

# Jewish Women's Archive



***Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution:  
Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges***

## **Materials for Part 1**

Excerpted from the Jewish Women's Archive's online  
exhibit at

<http://jwa.org/feminism>

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## **Heather Booth**

I grew up in a family that had good social values, reflected in our Jewish heritage, culture, and history. When I was growing up, at one point I wanted to be a rabbi, but was told (at that time) women couldn't be rabbis. I went to Israel when I graduated from high school in 1963, and the experience of Yad Vashem (the holocaust museum) had a transforming effect on me: I promised myself that in the face of injustice I would struggle for justice.

In 1964, at the end of my first semester of college, I went to Mississippi for the civil rights movement and the Freedom Summer Project. I'd been very active in SNCC already, and I was also active in the emerging anti-war movement on campus.

The photo [I submitted to the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* online exhibit] shows me playing the guitar for Fannie Lou Hamer – one of the great heroines of the civil rights movement – and some of her friends. Fannie Lou Hamer was a sharecropper who became a leader of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, fighting for dignity and the right to vote. In the civil rights movement, women played extraordinary leadership roles. Returning from Mississippi, I took with me the lesson that you need to stand up for justice and help others in need – a lesson that resonated deeply with my Jewish beliefs.

In 1965, a friend of mine was pregnant and needed an abortion. Upon being told there was someone with a problem, my reaction was to try to do something to resolve it. I called doctors in the civil rights movement and found someone who could help my friend. A few months later, someone else had heard about it and asked for help. I made another contact. And someone else called, then another, then another. I told people when they called they should ask for Jane. I would counsel the women, preparing them for the abortion and doing follow-up with them and with the doctor afterward.

Many of the women who called me were students. Some were housewives. At least a couple of women were related to the Chicago police. It made me believe that the police department knew about it, and might even be referring people. The law did not change until 1973, and until then abortion was illegal; I didn't want to go to jail. I was willing to take the risks because I thought I was fulfilling the Golden Rule.

In 1966, I met my husband, a leader of the student movement, at a sit-in against the war, and we decided we'd get married when I graduated in 1967. Then I was trying to get a doctorate, working full-time, had a Movement life full-time, and I was expecting a child. And the number of people calling upon Jane was increasing. I decided to recruit other women to take over the project and turned Jane over to the

***Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution***  
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collective in 1968. Jane ultimately served over 10,000 women before Roe v. Wade made abortion legal in 1973.

One of the great insights of the women's movement was that "the personal is political." This means that problems that you felt were yours alone – you couldn't advance in a career, you weren't treated well in relationships – were actually social problems shared by other women, and as such needed social solutions. To recognize these problems meant that we needed to act together to correct them.

Now too often that insight is turned on its head. Often problems that we know are political or social are treated as if they are only personal. We care about the environment, so we recycle. We support the women's movement, so we read non-sexist books to our kids. It is a good start, but more is needed to change society. We need to act on the principle of *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world). If we organize, we can change the world.

*Heather Booth helped transform the American political landscape from her early involvement in both civil rights and abortion rights through her campaign for marriage equality. Heather Booth began participating in the civil rights movement with sit-ins and travelling to Mississippi for Freedom Summer. On her return, she began the first women's movement organization on a school campus and spearheaded JANE, an abortion counseling service, risking criminal charges in the days before Roe v. Wade. She went on to direct a number of vital national organizations and campaigns, and founded the Midwest Academy to train leaders of social change organizations. As executive director of the NAACP National Voter Fund, she helped increase African American turnout in the 2000 election by two million voters. She has consulted for projects ranging from preserving social security and Medicare to immigration to regulating the finance industry, and was the national coordinator for efforts around the country supporting marriage equality.*

To learn more about Heather, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/feminism/booth-heather>.

*Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution*  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

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## **Susan Brownmiller**

As a child I was sent to the East Midwood Jewish Center on Ocean Avenue two afternoons a week for lessons in Hebrew and Jewish history. Biblical history, Palestine's history, Eastern European history. The High Holy Days and all the other holidays. There was a lot to cover, and it all got sort of mishmashed in my brain except for one thread: a helluva lot of people over the centuries seemed to want to harm the Jewish people.

