England would be fighting, right or wrong, I would be supporting England. I might discuss the issues but I certainly would be for the country of my ancestry. How can you do this to yourself? Aren't you ashamed?" It was the first time I actually confronted myself with the fact that I saw myself as running around trying to prove that I indeed care.

A lot of us have a tendency to look at the Jewish religion and find it hypocritical. Any religion is hypocritical. Any human being is hypocritical. Any way of life is hypocritical. If you look at anything closely enough, you will always find hypocrisy in it. The fact that we happen to be Jews means that we're going to look at Judaism a little more closely than any other religion and that we will find the hypocrisy in it, and the sexism.

Saul: Being Jewish, left-wing, can you oppose Israel and still be a member of the Jewish community? What is it to be a Jew? This is an agony that my wife and I and, I assume, my kids are going through for years. I'm not a red diaper baby but I became involved as a leftist very, very young, by the time I was twelve. Being Jewish has always been a very, very complicated factor for us. We belong to a conservative synagogue. We consider ourselves Zionists. It blows our mind to read what Israel is doing in a country like Guatemala, for instance, training troops, and police, teaching them counter-insurgency techniques. Or going into Costa Rica, maybe with AID money, abusing the kibbutz concept to create South Vietnam-type counterinsurgency settlements. How to you jibe it? It's hard.

I enjoy going to synagogue. I enjoy davening. I believe that to give your children secularism only, to give them no religion is to give a freedom which is the ultimate ending of the Jewish people. There's a tremendous turmoil in my life, my wife's life. Here I am condemning the right-wing of Soviet Jewry, who would want the bomb dropped tomorrow, who thought that Reagan was a victim of left-wing influence when he resumed grain sales. But we went to the Soviet Union twice and we met our family and we were involved in bringing twenty-one of them here to the United States. The bottom line is, I suppose, being Jewish is being meshuge. I think if I wasn't Jewish, it wouldn't be as interesting. It's like eating chocolate, I suppose. You're alive 60, 70 years and there are only so many things you can do. You might as well have the cherry one, you might as well have another one. So you might as well belong to the American Jewish Congress, send your kids to cheder, send your kids to Israel, or go to demonstrations. If I ever tried to find a stream of rationality to this whole thing, I'd just give up. It's just crazy.

Norma: I feel like I'm constantly doing a balancing act. I remember that my husband [Saul] was running for office in a Jewish organization and he wrote down that I was a member of Haddasah. I said, "Why'd you say that?" That was the last place I wanted to be. He said, "Oh, join." So I went to a couple of meetings and I got involved in a couple of things. In a sense I feel like I'm a spy in there. I'll say a few things to shake them up. Actually, to my surprise, there are some people who are very upset about what's happening in Israel. On the other hand, there are others who say Israel can do no wrong. I feel as though in these other groups I am serving a purpose of letting them know there is another viewpoint, a left viewpoint, while still being Jewish. I have a role to play in my community.

Mindy: My upbringing in terms of my Jewishness was confusing. My father came from an orthodox family. He still claims that he is an atheist. My mother couldn't make such a radical change, so she said she was agnostic. That meant a lot of mixed messages. I was exposed to every kind of religion. I had a lot of relatives who were Christians. We celebrated Christmas and Hanukah.

My exposure in the early years to Jewish people --this is where it gets confused with class issues --was to upper-middle-class kids whose values I didn't like. I did go to Saturday School. My parents wanted me to go to have the exposure but they said I could quit if I wanted to. I was sorry that I continued going because I realized that I didn't fit in with these kids. I think that had to do with class issues, not religion.

The Jewish religion and culture didn't seem to have any apparent effect on me, or so I thought for many years. What I realize now is that it had an extremely large effect on me. It wasn't until I was taking a co-counseling class that it started coming up. The teacher wanted me to be in touch with my Judaism. He kept stereotyping me. He has this sort of phony reverence for Jewish people. He would take some of my behavior and say, "That's the Jewish person in you." If he thought that I was sharp or fast or something, he'd say, "Jewish humor, Jewish this, Jewish that." It got me thinking about what is Jewish about my values, my

patterns, the way I act in the world? I started reflecting on my grandparents who lived a very strict orthodox life. I realized that a lot of the values I always considered red diaper values or leftist values were also confused with Jewish values, that maybe I was a lot more religious, at least in terms of the values, than I had ever thought I was.

