

Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution:
Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges
(for Adult Women)

Introduction for facilitators

There are three sessions included in this discussion guide. You can choose which sessions you would like to use and in which order you would like to use them.

For each session, we have written more questions than you may want to use at one meeting. You can pick the questions that you think would be most appropriate for your group. You will see that some of the discussion questions repeat in different sessions, so that each session can stand alone. Sometimes it is useful to answer the same question more than once in different contexts, but you can eliminate them if you wish.

For each session, you can download reading packets from the Lesson Plans section of the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit (<http://jwa.org/feminism>) that provide background information for the discussions. These packets contain short essays by and biographies of the women we will be talking about. In the first two sessions, there is more information than each person can read during the program itself, so you, as group leader, will need to plan how to use the materials to fit your group and program. The group's interests, size, and timeframe should all be factors in your planning. We include suggestions on how to do this below.

We have starred the names of the women whose documents the participants must read in order to answer all the discussion questions. (You can pick and choose which documents to read, depending on which questions you plan to discuss.)

Here are three suggestions for how to choose selections to read and how to structure discussion groups accordingly:

- *Option 1:* At the beginning of a meeting, participants should read the starred selections and perhaps one more that you have chosen. You will need about 15 minutes to read the selections silently, or you can take 30 minutes to read out loud together. Then continue with the group discussion.
- *Option 2:* Mail packets to participants for them to read before the group meets.
- *Option 3:* Have each woman choose a selection to read and have her report back to the group about that woman before the discussion begins.

Introduction to *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution*

The Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution online exhibit (<http://jwa.org/feminism>), created by the Jewish Women's Archive (JWA), tells the story of Jewish women who played key roles in building and advancing the modern American women's movement. As artists, intellectuals, activists, and professionals, they shaped every aspect of American life. The exhibit also focuses on Jewish women who drew on insights from feminism to transform the Jewish community.

The modern period of the American women's movement, generally called the "second wave" of feminism, spans from the 1960s through the end of the 20th century. The "first wave" of the American women's movement began in the mid-1800s and continued until approximately 1920 when women won the right to vote. (Today, some young feminist activists consider themselves part of a "third wave" of feminism that began in the 1990s). First wave activists fought for suffrage and equality for women throughout American society. Their values and goals were similar to those of modern day feminists, although they didn't use that word to describe themselves or their movement (the word "feminism" did not come into use until the 1910s).

The movement for women's rights surged again in the 1960s. Many women were inspired by the civil rights movement. Some were activists in the civil rights movement and/or the anti-war movement, had learned organizing skills in these movements, and had experienced sexism that sparked them to think about creating a movement for women's liberation. These movements and other factors helped provide a setting that was ripe for the rebirth of feminism.

The second wave of feminism began when women like Betty Friedan began to speak out about social expectations that limited women's growth and to demand equality for women. In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded to advocate for women's rights.

In the late 1960s, younger women began to form "consciousness raising groups." These informal groups provided a place where women could talk about their personal lives as women. Many women began to realize that their experiences and frustrations were often caused by inequities in society, rather than their own personal problems. Within a short period of time, the terms "women's rights," "women's liberation," and "feminism" permeated society and became part of the public conversation.

In the 1970s, women who had been active in the American feminist movement began to apply their new feminist insights to their experiences in the Jewish community. Realizing that they often felt excluded from full participation in Jewish life, they created a Jewish feminist movement to help make Judaism and the Jewish community more inclusive.

Jewish feminism has been one of the most important forces in shaping and revitalizing American Jewish life in the past 30 years.

Jewish feminism has taken many forms. Some women focused on women's access to public ritual roles, such as inclusion in a *minyan* [prayer quorum, traditionally ten men] and acceptance to rabbinical school. Orthodox feminists developed other innovative ways for women to participate in Jewish practice, such as the creation of women's *tefilah* [prayer] groups in which women lead prayers and read from the Torah but omit prayers that require the presence of a *minyan*.

Jewish feminists have also struggled to make sure that Judaism includes their voices, questions, and perspectives. They pointed out that since many traditional texts, such as prayer books and the legal writings of the rabbis, were all written by men, the experiences of half of the Jewish population were absent from the official record of Judaism. To address this imbalance, feminists began to create their own *midrashim* – interpretations of traditional texts – some in the form of traditional commentaries, and others in creative media such as poetry, fiction, or visual art.

