

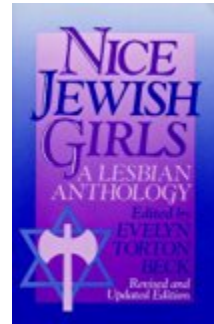
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christie Balka, Andy Rose, eds. *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989. x + 305 pp. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8070-7909-6.

Evelyn Torton Beck, ed. *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology, Revised and Updated Edition*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989. xlix + 333 pp. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8070-7905-8.

Reviewed by Aleisa Fishman (American University)  
Published on H-Judaic (October, 1997)



## A Measure of Community

*Nice Jewish Girls* and *Twice Blessed* examine the incorporation of Jewish identity into lesbian and gay communities, as well as the incorporation of homosexual identity into the Jewish community. The theme of community, central to both works, is explored in the sub-themes of diversity, invisibility, and reconciliation, topics that the contributors to these books believe are significant for understanding Jewish and lesbian/gay identity. Such a focus is not coincidental given that those who study American Jewry also seek to understand the nature of its constituent elements; how they were established, maintained, and contextualized. Growing out of the awareness fostered by the Jewish feminist as well as the lesbian and gay movements of the 1970s, the books grapple with the problems of antisemitism among homosexuals and of homophobia among Jews. Both works are anthologies filled with well-written, thought-provoking, and moving stories, essays and poems, a tribute to the talent both of the contributors and of the editors.

One sub-theme that runs through these works is the desire to show the wide diversity that exists within Jewish gay and lesbian groups. *Twice Blessed* contains essays by gay and lesbian Jews dissimilar in age, class, and other characteristics. Felice Yeskel writes about appreciating her Jewish, lesbian, and working class identities, as well as the conflicts she experienced in dealing with these multiple aspects of who she is. In the same volume Alan D. Zamochnick describes his struggles with cere-

bral palsy and a severe hearing impairment. He writes that nine years after joining Philadelphia's gay and lesbian synagogue he was drafted to become its president, which "made (him) realize how much (he) was accepted by (his) peers" (39).

Similarly, in *Nice Jewish Girls* Rachel Wahba describes her experience: born in Bombay, she was raised in Kobe, Japan, by an Iraqi mother and Egyptian father. As a Sephardic Jew she writes that she encountered difficulties since "Jewish history, culture, food...has been defined by Western/Ashkenazi Jews" (69-70). Also in this work Evelyn Torton Beck and her daughter, Nina Rachel, contribute a frank conversation about their respective involvements in the lesbian-feminist community, highlighting the various approaches of lesbian feminist Jews. Nina Rachel asserts that she and her mother take entirely different approaches to the same issue; the mother is more academic (studying and teaching about womyn's (sic) music), while the daughter more hands-on (distributing womyn's (sic) music): "I sometimes thought you were studying the things I was living" (26). Both works bring to the fore the importance of acknowledging and celebrating diversity within a community.

Invisibility as Jews and as lesbians and gays is a second theme. In *Twice Blessed* Rachel Wahba writes that at times she feels invisible as a Jew and as a lesbian. People assume she is part of a heterosexual marriage be-

cause of her wedding ring. Furthermore, she tends to hide her Jewishness, a legacy from her parents, who grew up where Jews were actively persecuted. Wahba argues that “coming out has to be better for the soul than passing though life in various shades of invisibility. It can be uncomfortable and even frightening at times. But not to do so leaves us disconnected, somehow” (56). In another essay, Agnes G. Herman describes how, as a parent of a gay son, she journeyed out of the closet. She movingly portrays her own “tangled web of grief, pain, and disappointment” (122) as she gradually grew to understand and accept her son. She admits that the path to real comfort was bumpy for her and her husband, who is a rabbi, but this essay makes visible an additional experience of those involved in the Jewish homosexual community.

*Nice Jewish Girls* also addresses this issue of invisibility. Evelyn Torton Beck writes in the introduction “In order to feel fully safe I need to feel known” (xvi). She describes masking her face with powder to hide measles contracted while sailing from Italy to New York as her family fled Nazi persecution in 1940. She learned at an early age that hiding was a response to danger. Now she struggles with invisibility—Jewish invisibility in lesbian groups and lesbian invisibility in Jewish groups—and finds it is not easy to combat antisemitism and homophobia and to convince groups of the need to affirm and accept difference. “Invisibility has a trivializing, disempowering and ultimately debilitating effect on its members” (xvii). While neither book explicitly advocates coming out as Jews or as homosexuals, the volumes do agree that the denial of difference is ultimately detrimental to community.