Jewish Brooklyn had been swept into a Zionist fervor in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust. In 1948, when Israel was declared a Jewish state, our Hebrew teachers instantly switched us from Yiddish-inflected Ashkenazi to the fluttery t-t-t and ah-ah-ah of the Sephardic pronunciation. With misty eyes and strong, quavering voices, they talked about emigrating to "Eretz" to work the land. They encouraged us to join a youth group. Wow, the idea was thrilling. I wanted to work the land, I wanted to be part of this brave, new movement. I wanted to help. I went to the Ocean Avenue synagogue on Saturday mornings and chanted the prayers.

My parents grew somewhat alarmed by my sudden intensity. My aunts and uncles started calling me "the *Rebbetzin*." "What's a '*rebbetzin*'?" I asked my mother, thinking it must mean a serious, dedicated, intelligent person. "A *rebbetzin* is a rabbi's wife," she laughed.

What a deflating blow to my ego and ambitions! A rabbi was a revered personage; a rabbi's wife served cake and tea and preened in his reflected glory. My instinctive feminism (no lessons needed) could not be reconciled with this severe limitation on my life's path. The sly mockery had its effect. So much for Judaism, so much for religion – I became an atheist, a secularist, and never looked back.

Somewhere in *Against Our Will*, my book on rape (1975), I mention quietly that I am Jewish from Brooklyn, but I have never stressed my Jewish heritage in my writing. Yet the heritage is still with me, and I can argue that my chosen path – to fight against physical harm, specifically the terror of violence against women – had its origins in what I had learned in Hebrew School about the pogroms and the Holocaust.

I have to say that I was surprised, and ultimately heartened, during the heady days of Women's Liberation to see the emergence of committed, observant, Jewish feminists who took on the task of creating equality within organized religion. This wasn't a project I had given any thought to, and it remains an uphill struggle, as do all feminist issues. But one thing became certain: these women weren't going to settle for being rebbetzins.

***Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution***  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

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*Susan Brownmiller sparked a fundamental shift in society's understanding of rape with her groundbreaking book, **Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape**. Brownmiller participated the Civil Rights movement through sit-ins, picket lines, and Freedom Summer in Mississippi and continued her work with civil rights and antiwar protests after she returned to editorial work for Newsweek and the Village Voice. In 1968, when the women's movement burst on the national scene, Brownmiller became involved as an activist and gravitated to the issue of violence against women. Her book, **Against Our Will**, published in 1975, examined everything from early human law codes to current portrayals of rape in newspapers and popular music. She was the first to argue that rape is an issue of power and control, not sexual desire, and that rape is not the victim's fault. The book is credited with changing laws requiring a corroborating witness for rape and allowing evidence about the victim's sexual history in rape trials. Brownmiller went on to write **In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution** about her involvement with the women's movement, and to speak out about violence against women.*

To learn more about Susan, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/feminism/brownmiller-susan>.

*Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution*  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

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## **Blu Greenberg**

This artifact [article Greenberg wrote about Jews and feminism; see *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* online exhibit] summons to memory an event that was a turning point in the life of American Jewish women – the first National Jewish Women's Conference, held at the McAlpin Hotel, February, 1973. Skillfully organized by a handful of young women, the conference placed the broad feminist agenda at the heart of contemporary Judaism and community consciousness. It attracted 500 women (and one man) from across the entire spectrum of Jewish life.

The artifact also represents a turning point in my life: It represents my first foray into the dialectics of religious feminism, my first major public address, and my first published article on a subject that would engage me for the next 32 years.

From the conference, I learned many things:

- Probing an issue directly through the original sources and not relying on pre-digested information was essential. Preparation for this talk – my first systematic look at the issue – turned up some interesting correctives. The accepted notion in Orthodoxy was that women were on a pedestal, hierarchy did not exist, and gender differentiated roles/status were from Sinai, thus unalterable. True, Jewish women were protected and respected, valued and honored in the tradition. But there were also areas of closed access, unequal dignity, and outright disabilities for women. Furthermore, over time, change had come – especially religious education for women and attempts to ameliorate the plight of the *agunah* (literally, “chained wife” – a woman whose husband won't grant her a religious divorce). All this had to be addressed.
- Feminism was an entry point for many women into Judaism and not an exit as other modern social movements had been.
- There was enormous value and power in cohorts.
- The difference between knowing a thing by observing others perform and knowing through first-hand experience had significant implications for women's ritual.
- One could critique the tradition from within yet remain a faithful daughter; one could make tradeoffs and compromises to remain within community yet not lose one's feminist aspirations or credentials.
- Feminists could be as Orthodox in their beliefs as traditionalists were in theirs. My critique was two-pronged: what Orthodoxy and feminism could learn from each

*Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution*  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

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other. Some in the audience welcomed the critique of Orthodoxy, but bristled at the critique of feminism. Happily, there has been great change in each sector during these past 30 years. Feminism yielded its radical edge, turned unqualifiedly family friendly, and became more inclusive of men. Orthodoxy has integrated values of gender equality to an extent unimaginable three decades ago.

The conference changed my life. How fortunate I was to be part of an incredible historical moment!

*Arguing that feminism could become a way into Judaism instead of a reason to leave the faith, JOFA founder Blu Greenberg created new possibilities for Orthodox feminist Jews. The daughter of an Orthodox rabbi and the wife of another, Greenberg was deeply involved in the Jewish community but concerned by the lack of opportunities for women to engage in ritual and study. At the First National Jewish Women's Conference in 1973, Greenberg argued that women should take part in ritual and synagogue leadership to the fullest extent within Jewish law, and that to claim that halakhah could not adapt to feminist concerns was to ignore the long history of Jewish tradition. Greenberg went on to become founding president of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) in 1997 and to develop a gender and Judaism curriculum for Orthodox day schools. Greenberg has also taken on a leadership role in a variety of Jewish organizations, serving on the boards of organizations including Project Keshet and Lilith Magazine, as well as her work as a founding member of the Dialogue Project, which helped create discussion groups between Israeli and Palestinian women to promote peace.*

To learn more about Blu, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/feminism/greenberg-blu>.

*Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution*  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

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## **Phyllis Chesler**

I grew up in an Orthodox family in Borough Park. In those days, girls had no visible or public religious futures. Thus, although I was sometimes known as the "smartest boy" in my Talmud Torah class, I knew that I could not have a Bat Mitzvah or ever become a rabbi or a cantor. In a sense, my first protest took place in 1946 when I refused to learn Yiddish (a decision that I of course regret) but insisted on learning Hebrew.

My second protest took place in 1948, when I joined Hashomer Ha'Tzair, a left-wing socialist Zionist Youth group. My third protest took place in 1950, when my parents brought in the rabbis to talk me out of this association. Instead, I joined Ain Harod, a Zionist group to the left of Hashomer. My fourth protest took place in 1952, the year that I was not Bat Mitzvah'ed. I ate non-kosher food for the first time – and lived.

My fifth protest took place in 1961 when I married a wealthy and westernized Muslim from Afghanistan with whom I attended college. When I arrived for what I thought would be a brief visit in Kabul, my American passport was confiscated and I was held as a captive. I tried to escape many times and finally did so. I had the marriage annulled.

I learned that no woman, no radical, and no feminist can afford to romanticize Third World countries, customs, or leaders. Perhaps my fiery feminism was forged in Kabul.

In 1967, I attended my first NOW meetings. Between 1967 and 1971, I marched, demonstrated, picketed, sat-in, organized, delivered keynote speeches, co-founded organizations, and encouraged the formation of feminist magazines and journals. Simultaneously, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I helped women get abortions and supported one of the country's first Women's Crisis Centers, which was on Dean Street, in Brooklyn.

In 1969, I was in a feminist consciousness-raising group in New York City. I was also attending the preliminary meetings that led to the formation of the Association for Women in Psychology (AWP), which I co-founded in 1969 and which is still going strong. In September of 1969, I delivered an impassioned speech on behalf of AWP at the American Psychological Association (APA) Annual meeting, demanding one million dollars in reparations from the APA on behalf of women. The speech led to world headlines and also to my first book contract.

That June, I received my Ph.D, published my dissertation in Science magazine, and began teaching at a branch of CUNY, Richmond College, on Staten Island, as the only female member of the Psychology faculty.



*Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution*  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

Excerpted from the Jewish Women's Archive's online exhibit at <http://jwa.org/feminism>

In 1969, I also began writing what became *Women and Madness*. *Women and Madness* received a front-page *New York Times* Book Review and was the first feminist work to do so.