The next major thing that made me think more deeply about my Jewishness was what was going on with Israel and the Middle East crisis. A lot of Jews and leftists didn't know very much about the Mideast and were afraid to find out because of the many confusions and complexities. It seems like Central America's easier to learn about; a lot of people seem to avoid learning about the Mideast and therefore taking a stand. I joined a group of people who were studying the Mideast. Because a majority in that group were Jewish, I could say that I seriously criticize what Israel is doing without feeling that it was going to be construed as an anti-Semitic statement.

One of my closest friends is a minister. Somebody else moved into my house who is a very religious Jew. I realized that the three of us have a lot in common, as spiritual people. I still haven't figured out what that means in terms of Judaism.

Faye: I live in Maine and have been living in rural situations for awhile. That has helped me focus a lot, from not being that concerned about being Jewish to getting very identified with being Jewish because of running into anti-Semitism and realizing how cut off I was from my roots and how few Jews were around. I grew up in a little town in New Jersey. There weren't a lot of Jews there. I resent how little Jewish background I have and how much I had to reclaim as an adult. I belong to two Jewish women's groups in Maine. One is a local group and the other one is where some women travel a couple of hours so we can meet the other eight Jews that are around.

When I was a kid, there was a real conflict between being Jewish and being a radical. One of the big conflicts had to do with my parents not having much money. My father was a union organizer. Money was not good and you didn't need it that much and you always had to identify with the international struggle and the working class. There was this whole thing about not bettering yourself, which I see as a conflict with a lot of Jewish values of how to better yourself, how to get ahead. I'm still working that stuff out.

There are two things I want to address. One is feeling anti-Semitism from the Left and how scary that is. Where is the feeling that we're accepted as Jews within this whole movement to change things? That's one thing. Then, as a lesbian... It's even hard to say that because in Maine, it's hard to come out as a Jew and it's hard to come out as a lesbian. But I feel it's important for

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me to do that because there were so many lesbian/gay people who were killed in the Holocaust. It's a reality that "they" hate that side of me as much as my Judaism, whoever "they" are. It's very important for Jewish people who are radical to understand in a deeper way the kind of shit that gay people and lesbians tend to get. My mother doesn't want to tell her friends that I'm a lesbian. How many Jews accept lesbians? And a lot of lesbians are anti-Semitic. Someplace, it all has to come together. A lot of my security is from other Jewish lesbians. I guess the predominant feeling is somehow wanting to know where my allies are.

Max: I'm here with the qualification that my two girls--women--are red diaper babies. I'm the father of two red diaper women, aged 31 and 32. I was raised in an orthodox family and eventually became agnostic, with a principle of a one-world humanistic idea. In recent years, I've come back to a feeling that there is room for a religious Judaism as well as room for other religions in this world. I have a theory that thanks to the existence of orthodox religion, the Jewish people have survived these thousands of years. Our girls were sent to the secular school of the Workmen's Circle and acquired a basic Yiddish, a little Hebrew education, and an introduction to the ceremonies, rites, and rituals that we call secular, but are really derived from the religious background.

One of my daughters sends her little boy--he's four now--to a reformed nursery school. Although she and her husband are not members of the temple, nonetheless they send their child there. My other daughter has become involved with Jewish support groups. She is at the same time deeply involved in the feminist movement, Central, South American liberation movements, anti-nuclear protest demonstrations. I am very proud of both of my daughters and I wish they could be here to kvell over what I hear coming from so many of you.

