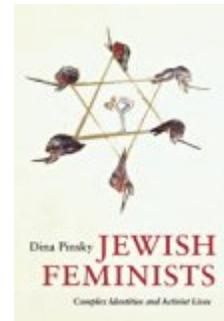


Dina Pinsky. *Jewish Feminists: Complex Identities and Activist Lives*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010. viii + 137 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03486-2; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07677-0.

Reviewed by Riv-Ellen Prell (University of Minnesota)

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Feminism and Jewish Identity

Social scientists of American Jewry have been interested in personal narratives for more than three decades. At the meeting place of oral history, life history, the ethnographic interview, and focus groups, they have queried immigrants and the native-born about their lives as Jews. The resulting scholarship has created a rich library that documents in some cases how people lived, but more often how they have made sense of their lives. The use of narratives has grown as the field of American Jewish studies has embraced a more qualitative turn. It underlines the notion that the complexity of American Jewish life is well served by capturing memory and reflection in ways that do not flatten and narrow experience, as quantitative measurement inevitably must.

Dina Pinsky's *Jewish Feminists: Complex Identities and Activist Lives* is motivated by some of the same issues as an earlier generation of social scientists, and by some different ones as well. She is interested in understanding how Jews who were committed to feminism in the 1960s and 1970s make sense of their identities as Jews and feminists. She asks if these identities are antithetical, difficult to combine, or complementary. She conducted thirty life-history interviews with twenty-five women and five men who identified with feminism in the 1960s and 1970s and were political activists. There were no orthodox Jews in her study because she could not find women who identified with political feminism in that era.

Pinsky is more sophisticated than an earlier genera-

tion of scholars because she argues that narratives do not speak for themselves; they constitute a discourse about identity rather than straightforward information about Jewishness. Hence she refers to them as "narratives of identity construction." Her numbers are small and her method of selecting informants results in a study that simply offers rich stories about Jews' engagement with these identity constructs.

Pinsky explains that what motivated her research was a specific turn in feminist theory, generally referred to as "intersectional analysis," or intersectionality. While there is not consensus among scholars about how to define these ideas, generally it is a theory of oppression that suggests that socially constructed categories such as race, gender, and sexuality do not exist independent of one another. They intersect to create a system of hierarchy. Intersectionality became a crucial corrective to earlier feminist theory that posited that gender was the singular basis of oppression in society, and thus denied the significance of race, sexuality, and other forms of differentiation. In light of the concept of intersectionality, Pinsky asked if religion is a valid identity, and thus undertook a study to understand how Jews fit into intersectional analysis as a feminist identity.

Her book offers a typology of responses to the question of how the women and men she interviewed understood themselves as Jews and as feminists. She posits three modes of creating an identity based on both Jewish-

ness and feminism: “Torah Warriors,” “Secular Adapters,” and “Encountering Difference.” The first group integrates Jewishness and feminism in the practice of Judaism. The second describes women who find their feminism and Jewishness (they tend to be secular) compatible because they understand both to be concerned with justice and see strong parallels between antisemitism and sexism. The third category encompasses women who felt they were insiders to feminism, but also alienated from it because of their experiences with antisemitism and anti-Zionism in the women’s movement. Her final category applies only to the five men that she interviewed, and their perspectives on the compatibility between Jewish and feminist identities varied.

Pinsky’s research suggests that women and men involved in the social movements of the 1960s have over the decades come to think a great deal more about their Jewishness. Some have embraced an active engagement with Judaism precisely because it has become more egalitarian as a result of feminism. Other Jewish women understand their Jewishness and feminism as deeply tied to one another. Some remain alienated from Jewishness because they feel marginalized by it as women and lesbians. Pinsky’s contribution is to show how identity changes over time and how Jewishness became woven into feminism.

Pinsky’s very commitment to the complexity of Jewish identity complicates her desire to link Jewishness to intersectionality, the issue that shaped her interest in life narratives. She concludes her study by reiterating that Jews have been “left out of the conversation about intersectionality in women’s studies.” She is critical of the failure of this conversation for leaving out the role of “religious identities” (p. 96). However, *Jewish Feminists* is not fundamentally a book about either Judaism or “religious identity.” There are no orthodox Jewish women in the study. The forms of discrimination described in the women’s movement were real enough, but they were not a “religious” form of antisemitism. It is, therefore, difficult to understand what the category of religion means precisely in this research and for intersectional analysis.

The study would have been greatly helped by a fuller

discussion of what Pinsky means by intersectionality. The concept developed as a theoretical framework not for the study of identity, but for the analysis of systems of power and domination in which categories such as race or gender were social constructions created for the purpose of hierarchy and oppression. In contrast, the narratives in this study for the most part embrace Jewishness as a powerful identity, often proudly claimed.

Jewish Feminists more successfully engages the conversation around multiculturalism because its narratives underline that Jews’ racial privileges have not shielded them from antisemitism, but Pinsky is less clear about how to integrate Jews into the conversation beyond these narratives.

The student movements of the 1960s and 1970s in general and feminism in particular, continue to pose important questions for scholars. Jews were active participants vastly out of proportion to their numbers in the larger society and even on college campuses. What to make of that critical fact is not yet clear however. This activism is clearly rooted in the multigenerational history of the Jewish Left in the United States, but that historical reality does not end the conversation.

The real questions are what effect did the Jewishness of the participants have on these movements and how were they affected by it? Will histories of second-wave feminism look radically different when the Jewishness of participants is made clear? What analysis of narratives may offer is the opportunity to see how some of these issues have played out in some women’s and men’s lives. But the larger questions raised by the histories of second-wave feminism have centered around the deep ideological divisions in the movement, the viability for it of the concept of gender as the foundation of oppression, and the long-term effects of a politics of rights and identity. Precisely because, as Dina Pinsky argues, Jewishness is a dynamic and complex identity, it is exceptionally difficult to understand how to relate the disproportionate presence of Jewish women in this movement to these issues.

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