*In her controversial book, Women and Madness, Phyllis Chesler argued that the definitions of mental illness, created by men, are often used as a means of controlling and abusing women. Chesler became involved with the women's movement while studying psychology and at the 1969 annual meeting of the American Psychological Association she demanded \$1 million in reparations for decades of women being misdiagnosed and drugged or imprisoned against their will. In Women and Madness, she outlined the double standards that labeled male behavior as normal and women's behavior as insane, as well as real problems, such as postpartum depression and childhood sexual abuse, that the psychiatric community failed to treat. She went on to teach psychology and anthropology at Richmond College, where she founded one of the first women's studies departments in the country. A cofounder of the Association for Women in Psychology and the National Women's Health Network, Chesler later became a founding member of Women of the Wall.*

To learn more about Phyllis, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/feminism/chesler-phyllis>.

## Judy Chicago

My first ideas in developing imagery for the *Birth Project* involved using the birth process as a metaphor for creation. In 1975, I met a radical nun who collaborated with me in writing a reinterpretation of the myth of Genesis from a female point of view. I began trying to build a visual analog to this myth (as expressed in *The Creation*, a 14-foot tapestry), one that would affirm the fact that it was women who created life. I went to the library to see what images of birth I could find. I was struck dumb when my research turned up almost none. It was obvious that birth was a universal human experience and one that is central to women's lives. Why were there no images?

I decided that I would have to go directly to women, ask them to tell me about their birth experiences, and then use that raw material in the development of images. Many of the women I talked to had never spoken to anyone about their birth experiences. As I listened and studied and read, I realized that the very nature of this subject was shrouded in myth, mystery, and stereotype. I knew that I wanted to dispel at least some of this secrecy.

In the *Birth Project*, the content – birth, the essential female experience – was fused with needlework, a traditional form of women's art. From 1980 to 1985, I met and worked with the over 130 needleworkers from the United States, Canada, and New Zealand who collaborated with me on this project. Working with the *Birth Project* stitchers was like being in touch with one aspect of the continuum of women's history: the medieval workshops where women stitched together for the glory of the church; the all-female Renaissance guilds where women embellished royal robes; the 19th-century quilting bees where women coded secrets into their quilts. But this time, we were using needlework to openly express and honor our own experience through this unique form.

It is possible that in some future generation, child-rearing will be seen as the crucial activity of a culture, and the raising of future generations will be the most prized and rewarded profession. It is possible the time will come when both women and men will share the responsibilities of child-rearing equally. But that is not the case now. Exploring the subject of birth brought me face-to-face with the fundamental cause of women's oppression – as soon as one gives birth to a child, one is no longer free. And, tragically, that lack of freedom is reinforced and institutionalized by the very nature of society. It may be a high-school girl being deprived of an education because she becomes pregnant; a woman on an airplane desperately trying to quiet a screaming child while everyone stares at her in disgust; a long-married mother of three whose husband leaves her, her income thereby reduced to poverty level; or a highly gifted artist whose conflicts between self-fulfillment and her child's needs tear her apart with guilt. Whatever her situation, every woman who has a child is punished for having done the very thing which society tells her is her womanly goal.

***Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution***  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

Excerpted from the Jewish Women's Archive's online exhibit at <http://jwa.org/feminism>

*Judy Chicago vividly depicted women's history and women's experiences through sculpture, paintings, and installation art that involved hundreds of collaborators. Chicago helped develop the Fresno Feminist Art Program, whose 1972 exhibition, Womanhouse, involved female art students completely transforming a house into an environment that expressed their personal experiences and identities as women. Soon after this, Chicago became aware of the absence of women's stories from history and began research on important women who had been neglected by historians. This culminated in her monumental art installation, The Dinner Party, where hundreds of volunteers helped craft individual place settings and vaginal-shaped ceramic plates to commemorate historical and mythological heroines. The Dinner Party is on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum. Chicago's next major work, The Birth Project, involved images of women in labor, which Chicago felt was a central experience for women that was completely missing from the artistic canon. Her Holocaust Project: From Darkness into Light, explored the abuse of power through mixed media installation. Chicago continues to create art, working in the medium of glass since 2003.*

To learn more about Judy, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/people/chicago-judy>.

*Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution*  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

Excerpted from the Jewish Women's Archive's online exhibit at <http://jwa.org/feminism>

## **Sonia Pressman Fuentes**

On July 2, 1965, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) commenced operations; it had been created to enforce Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited employment discrimination, including that based on sex, among covered employers, labor unions, and employment agencies. Three months later, I joined the agency as the first woman attorney in the Office of the General Counsel.

Initially, in the area of sex discrimination, the EEOC moved very slowly or not at all. I found myself increasingly frustrated by the unwillingness of most of the officials to come to grips with the issues and to expand employment opportunities for women. I became *the* staff person who stood for aggressive enforcement of the sex discrimination prohibitions of the Civil Rights Act and was ultimately awarded a Superior Performance award for my efforts. It was gratifying to me to receive this award, as it evidenced the Commission's recognition of the importance of interpreting and enforcing the sex discrimination prohibitions of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Then Betty Friedan, who had become famous through writing *The Feminine Mystique*, came to the EEOC to interview officials and staff for a second book. I invited her into my office and told her, with tears in my eyes, that the country needed an organization to fight for women the way the NAACP fought for African Americans.

Thereafter, in June 1966, at a luncheon at the Third National Conference of Commissions on the Status of Women in Washington, D.C., 28 people planned the formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW). Another 26 founders, of whom I was one, were added at an organizing conference in Washington, D.C. that October. In the picture taken at that organizing conference, I am in the front row at the right, one person away from Betty Friedan.

After its founding, NOW embarked upon an ambitious program of activities to get the EEOC to enforce Title VII for women. As a result of pressure by NOW and other subsequent developments, the EEOC began to take seriously its mandate to eliminate sex discrimination in employment and the American public became aware that there was a new national priority: equal rights for women.

A little-known law, a relatively small organization, the developments that followed in this country, and similar movements worldwide have completely changed the face of this country and are well on their way to changing the face of the world.

***Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution***  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

Excerpted from the Jewish Women's Archive's online exhibit at <http://jwa.org/feminism>

(This statement is excerpted from the chapter called "Sex Maniac" in Sonia Pressman Fuentes' memoir, *Eat First – You Don't Know What They'll Give You, The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter.*)

*In the early days of second wave feminism, Sonia Pressman Fuentes spearheaded the effort to extend the Civil Rights Act's protections of equal opportunity to all people regardless of gender. First in her class at University of Miami School of Law, Fuentes worked as an attorney before joining the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which was founded in 1965 to enforce the Civil Rights Act. Fuentes drafted many of the commission's most important decisions and was the driving force behind many efforts to ensure opportunities and equal pay for women. Tired of resistance from colleagues to issues of women's rights, Fuentes told Betty Friedan that women needed an organization that would fight for them the way the NAACP fought for African Americans. Fuentes then joined Friedan as one of the founders of NOW, fighting for the Equal Rights Amendment and Title IX. Fuentes also helped found the Women's Equity Action League and Federally Employed Women, and served on the Board of Trustees of the National Women's Party. She continues to write and speak on women's rights.*

To learn more about Sonia, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/people/fuentes-sonia-pressman>.

*Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution*  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

Excerpted from the Jewish Women's Archive's online exhibit at <http://jwa.org/feminism>

## **Nancy Miriam Hawley**

There was a larger social context for the formation of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, which created *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Many of us were involved in other movements for liberation – the New Left or civil rights or the antiwar movement. When the women's movement came along, it hit home, because it was addressing our oppression as women, which we hadn't identified before.

My involvement in the women's movement began in 1968, when some of the women I knew from Students for a Democratic Society and I began meeting to talk about what it was like to be a woman within the Left. Out of these monthly meetings several of us decided to put on a conference at Emmanuel College in Boston, on May 4, 1969, that would offer different approaches to many issues of concern to women.

It was at this conference that I led the first workshop on "women and their bodies." A number of us were particularly concerned about health issues because as young women, we were having our first babies, and birth control and childbirth were prominent issues for us. After the workshop, people wanted to continue the conversation. We began talking about creating a list of good doctors. We felt that we couldn't fully evaluate the doctors because we were not health professionals, but we could talk about how we experienced doctors treating us. We began to research health issues, and ultimately developed our research into a course on women and their bodies. We wrote up our findings, which became the first edition, printed by the New England Free Press in 1970 on stapled newsprint. It sold 200,000 copies by word-of-mouth alone.