I'm a little worried about the question of anti-Semitism. I am retired now five years and am finally free to speak about my past. I was a Party member. I fought in Spain. I worked for forty years in industry and had to hide my identity completely for fear of instant dismissal. I had to change my name. I had to live three different lives. The past five years I have the opportunity to speak the way I'm speaking now, without fear of any retribution whatsoever. Speaking therefore of anti-Semitism, I've been to China, Russia, Israel, Egypt and a whole host of other countries and have observed some things. I'm thoroughly convinced that anti-Semitism is an official government attitude on the part of the Soviet Union. I'm sorry to say that, because I have had hopes for a new world, the way all of you have had. I haven't given up hope; I am still involved in a great many things.

Edith: My mother was an anarchist. There was no such thing as religion in our house, but she wanted me to have a secular Yiddish education. I did develop a very close feeling for Yiddishkeit. I speak Yiddish very fluently, although I cannot read or write it. My mother felt that although she was an anarchist and she wanted me to have certain ideals, she wasn't gonna impose her political feelings and stands on me. My mother let me evolve as my own person. We didn't impose

anything on our kids, although we did send them to the Workmen's Circle shule, as my husband [Max] said. That was not the shule of our choice. We would have preferred to send them to the left-wing shule, but the Workmen's Circle shule was the only one in the neighborhood, so, wanting our children to have a Yiddish education, we sent them there. If I had to do it over again, and our kids are pretty much the age of many of you, I wouldn't leave them to make the decision. I would say, "You are Jewish. You get a Jewish education. You get a Hebrew background. Then you can make your own decision." Too many of our young people today are only now coming back to the realization that Judaism is a very important part of their lives.



Fern: It seems to me that a lot of the people who spoke last night who have a revived interest in their Jewishness are living in rural areas, having come from sheltered metropolitan and leftist environments and now experiencing stereotyping and anti-Semitism. What if these people had never gone into the rural area, had remained in their sheltered Jewish environment, as I have? I've always lived in New York or Israel. Would they have experienced an interest in Judaism, or is it only a result of anti-Semitism? Is the survival of Judaism in fact only a result of anti-Semitism? If we could hypothetically eliminate anti-Semitism, would Jewishness, separate from the religion, disappear?

Miriam: When you're in a minority, your values are tested and then you have to go back and re-discover them. When you are living in a majority, like in New York, you don't have to worry about that.

Amy: I live in Boston. It wasn't until moving into a larger city that I had contact with a Jewish lesbian movement that was somewhat alternative that I could relate to and start to rethink what it was about Judaism that I could embrace. I had to get rid of some of the class issues that made me feel uncomfortable about Judaism. I had to look at some of the values that are a part of who I am, which maybe has to do with accepting the stereotypes: the pushy aggressiveness, the emphasis on intellectualism. Some of it we put into negative terms: the over-achievement, never being satisfied with yourself, the emphasis on success. I started thinking about what's positive about all that. One of the things that really made a difference to me was going to a speak-out where they read some of the pieces in Nice Jewish Girls, an anthology written by Jewish lesbians. There was one piece where a woman ran through all the stereotypes she could think of and said, "Goddammit, that's us and that's fine." I don't know if I feel like it's all fine, but it was the first time I thought of it as not all horrible and stopped internalizing that oppression that's all around us.

Mindy: When I went to college, I was the only Jew in a Christian sorority. I didn't stay in it for long, but I wanted to belong. I wanted to be the good Jew. I wanted everybody to know that I wasn't like the Jewish American princesses from Long Island.

W: Can I express some amazement about the trend of this conversation? I'm not Jewish and that's part of the reason I'm amazed. I come from a family that defined itself as intensely political. Part of the definition of being on the Left was: If you see a Jew, chances are that Jew is a leftist. [Laughter] My associations to Jewishness are all positive: warmer, more demonstrative, less afraid of expressing sympathy. Also the tremendously impressive fact, and I think it's really true, that a disproportionate number of Jews are on the Left. When you compare with other ethnic groups, it's a striking fact.

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W: That's a set-up. I see this with non-Jewish friends when I talk about Israel. The hatred toward Israel is more intense than the hatred toward other imperialist countries, because Jews are supposed to be better. That's where a lot of our self-hate comes from. We have this image of ourselves that we're supposed to be better and then we can't, obviously, live up to it.