Jewish (and non-Jewish) feminists have wrestled with traditional depictions of God as male. In the 1970s and 80s, some women began to change liturgy so that it would reflect more inclusive, and in some cases, more feminine, images. This creative approach to God-language and prayer has had a strong influence even on mainstream American prayer books.

Women have also developed new rituals to provide women and girls with opportunities for meaningful Jewish experiences. The most obvious example of such innovations is the bat mitzvah, first held in 1922 and a widespread practice since the 1970s. Feminists have also developed ceremonies to mark experiences specific to women, such as childbirth and menstruation. Some Jewish women have also re-embraced rituals and holidays traditionally considered part of women's religious practice, such as the *mikveh* [ritual bath] and *Rosh Hodesh* [new moon] celebrations, finding in them rich opportunities for female spiritual expression.

Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution
Discussion Guide



Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution highlights 74 Jewish women who were involved in second wave feminism. The exhibit includes a statement by each woman about her role in the women's movement and a short biography, as well as artifacts, documents, photographs or videos that she submitted about her experience of feminism. The viewer can read about the events and women in chronological order on a timeline or can explore different themes in feminism. A viewer can also go to "Search the Collection," to find exhibit entries according to a list of women, topic, dates, formats, or keywords.

There were (and continue to be) many more Jewish feminists than are represented in this exhibit. The curators worked to bring together a diverse group of women, who made unique contributions to the feminist movement. The women represent different age groups, parts of the country, sexual orientations, professions, and cultures within the Jewish community.

We encourage you to browse the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit, which you can find online at <http://jwa.org/feminism>.

Part 1: Considering Jewish women's roles in the women's movement

As was stated above, Jewish feminists influenced every aspect of American life. Below are a few examples from the Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution exhibit of Jewish feminists who made their mark in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Their stories will form the background for our discussion. (The entries that are starred are the ones that are referred to specifically in the discussion questions.)

**Heather Booth*: abortion rights and civil rights activist

**Susan Brownmiller*: author of *Against Our Will*, a groundbreaking book about rape

**Blu Greenberg*: Orthodox feminist

Phyllis Chesler: pioneer in the field of psychology of women

Judy Chicago: feminist visual artist

Sonia Pressman Fuentes: feminist lawyer and a founder of NOW

Nancy Miriam Hawley: women's health activist

Alix Kates Shulman: feminist writer, author of egalitarian marriage agreement

**Gloria Steinem*: a founder of *Ms.* magazine; feminist speaker and writer

Ruth Messinger: politician and activist

After reading about these women (either in advance, as a large group, or individually – see options outlined in “Introduction for facilitators”), discuss the following questions:

- In reading about these women what did you find most impressive? Which woman/women is/are most interesting to you? Why?
- How has the women's movement impacted your life? Do you identify as a feminist, or have you at other stages of your life? Do you like or dislike that term? The word “feminism” has stereotypes attached to it. What are those stereotypes and where do you think they come from?
- Why do you think so many Jewish women have become feminist leaders? What unique strengths do Jewish women bring to the women's movement?
- If you are a mother of a teenage or young adult daughter, how does she view feminism?
- What are the parallels between Heather Booth and Susan Brownmiller and their stories about their girlhood experiences in the Jewish community?

How did sexism discourage them from becoming leaders in the Jewish community? How did their Judaism influence their work as civil rights activists? As feminists?

- Heather Booth, Susan Brownmiller, and Gloria Steinem all state that the civil rights movement inspired them to speak out about sexism or take action for women's rights.
- Did the civil rights movement affect your view of feminism? In the current period, what do civil rights and feminism have in common?
- In contrast to Heather Booth's and Susan Brownmiller's experiences in the Jewish community, Blu Greenberg states, "Feminism was an entry point for many women into Judaism and not an exit as other modern social movements had been." Has this been true for you? How about other women you know?
- What do you think are some of the key issues for feminists today?

Part 2: Transforming the Jewish community

Below are a few examples of how Jewish women used the insights of feminism to transform the Jewish community. Read their entries from the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit as background for the discussion. (The entries that are starred are the ones that you will need to read in order to answer all the discussion questions.)