At some point in these early printings, we realized that the title "Women and Their Bodies" was itself a sign of our alienation from our bodies. We changed the title to "Our Bodies, Ourselves," because that was what we were really talking about.

About a year later, we began to be courted by publishers. We realized that we had to let go of our reservations about a capitalist publisher in order to get the information out to as many women as possible. So we chose Simon and Schuster, and incorporated our collective.

The chapter on sexuality was the first chapter ever written by women for women about what it was like to be a sexual being. And of course that honest conversation threatened some people, and there were efforts to ban the book. Here we were, putting information out in the world, and people wanted to hide it away. But there was a groundswell of support for us, and we continued our work.

We began with mimeographed copies, and have since published eight editions and 19 translations and/or adaptations. Members of the Collective have also written

*Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution*  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

Excerpted from the Jewish Women's Archive's online exhibit at <http://jwa.org/feminism>

other books including *Changing Bodies, Changing Lives* (for teens); *Ourselves, Growing Older*; and *Sacrificing Ourselves for Love*.

The women of the Collective are my family. We've been connected, some of us, since 1969. We've been together through marriages, divorces, coming out, and births of children and grandchildren. Some of us many years ago created a seder, and we celebrate Passover together, Jews and non-Jews alike. We've supported each other through illnesses, the death of one of our members (Esther Rome), and the deaths of three husbands. It's been a lifetime of work and a lifetime of relationships.

*Nancy Miriam Hawley helped found the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, Inc., the organization responsible for writing the best seller Our Bodies, Ourselves, which empowered women to take control of their own health care. In 1969, Hawley led the first workshop on women and their bodies for a conference at Emmanuel College. The discussion about the lack of information about women's health and the difficulty of finding doctors who would take women's concerns seriously led to the publication of Women and Their Bodies, later retitled Our Bodies, Ourselves. The first edition sold 200,000 copies; to date, the book has been translated into 26 languages, including Braille, and has sold 4.5 million copies. The Collective's work also served as a model for health advocacy, influencing later efforts to approve HIV drugs. Hawley served on the Collective's board for many years, and also worked as a clinical social worker, group therapist, and as the principal clinical social worker for the Cambridge Hospital of Harvard Medical School. As of 2014, she serves as an organizational consultant and coach to business executives.*

To learn more about Nancy, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/people/hawley-nancy-miriam>.



*Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution*  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

Excerpted from the Jewish Women's Archive's online exhibit at <http://jwa.org/feminism>

**Alix Kates Shulman**

My "Marriage Agreement" was first published in the small feminist journal *Up From Under* in 1970. The radical feminist idea it embodied was so controversial that it was reprinted (and sometimes misprinted) in *Life*, *Redbook*, *Ms.*, a Harvard textbook on contract law, and many an anthology. For decades it has been loudly debated, championed, and ridiculed – right up until last year, when it was attacked anew in *The Atlantic* and subsequently defended in that magazine's Letters columns.

The idea was simply this: that a woman and man should share equally the responsibility for their household and children in every way, from the insidiously unacknowledged tasks of daily life to the pleasures of guiding a young human to maturity.

This explosive idea went completely against the conventions of that era. At the time I wrote my "Marriage Agreement," child care and household management were considered exclusively a woman's responsibility. What made the idea radical were the Principles. The rest of the Agreement was my attempt to stir up public consciousness by naming some of the hidden tasks, so often considered trivial, that are taken for granted in the traditional divisions of household labor. Today, in an era of two-earner families with the attendant problems of the Second Shift and rampant overwork, someone searching among the data of daily life might come up with a different list of tasks and inequities from mine. But the Principles remain – and continue to sting – despite the fact that now, more than three decades later, the idea of equal marriage is widely accepted, like many other feminist ideas. Some people nowadays try valiantly to live by it, while many others pay it lip service, even while managing to avoid its practical consequences.

The idea's limited success is hardly surprising, given the economic, social, and psychological arrangements that continue to impede equality, in marriage and out. Such strains doomed my own marriage, along with half the marriages in America. Probably not until the polity is more child- and woman-friendly, not until men and women are equally valued – economically and otherwise – not until free or low-cost quality childcare is universally available, will the ideal of equality in marriage be other than radical.