W: I don't deny that that's a burden, although some of it doesn't seem to me like a burden--the sense that the culture's warmer and more supportive than Anglo-Saxon culture...

W: But it's also more demanding. Parents are very demanding. You have to be good Jews and good leftists and sometimes it doesn't fit together.

Elliot: I think a stereotype is just that, a stereotype. Within the Jewish people, there are all different types. My heritage, and I think a number of other people's, has its roots in Eastern Europe and in tremendous poverty and anti-Semitism. I think that gives a clue as to why there are so many Jewish lefties. They came out of oppression, out of struggle. The issue for me today in the 1980's is that my parents are part of something; they struggled and built something that I think has value. There was a Jewish identity as well as a political identity, totally unreligious but very Jewish. Yiddish was my first language. The Yiddish newspaper was read. Yiddish was very much a part of the cultural experience.

M: The Forward or the Freiheit? [Laughter] Just keeping you honest.

Elliot: What do I do with that cultural heritage? I was brought up steeped in it. A part of me wants to look back and say, "Where did I come from?" and use that as a basis and foundation of strength to go out in the world politically and otherwise, as opposed to starting from scratch. When I was growing up, the shule movements and the cultural things were very intense. How do I reconnect and use that not as an insulating thing --We are Jewish and we will now go hide and be special--but to say that I came from oppression and struggle?

Sheli: How do you explain the fact that so many of us have met Jews who don't come from that

tradition, are not struggling, are quite reactionary, and are living out a negative stereotype of the Jewish people? I have an investment in understanding why a people who were so oppressed and exploited could have such a reactionary presence. I would ask this question for Blacks and for the working class in the United States today, for that matter.

Elliot: Jews are people. They're subject to the same kinds of societal impact and pressures that everybody else is. I don't think Jews are that unique. We have a history and a culture that molds us.

Aaron: Some of the confusion and discomfort is connected with the objective change of the class position of the Jewish community, by and large. When we were growing up, the immigrant tradition was still a strong one. Our parents were either immigrants or first-generation. The communities in which we lived were working-class, upwardly-mobile. The Jewish community as a whole was not the success that it has emerged as in the post-war era. The confusion is that the ethnic group, in the last twenty or thirty years, has come to occupy a different place in society. The base of the ethnic group is now, in large measure, identified with the status quo and the ruling class.

Jews used to identify very much with the Black community. Jews saw themselves as a minority group surrounded by a hostile Gentile white world. There was, true or not, a perceived mutuality of interest with Blacks. Now that the class as a whole has moved to a different position in society, we're all, I'm sure, enormously pained by the racism within the Jewish community. From a historical standpoint, it seems so ludicrous, so disturbing. Our ethnic peers have now adopted the ideology of the dominant oppressive group and see themselves more as white Gentiles than as Blacks, in terms of their own privilege and what there is to protect. I think that the Yiddish culture was a working-class culture. It's hard to talk about Jewish culture today as being a working-class culture. This is one of the confusions. The question of Israel and Palestine adds another layer, and compounds the confusion. We were reared to identify as oppressed. I'm not so sure where that outlook is today.

Elliot: I'm not sure I'm comfortable saying that Yiddish culture was a working-class culture. I think that in the United States, at a given historical moment, much of the Yiddish world was working-class. But when you look at Eastern Europe, which produced that culture, it included many middle-class groups. Menachem Begin emerged out of European culture. The orthodox Jewish community, even on the Lower East Side, might have been working-class in terms of their economic condition, but I'm not sure that their culture can really be defined as working-class.

W: There were upper class and there were reactionary elements. I recently left a job working in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. You have very strong Yiddish culture there of the most reactionary type. They've been there for a few generations and they can barely get out a sentence in English. That's Yiddish culture and it's not the kind that you were referring to.

To define Jewish culture as that culture that



most of our parents came from and the values that they gave us is to talk about a very small and diminishing minority of what Jewish culture is today. As we move out of--we've already moved out of--the working class, the culture has totally changed. We are deluding ourselves to think that the leftist values, the humanist secular values we have today are really Jewish. They were Jewish for a certain portion of the Jewish people at one time. I don't think they can be defined as Jewish today, because the vast majority of Jews have a whole set of values which are alien to the values that we profess.

