

## **Being an Insider/Outsider to Judaism**

### **Lesson plan for adults**

*This lesson plan is part of a larger lesson entitled “Wrestling with God and Jewish Tradition,” which can be found at*

*<http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/jan06/>.*

*Most of us, whether we are Jews by birth or Jews by choice, have experienced moments of feeling truly at home within Judaism, as well as moments when we feel alienated. These moments may span simply a few seconds: we light the candles as Shabbat begins and feel a great wholeness; or they may span years, as we grapple with a religious community that does not embrace issues that are dear to us.*

- 1. Begin by introducing the topic** to your group. Ask participants to think of one time that they felt truly at home within Judaism, and one time they felt themselves on the outside of the tradition. If your group is comfortable sharing with each other, ask them to do so.
- 2. Ask and discuss:**
  - How did you respond to your feeling of alienation?
  - Was your response to confront, withdraw from, or attempt to change, your community or that issue which offended you?
- 3. Show the group Helène Aylon’s “Self-Portrait”** from “The Digital Liberation of G-d.” (The image can be found on the above website.) Ask your group what they see in the image, what feelings it elicits, and how they think this image speaks to Aylon’s sense of being inside or outside of Jewish tradition. They might notice, for example, the weary expression on Aylon’s face, the Hebrew words flowing over her, the traditional religious dress and hair-covering, the title of the piece, as evidence of her stance as insider or outsider.

- 4. Read Aylon's statement about this work** from JWA's online exhibit "Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution," found at <http://jwa.org/feminism/index.html?id=JWA002>. You can also download a PDF of the artist statement and Aylon's bio on the main page of this month's edition of Go & Learn (see website listed at top).
- 5. Look at other examples and explanations of Aylon's work.** The following quote is from "Intimate Architectures: Letters to Helène Aylon" by Ruth Ost, found on the website <http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/cf/ruth/Finalintrox.htm>, along with many other images from Aylon's exhibits.

*I remember seeing The Liberation of G-d at the National Museum of American Jewish History, part of the exhibition, Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities, curated by Norman Kleeblatt, in December 1997. You created a powerful ritual space in which visitors were invited through velvet curtains onto a bema of your own design to read Torah, violating the rules of your Jewish Orthodox past, the patriarchal rules you resist, again and again. You offer visitors a magnifying glass and a light by which to read the Five Books of Moses in Hebrew and English, each page of which you covered with vellum. With your pink marker, you have meticulously highlighted every hint of misogyny, readable through the parchment veil. Your marker, though, never bled through, staining the text, making it unclean. You've kept your distance. The visitors keep theirs.... These books will not close, these books you have so lovingly and painstakingly covered page by page. How do you store these thick starched books? And what can you do with all those pages of text stored in you?*

(Ruth Ost, "Intimate Architectures: Letters to Helène Aylon," January 11, 2002)

- 6. Ask what Aylon's statement (and Ost's, if using) adds to our understanding of Aylon's stance regarding tradition.**
- How is she responding to her alienation?

- Is this art an attempt to withdraw from, confront, or change the tradition?
- What did she need to know and understand in order to create this piece of art?

**7. Discuss:** Do we have a responsibility to Jewish tradition, even if/while we feel ourselves to be outside of it?

**Further ideas:**

- Learn how other Jewish women and feminists have expressed their positions as insiders/outside to the tradition and effected change in Jewish communities, using JWA's web exhibits:
  - Jewish Women & the Feminist Revolution:  
<http://www.jwa.org/feminism>
  - Women of Valor: <http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov>
- Discuss changes that have been made by your own congregations/communities: for example, adding matriarchs to the liturgy, creating new liturgy, introducing the bat mitzvah, hiring a female rabbi. Who initiated these changes? How did the changes affect the community?