*From her radical marriage contract to her lyrical novels and memoirs, Alex Kates Shulman's honesty and willingness to share her story helped shape the conversation about women's liberation. Shulman helped plan the 1968 Miss America Pageant Protest, the first national demonstration for women's liberation. She then published "A Marriage Agreement," in which she detailed a fair division of housework between herself and her husband. The article has been regularly reprinted and anthologized in magazines and even a Harvard textbook on contract law. From her bestselling first novel, *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, to her*



***Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution***  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

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*biographies of activist Emma Goldman and Shulman's accounts of her own life and struggles, her writing has been praised by the New York Times and the Oxford Companion to Women's Writing for its power and lyricism. Shulman founded a Pacific chapter of No More Nice Girls, an abortion rights group, and has spoken out on her own experiences with abortion. Shulman has taught writing and women's literature at a number of universities, and continues to write.*

To learn more about Alix, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/people/shulman-alix-kates>.

*Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution*  
**Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 1**

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## **Gloria Steinem**

What's a nice girl like me doing in a movement like this? I guess the real question is why it took me so long. I was about 34 or 35 before the light began to dawn. I had identified with every other social justice movement in the world first. I think that often happens to women – we identify with other underdogs, even if we don't know why – but there was no women's movement out there really, and nothing told me to take females as a group seriously. That's especially ironic because I had a Jewish suffragist grandmother, Pauline Perlmutter Steinem, who died when I was about five. She had addressed Congress, but nobody told me about that. They told me that she was a wonderful woman who kept a kosher table, had four sons, and was a pioneer of vocational education – different measurements of success – but not that she was also the first woman to be elected to a Board of Education in the state of Ohio, as a suffragist on the same ticket with the socialists and the anarchists. I didn't know this until a feminist historian in Toledo wrote a monograph about her. In a way, feminism rediscovered my grandmother for me. I think a lot of us have women in our families who aren't talked about. They were the feminists.

It was really the women who had come out of the civil rights movement, who realized that sex was a caste system just as race was, who introduced me to feminism. Betty Friedan had already written *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. It was very important for homemakers in the suburbs who were well educated and wanted to get into the paid labor force, but I thought, "I've always been in the labor force, and I'm still getting screwed." I didn't see how that message applied to my life. Then younger feminists came along with an analysis that included all females – a revolution and not a reform – and it made sense of my own life.

My first big experience of this came in 1969. Abortion was still illegal, and the New York State legislature was having a hearing on whether to liberalize the State abortion law. They invited 14 men and one nun to testify. A group of early feminists said, "Wait a minute, let's hear from women who have actually had this experience." They held their own hearing in a church downtown in Greenwich Village, and I went to cover it for a column called "The City Politic" that I was writing in what was then a brand new *New York Magazine*. I went as a reporter, but I think now that I was drawn to what I needed to know. At this speak-out, I heard women stand up and talk about having illegal abortions. I'd never heard women talk in public about that in my life – I'd never heard women take anything seriously that "only" affected women. Class, race, everything was serious because it also affected men, but if it only affected women, it couldn't be serious. Then I saw these women standing up and telling their stories – dramatic, horrifying, funny. They spoke about the dangerous illegal underground they had to enter, about bargaining with illegal abortionists, dealing with men who demanded sex before performing an abortion – incredible stories. For me it was like a big light coming on. I had had an abortion and never told anyone – not a girlfriend, not the man, nobody.

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That was my first big moment of "Aha!" I thought, "If one in every three or four women in this country has had this experience of needing an abortion at some time in her life, why is it secret? Why is it kept illegal and dangerous?" I went home and wrote an article about this for *New York Magazine*. It was not a personal article – reporters weren't supposed to say "I" in those days. It was a column called "After Black Power, Women's Liberation." At the end, I said that if these younger, more radical, more "sex-as-a-caste" liberationists could coalesce with the NOW reformers – who were less radical than they later became – there could really be a national populist women's movement. For me, that was the beginning.