Rosa: I live in a rural area. I've lived there for about fifteen years. About a year and a half ago, someone started a Jewish Brunch in central Vermont. I thought that everybody there would be like me: red diaper babies who had moved to Vermont and were anti-Zionist, that we shared something. That's why I went, because I live in a community where I don't share something in common with most of the people. I went to a couple of these meetings and they ended up in bitter arguments. Most of the people were what I would call closet Zionists. It wasn't like they even thought about it. They took it for granted that Israel was good because it was Jewish. I got disillusioned. Some of them formed a New Jewish Agenda group, which I wasn't interested in. I felt like this wasn't where I was gonna find out who I was. I had less in common with them than I had with my friends who were non-Jewish leftists in my own town. I am really interested in Judaism, but I don't think I have anything in common with people like that.

W: I think it's a trap when we try to rest positive values on a single definition of who we are. Some of us were raised in Jewish homes where it was a horror and there was tremendous family violence and repression. My struggle is to synthesize all of this. I know that a part of who I am is Jewish. I don't want to let it go. I don't want to lose it. But I don't want to romanticize it into an impossible attainment, that somehow if I can only find the right Jewish community, I'll be o.k. or everything will be o.k.

M: There's been tremendous assimilation among us. My parents, when they came to this country, never assimilated, to this day have not assimilated. They stay in the Yiddish culture. They feel uncomfortable in the American culture. They don't feel comfortable in certain restaurants. They don't feel comfortable among certain kinds of people. They don't feel comfortable getting dressed up. They don't have a facility with English. On the other hand, they said to me, "Go out into the world. Become successful." With the politics, but also with middle-class values. "Don't have the insecurities we had. Don't have the suffering we had." I think that assimilation is a real factor. You make it. You like the nice restaurants. You like going out. You forget who you are and what you came from. You can't deny that comfort. You can rationalize it. We do that all the time. We all make compromises. We have contradictions in our own lives that we live with.

Why is it that we, as radical Jews who are looking for some connection between radicalism and our Jewish identity, have not been able to create institutions or organizations to reflect both?

People go to synagogue. People have New Jewish Agenda, which is not my personal thing. What happens to radical Jews? Why hasn't something organically come out that we can plug into and share these values and a common sense of the world? That's what troubles me.

Mitch: When we're talking about trying to develop something that's both Jewish and radical, rather than to say Judaism isn't providing the things we are looking for, it makes more sense to look at Judaism as both a religion and a culture. It's not one or the other; it's both. Within the religion and the culture, there are many things that are life-giving, sustaining, that have kept us alive as a people for four thousand years. A lot of the strength that we have comes from the tradition of ideas, intellectualism, love for learning, and importance of the family. There's a strength there to be tapped into. As radicals, we have this vision of a better world; that's also something we can look to. We can develop something that's both radical and Jewish, and that makes sense for us, drawing on those two important tap roots, our radicalism and our Judaism.

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## We can develop something that's both radical and Jewish, and that makes sense for us.

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M: Institutions and organizations take awhile to build. In the 1980's we're in the process, just as we were in Germany in the 1870's, of building a new movement. Exactly what form it's gonna take, I can't say.

M: There's a lot happening nationally. Lenny talked last night about a shule movement starting in Brooklyn. There's Hatikvah, a gay Jewish group in Boston. There's been a tremendous amount of work in the women's movement around alternative ritual.

Sheli: Feminists are trying to come to terms with their Jewishness and the sexism of Jewish history and culture. Feminists are trying to do rituals in a non-sexist way that perpetuates feminist values. People have talked about doing seders and explaining our leftist traditions, like the tradition of struggle, and not retaining the religious elements if you're not happy with them.

W: Since our children were small, we've always had a Friday night meal in the dining room. We light candles. That's what I've done and I'm an atheist.

W: I think what we really have to do is create a Jewish culture that is separate from religion.