Tamara Cohen: Jewish feminist writer, activist, and educator

**Dianne Cohler-Esses*: first woman rabbi from the Syrian Jewish community

Marcia Falk: feminist liturgist

**Debbie Friedman*: singer/songwriter of Jewish music

**Blu Greenberg*: Orthodox feminist pioneer

**Paula Hyman*: founding member of Ezrat Nashim and co-author of
its Call for Change

**Sharon Kleinbaum*: lesbian rabbi

**Judith Plaskow*: feminist theologian

After reading about these women (either in advance, as a large group, or individually – see options outlined in “Introduction for facilitators”), to discuss the following questions:

- How has American Judaism changed because of the work of these women?
- Do you resonate with the particular stories of any of these women? If so, which ones?
- Has Jewish feminism affected your relationship to Judaism? If so, how?
- Compare the tactics of Ezrat Nashim (Paula Hyman) and B’not Esh (Judith Plaskow). What was similar and what was different in their approaches to changing the opportunities for women in the Jewish community?
- Dianne Cohler-Esses tells a story about her struggle between the values of her Syrian Jewish community and her decision to become a rabbi. Can you think of an experience where your beliefs conflicted with those of your family or community?

- Read Blu Greenberg's statement about what she learned from the first National Jewish Women's Conference in 1973, and consider each of her points. Which ones might feminists of other Jewish backgrounds/denominations agree with? What do you think about each point?
- How has Debbie Friedman's vision of music and feminism had an impact on Judaism?
- Tamara Cohen said of her colleagues at Ma'yan: the Jewish Women's Project of the JCC in Manhattan, *"We wanted to bring Jewish feminism into mainstream synagogues and community centers and to help make it part of the vocabulary of Jewish teachers and families, sometimes without their even noticing. We didn't want to let Jewish feminism be one 'topic' or bookshelf in a Jewish library. Instead we knew that Jewish feminism needed to be suffused through all of Jewish practice so that it would be impossible to ignore."* Do you think this has been accomplished? If not, what else needs to change to attain this goal? How have you seen this issue play out in your own community?
- Sharon Kleinbaum talks about her vision of bringing women's voices to Judaism and transforming Judaism in doing so. What do you think she means by this? What is your vision of how Judaism should change?
- Do you continue to struggle for equality in your Jewish community and in your practice of Judaism? If so, how? What do you think still needs to change?

Suggested wrap-up for Parts 1 and 2 (when you have done both sessions):

In the first session, we focused on Jewish feminists involved in the transformation of general American society; in the second, we focused on Jewish feminists who transformed Judaism and the American Jewish community. Discuss the following questions:

- How did these groups of activists (feminists in the general American community and feminists in the Jewish community) influence each other as they developed? Do they continue to influence each other currently?
- Do you know of other ethnic or religious women's groups that are focusing on feminism within their communities? (e.g. Catholic? African American?)

What do Jewish women or Jewish feminists have in common with them?
What are our differences?

- Are there opportunities for Jewish women's groups and other religious or ethnic women's groups to support each other in achieving goals? What are the possibilities for working in coalition with them?

Part 3: Balancing acts: feminist identity and Jewish feminist identity

Some of the women featured in *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* identify as feminists, and some specifically as Jewish feminists. For some, their feminist identities and their Jewish identities come into conflict, and for others, they are mutually reinforcing. This session explores the perspective of Shifra Bronznick, a Jewish feminist activist, on these issues, as a starting point for your own discussion of feminism, Jewish feminism, and women's future.

Read Shifra Bronznick's statement and biography from the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* online exhibit, and discuss the following questions:

- In her statement, Bronznick describes feeling that Jewish feminism was a "powerful calling" but one that "seemed more laborious and more constricting" than her experience in the general women's movement. What do you think she means by this, and why might she have felt this way?
- Do your identities as a woman and as a Jewish woman ever come into conflict? Do they ever converge? If you consider yourself a feminist, do your identities as a feminist and as a Jewish feminist ever come into conflict?
- Bronznick writes that "my feminism went wide; my Jewish feminism went deep." What does she mean by this? Does this description resonate with your experiences of feminism and/or Jewish feminism?
- Do you feel confident that feminism has changed the world, "opening every single field to women's influence"?
- Do you relate to Bronznick's statement "I feel the weariness...where our huge efforts seem so disproportionate to our modest outcomes"? If so, what are the situations in which you feel this way?
- How do you think we can keep feminism vital? What lessons does feminism have for today's challenges? What are the key next steps for feminists today?
- How do you think we can get young women more interested in women's issues and feminism?
- What do you think about Bronznick's question, "When will our women's work become the work of the world?" Does this question resonate with your experience? Can you propose an answer?