*Gloria Steinem is a leader, spokeswoman, and icon of the feminist movement. Steinem began her career as a journalist, working first as a freelancer and then for New York magazine, where an assignment covering an abortion hearing made her realize how rarely women's issues were covered as serious news. The experience led her to the women's movement in 1969, where she began speaking out on race and gender issues both alone and with African-American friends and allies, quickly becoming the public face of the feminist movement. With Betty Friedan and Senator Bella Abzug, Steinem helped lead the 1970 Women's Strike for Equality. In 1971, she co-founded Ms. magazine, which immediately became a major popular forum for issues affecting women. Steinem went on to co-found a number of vital organizations, including the Women's Action Alliance, the National Women's Political Caucus, and the Women's Media Center, and testified before the Senate for the Equal Rights Amendment. In 2013, Steinem received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She continues to advocate for women's rights, racial equality, gay rights, and peace with passion and wit.*

To learn more about Gloria, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/people/steinem-gloria>.

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## **Ruth Messinger**

During the years that I held elected office, the percentage of women holding such positions across the U.S. went from about 4% to 20%. An impressive increase to be sure – very important for the advance of women and, in my judgment, for the improvement of politics – but also in some ways a painful one, given the hurdles that women in politics encounter. The public often has different expectations of women than of men. They are not sure that women should be working, particularly in a business they think of as dirty. Experienced political donors contribute less to women than to men and, if asked why, cannot justify this decision. Male colleagues are often people who really have never dealt with women as equals and are easily threatened by women expecting to be treated that way.

Some vignettes:

I meet with a colleague who has control over an important committee. I ask for a public hearing for a piece of legislation I have drafted. I offer many reasons why the hearing should be scheduled, how important it will be to a key group of constituents, how it will help advance his position with these individuals. He asks all sorts of questions and then, at the end of our conversation, when I push for a response, says, "Of course you can have a hearing. I can never say no to a pretty girl."

I am in a serious battle with the Mayor over the responsibilities of his commissioners. We are confident that the law is on our side – eventually proved to be correct. But the Mayor speaks to the *New York Times* and says that I am in error, perhaps cannot understand the law because I am not a lawyer, and seem to be "hysterical" about the matter.

I am part of a small group on the City Council charged with shaping the final budget that the Council will propose to the Mayor, and we are arguing about what items will be cut and what items must stay in our final draft. I am doing the math for the group of seven individuals, helping each of them to cost out his proposals, make some cuts and adjustments, fit as much as possible into the final draft. At the end of this process, I then speak up to say what items from my original list must make the final draft, and there is, literally, collective astonishment that I am going to do more than facilitate their requests, that I have the temerity to demand to be treated as an equal. Then, to top off this experience, as we are leaving this session – at about five a.m., after six or seven hours of work, one male colleague says to me that he has spent more time with me than he spends with his wife in a year!

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Polls show that in my citywide race I cannot win the support of Hispanic women over 40, even though I am very popular in the Hispanic community based on my positions, because they do not believe a woman should work outside the home in this public arena.

In this same citywide race against a popular incumbent, a columnist in the *Washington Post* weighs in with a piece in support of the Mayor in which he concludes that I am too unattractive to be Mayor.

I was a part of the political arena for 20 years. I loved the experience and believe that having people of different backgrounds – gender, race, class, national origin – makes for a stronger and more democratic government. It was always exciting, always challenging, and I know that I was able to make a difference and, in the process, interest other women in standing up for their own rights, working to promote change, thinking about running for office themselves. And, during these two decades, people got more comfortable with seeing women hold positions of power, but there is still a long way to go.

*As a politician, Ruth Messinger served her community, but in leading American Jewish World Service, she has found ways for her community to help repair the world. Messinger worked as a teacher, college administrator, and social worker before winning a seat on the New York City Council in 1977, winning reelection several times by large majorities. She became Manhattan borough president in 1990, using her influence to support gay rights, affordable housing, public school funding, and other vital issues. In 1997, she ran for mayor of New York (the first time a woman candidate secured the Democratic nomination for the post), but lost to incumbent Rudy Giuliani. The following year, she became the executive director of AJWS, which funds both development projects and emergency relief worldwide. AJWS is known not just for working to eliminate poverty and disease, but also for its support of the rights of women, homosexuals, and transgender people. Honored by the Huffington Post, the Jerusalem Post, and the Forward as one of the world's most influential Jews, Messinger served on President Obama's Task Force on Global Poverty and the State Department's Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group.*

To learn more about Ruth, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/people/messinger-ruth>.