M: I don't buy that if you celebrate a holiday, that's religious. Because it has religious antecedents and comes from a certain place, I don't have to be sectarian and limited to their definition. I can take that--that's part of my heritage also--and make it fit for me and my family.

W: Then you're ignoring totally the origin of the holiday.

M: No. I'm ignoring what the origin means.

W: How do you celebrate Yom Kippur? Simchas Torah?

M: We pick and chose our holidays. [Laughter]

W: You laugh, but I think that's what a lot of people do.

M: That's part of the culture that we're developing.

M: It is true that all the holidays are inseparable from a fundamental religious meaning. Certainly for a group like this, the attachment is not a religious one. There's something in terms of group identification, the concept of ritual. In some ways, it's a little perverse to divorce the ritual from its historical meaning. But it's not unlike last night, when everybody was sitting around singing the old union songs. It's a reaffirmation of some sort of historical connection.

W: My family, until recently, would be considered by some anti-Semitic because they were anti-Zionist. They celebrated the holidays. They said, "We're Jews, but we're not religious and we don't believe in God and we're not going to temple." It wasn't until lately that I and a few other people in the family started to have a seder. We never had a real seder because you couldn't read the Haggadah and say "God" every other sentence. I and some of the younger ones are drawing some of the older members into it, who are now saying, "Gee, we feel Jewish."

W: What makes you Jewish?

M: I decided that--this is gonna sound pretty silly--it's Sunday mornings. I've been living for the last two years in a communal household. I'm the only Jew. I realized that my perception of Sunday is completely different from everybody else's. Everybody else grew up either going to church or thinking they were supposed to go to church. I grew up eating bagels and lox and reading the newspapers and talking about things. It's one of the things that defines me most thoroughly as different from Christians in this society.

Sheli: So, it's eating and reading? [Laughter] What else is there?

Mindy: A lot of my getting back in touch with a sense of what it means to be a Jew has to do with eradicating some bad associations that I have with Jewishness and re-defining the good associations. My first re-embracing of Judaism was a cultural re-embracing. You can't separate the religious and the cultural as distinctly as all that. It took me awhile to get over what I negatively associate with the religious aspects. My house has started doing shabbas on Friday night. I was sitting there being, as my minister roommate friend said, a good girl, listening and being quiet, showing some respect for my religion. At one point, she looked at me and started to laugh because she realized how uncomfortable I was with the ceremony. We talked about how uncomfortable we felt. I could get some of those feelings out, and then see what it was in the ceremony that I liked. The woman who was running it talked about how it was a feminist ceremony. I never saw it that way. I saw it as something that somebody wanted me to do that I didn't want to do. I don't think I'm that atypical of a lot of Jewish people

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## When I discovered the rituals for myself, they were more familiar than I expected them to be.

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who have let go of some of that stuff, and yet we're all searching for some kind of identity.

M: A lot of my feminist friends have been part of a re-defining of some of the old traditions so that they're do-able in a way that doesn't make you feel invisible. I've tried to do that and find it very difficult because there was very little ritual in my family. When I try, I find that I'm a stranger to my own religion. That's made me face the question about what makes me Jewish. I, like I think a lot of us, feel differently about that as time goes on. What we should acknowledge is that we have a shared history. Regardless of how we interpret or re-interpret that history, we do have a history. I know that I am a Jew back through generations of experience in my family and in terms of the oppression that comes along with being a Jew, including the fear and the pride of survival.

W: Even though I wasn't raised with them, when I discovered the rituals for myself, they were more familiar than I expected them to be.

Sheli: Part of understanding the religion is putting it in a historical perspective. To me, all religion is reactionary. There is a part of religion that is positive and beautiful, that all of us can try to re-define and recapture, but institutionally, religion is reactionary and Jewish religion is, too. What I want to understand is how, historically, the Jewish people with their religion were oppressed by more powerful religious forces and how, as a people, we came to react to that. Within that there was a left wing and a right wing. I want to be able to explain it to myself and my children.