A final theme is reconciliation within Jewish and lesbian and gay communities. It is treated more fully in *Twice Blessed* than in *Nice Jewish Girls*, perhaps because the latter is an new edition of a 1982 publication. The revised and updated 1989 version contains a dozen additional essays, but the work barely addresses the question of reconciliation among different communities. One exception is the moving essay by Harriet Malinowitz. She describes the mood after coming out to her brother, who neither fully accepted nor rejected her:

Driving home in the car....neither one of us has seized the oars and rowed away, but neither of us has dropped anchor, either....He is at the wheel, still driving, still liking me, not going through any red lights. And I still like him too, even if it would be more convenient at this moment not to (215).

By contrast, *Twice Blessed* provides concrete exam-

ples of reconciliation and integration. Yoel H. Kahn addresses the establishment of a new liturgy, one that conveys “not only that lesbian and gay people are welcome in this community but that the liturgy—and the congregation—embraces all of us” (182). This liturgy contains new texts and also draws on and is grounded in traditional Jewish liturgy. Kahn writes, “Liturgy, however, is not limited to words.... The seating arrangements in a room, wearing name tags, the style of service leadership, and the choice of music are all part of the ‘liturgical message’ ” (183). In another example of reconciliation, Janet R. Marder writes about her experience as the heterosexual rabbi (from 1983-1988) of the world’s first gay and lesbian synagogue, located in Los Angeles. She describes her journey from tolerance to acceptance of homosexuality in a Jewish religious context. Her struggle with her belief in tradition and the sacredness of *halakhah* (Jewish law), which rejects homosexuality (although not specifically lesbianism), and her experiences with her congregants is compelling. Marder eventually chooses to cherish and affirm those Jewish principles that teach “love of humanity, respect for the spark of divinity in every person, and the human right to live with dignity..., and endorse loving, responsible, and committed human relationships” (214-5). Another essay in this volume is by “La Escondida,” a lesbian rabbi who feels she cannot reveal her identity. It illustrates the difficulties in trying to establish an integrated community. When this rabbi suggested to her synagogue board that they invite Jewish beneficiaries of the AIDS food project (to which the congregation enthusiastically donated cans of food after her High Holy Day sermon on the subject) to worship in their community, she encountered a storm of reaction. They did not wish to be known as “the gay synagogue” or to be “marginalized” within the larger Jewish community. These essays demonstrate that the struggle for reconciliation is ongoing.

While *Nice Jewish Girls* lays out the variety of experiences lesbian Jewish women have had in combining their lesbian and Jewish identity, *Twice Blessed* pushes further with appendices on “Teaching about Homosexuality” and a “Homophobia Workshop Model.” Such concrete models for establishing understanding in the Jewish community seem quite useful, although no empirical discussion of their effectiveness accompanies the appendices. Unfortunately, *Twice Blessed* does not include analogous appendices on “Teaching about Judaism” or an “Antisemitism Workshop Model” that might prove useful in homosexual groups and organizations in which antisemitism exists on various levels. In addition, a minor

criticism of both books is the lack of an index, which would be useful for readers interested in specific topics such as antisemitism or the Holocaust.

Despite these criticisms, these two books provide excellent groundwork for highlighting the diversity of experience and the commitment to combining multiple communities of identity by a number of lesbian and gay Jews. This tendency is the direction of much recent work in women's history, for example. No longer can historians view women as a monolithic group, when differences of class, race, region, ethnicity, and sexuality com-

pound to create the category of women. While these volumes provide important and crucial visibility to women and men who were/are largely invisible, perhaps the next step will be narrative or interpretive studies of Jewish lesbian and gay history; one that can draw upon the very rich materials of these two works.

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**Citation:** Aleisa Fishman. Review of Balka, Christie; Rose, Andy, eds., *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish* and Beck, Evelyn Torton, ed., *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology, Revised and Updated Edition*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. October, 1997.

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