W: I'm puzzled by the narrowness of a definition of culture that associates it with religion. It seems that many of us here, when we hear people talking a certain way, indulging in certain kinds of jokes, even physical gestures, we think that these people are Jewish. This seems true across cultures. I knew a few Argentine Jews. They would meet Jewish friends of mine in the United States and say, "Isn't it incredible? I grew up in Buenos Aires and this person grew up in New Jersey and we would immediately recognize each other." They were not religious Jews, but they did seem to share something with people who were also not religious Jews who grew up in New Jersey. I don't think it was left-wing culture. They didn't meet me and say, "Oh, a leftie." They met the other people and said, "Oh, Jewish." It does seem to me that there are other ways we transmit common experiences.

W: I never felt like I was assimilated or like I belonged in this country. I went to elementary school in New York City. We used to have to say the 23rd Psalm. When I was in the third grade, I had this Catholic teacher who was very anti-Semitic. She was trying to get all of the



Catholic kids to go to the new Catholic school. I heard about God. I found about how you could pray. You could kneel by your bed and pray and get what you prayed for. One night, I did it. My mother came into my room and said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm praying to God." The point of the story is that I didn't know anything about religion except that you couldn't eat butter in my grandmother's house [Laughter] and we had a seder. To this day, I don't know anything about Biblical Jewish history. I know more, because I've read a lot of books, about the history of the Jews, but I don't know the Biblical history. I'm trying to learn it.

I still don't feel like I'm part of this country, because I was brought up in a communist Jewish home. I would say it was mainly communist. But culturally, my parents and all their friends were mainly Jewish. To this day, most of my parents' friends are Jewish. I asked them two weeks ago, "Who are your friends who aren't Jewish?" They tried to name a few but it was hard for them. At a certain point, when we lived in Flushing, they had a lot of friends who weren't Jewish. We got run out of there because I told everyone on the block that they went to Peekskill. I still feel that I don't belong. It really bothers me. I don't know how many other people have that feeling.

W: What you're describing, I think, is the nature of being an outsider. I feel that way, even among

## I don't feel like I'm part of this country, because I was brought up in a communist Jewish home.

my own people. Then I got used to it and I like it because it gives me certain insight. You are on the outside looking in. You have a better perspective. There are many people like that and you read about many writers who write that way. I think those are the people who give the majority a direction.

W: There has always been some kind of dichotomy among Jews between living the life of the majority of the people and maintaining the religion. Maimonides was considered a heretic because he was trying to adapt the Jewish religion to the concepts of Mohammed. All through history, you're having this constant re-defining of what a Jew is in terms of the larger society. We're continuing it.

Sheli: We thought it would be appropriate to end by singing something together. I was raised on "Zog Nit Keynmol" as sort of a Jewish national anthem. It's the song that came out of the Warsaw Ghetto. It's a fighting song of people who resisted oppression. [All sing]

## Zog Nit Keynmol

Words by Hirsh Glik  
Music adapted from a melody by Pokras  
English translation by Aaron Kramer  
Arrangement by Robert DeCormier

*(One of the most stirring of the partisan songs to come out of the Second World War, this song was written in commemoration of the heroic uprising by the Jews of the Vilna Ghetto. Jewish people throughout the world have given it the status of an unofficial anthem in memory of the six million Jews slaughtered by the Nazis.)*

**With Deep Feeling**

Zog nit keyn-mol az du geyst dem lets - tn  
Ne - ver say that there is on - ly death for

veg, Chotsh him-len blay - e - ne far - shte - ln bloy - e teg; Vail ku-men  
you, Though lead-en skies may be con - ceal-ing days of blue, Be-cause the

vet noch und - zer oys - ge-benkt-te sho, Es vet a poyk ton und-zer trot: mir zenen  
ho - ur we have hun-gered for is near; Beneath our tread the earth shall tremble, we are

do! Vail ku - men vet noch und-zer oys - ge - benkt-te sho, Es vet a  
here! Be-cause the ho - ur we have hun-gered for is near, Be-neath our

poyk ton und-zer trot: mir ze - nen do. Fun gri-nem mut.  
tread the earth shall tremble, we are here! From land forth.