



The Ladies Auxiliary by Tova Mirvis

Kaaterskill Falls by Allegra Goodman

Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith by Gina B. Nahai

*Deborah, Golda, and Me: Being Female and
Jewish in America* by Letty Cottin Pogrebin

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Jewish women have been central to the creation of communities. Managing domestic arrangements, nurturing social relationships within and among families, making common cause with other women in the workplace, Jewish women are both celebrated and taken for granted as community builders. From the Old World to the New, Jewish women have influenced the direction of communities, transmitting tradition and guiding assimilation.

Despite their primary roles in enabling and maintaining communal relations, women have historically been excluded from important aspects of Jewish community; custom and religious law bar women from holding public positions of religious and legal authority. Yet even from the margins of public life, many Jewish women have exerted a strong influence on communal functioning, serving as informal advisors and behind-the-scenes managers to their husbands or sons. Like Rachel in Allegra Goodman's *Kaaterskill Falls* or Mimi in Tova Mirvis's *The Ladies Auxiliary*, Jewish women through the ages have found ways to assert their opinions and make their influence felt in community matters.

The work of creating and maintaining communities is not simple; it requires careful and ongoing negotiation of conflicts and boundaries. As the collective narrator in *The Ladies Auxiliary* makes abundantly clear, communities depend not only on the cooperation of their members but often on the exclusion of those who do not conform to established communal norms and thereby threaten their order. For this reason, many Jewish women have struggled to find a place within the communities of their choosing – Jewish and otherwise – and have been denied access, like Roxanna in Gina B. Nahai's *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, because of their insistent individuality.

Some Jewish women, like Letty Cottin Pogrebin, experience competing claims from communities to which they feel connected, and they face the challenge of determining for

themselves what compromises are worthwhile. Can one identify, for example, with both the Jewish community and a community of feminist activists? Should one have to choose a single, primary allegiance? Painful as they may be, challenges such as these also create possibilities for the creation of new communities – as Jewish women did when they articulated the aims of Jewish feminism and found a new sisterhood that honored the claims both of the Jewish community and the feminist community. Upholding communal rules and defying them, Jewish women today continue the ongoing work of seeking and creating community.

THE LADIES AUXILIARY (1999)

BY TOVA MIRVIS

The insular Orthodox Jewish community of Memphis, Tennessee, is unsettled by the arrival of Batsheva, a free-spirited single mother, into their midst. Although initially put off by her unconventional behavior, the community – represented by the collective narrator of the Ladies Auxiliary – comes to appreciate Batsheva’s enthusiasm, originality, and calming influence on their rebellious adolescent daughters. But when the threats of modern secular society tempt the younger generation, the Ladies Auxiliary questions the value of accepting difference, and Batsheva wonders if it is possible both to find close-knit community and to maintain her individuality.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How does the use of the first-person plural pronoun for the narrative voice represent the character of the community? Does this voice change over the course of the novel? Is this collective narrator omniscient?
- How does the collective narrator define the Ladies Auxiliary’s role in the community? What is admirable about its work? What is not?

- Which character(s) did you identify with in the novel? Did this shift at any point in the story?
- Who or what do you believe is responsible for the events that take place in the community over the course of the novel?
- What do you think makes a community? Is a certain amount of homogeneity required? What kinds of compromises are required to be part of a community?
- Do you think there is something unique about the kind of community that can be created by Orthodox Jews? Is this story relevant to those who experience Judaism in other ways?
- At the beginning of the novel, the narrator describes the Memphis Jewish community as “a carefully crocheted sweater”; later, the narrator imagines that Yosef’s process of questioning his beliefs was “like pulling a thread on a sweater until the whole thing eventually comes unraveled.” Is this an apt metaphor for how communities work?
- Do you think Batsheva was naïve in thinking she would be welcomed and accepted in Memphis?
- When Shira runs away, Leanna wonders if this is “the price of freedom.” Do you think freedom has a price? If so, what is it?
- What is the meaning of the vision in the sky at the end of the book?
- What do you imagine might happen to Batsheva after the story ends? Do you think the community has changed?

KAATERSKILL FALLS (1998)

BY ALLEGRA GOODMAN

In the summertime, the ultra-Orthodox Jews of the Washington Heights Kirshner community relocate to the upstate New York town of Kaaterskill. In this idyllic atmosphere, the members of the cloistered sect struggle to find their own places within the community and their own families. With her five daughters past babyhood, Elizabeth Shulman yearns for a project of her own. In the Melish family, mother Nina and her teenage daughter, Renee, fight incessantly, while father Andras seeks comfort with his refugee sisters. Even the leader of the community, Rav Elijah Kirshner, harbors his own uncertainty: which of his sons – loyal, pious Isaac, or intellectual apostate Jeremy – should succeed him?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Early in the novel, Elizabeth describes her religious observance as “external” to her sense of self. Her religious practices “don’t really control what she is on the inside; they don’t have anything to do with what she thinks or what she wants.” Does this attitude change over the course of the novel? If so, how and why?
- Why is it so important to Elizabeth that she open the store? Why is her husband hesitant about this project? Why does she need the Rabbi’s permission? Why does she lose the permission?
- How does Elizabeth’s work in the store in Washington Heights at the end of the novel compare to her earlier experience owning her own store? Why is Isaac more encouraging of this second project?
- What role does Rachel play in the ascent of her husband to the position of Rav? What kind of power does she wield as Isaac’s wife?

- Several characters in this novel – Cecil, Beatrix, Jeremy – live on the margins of the Kirshner community. How do they negotiate their place in the community? What does the community mean to them? Is it easier for men to remain on the margins of the community?
- Why is there so much tension between Nina and Andras? What changes make a resolution foreseeable by the end of the novel? How would you compare Nina’s experience of the Kirshner community with Elizabeth’s?
- Elizabeth has hopes for her daughters that exceed the usual expectations of girls in the Kirshner community. Where do you think they will find their place? Is Chani’s secret interest in Israel a sign of future rebellion against the community in which she was raised?
- What role do the non-Jewish characters play in this novel? How do they interact with the Kirshner community? Are there possibilities for meaningful connection between the Orthodox Jewish characters and non-Jewish characters such as Stephanie and Una?
- How do you think the characters’ lives are different in Washington Heights than in Kaaterskill? Why does Goodman choose to explore the daily dramas of their lives in the Catskills, rather than in their permanent community?
- How does this Orthodox community compare to the community depicted in *The Ladies Auxiliary* by Tova Mirvis? Do the women of this community play similar roles, struggle with similar issues? Could you imagine a collective narrator in *Kaaterskill Falls*? If so, who would it be?

MOONLIGHT ON THE AVENUE OF FAITH (1999)

BY GINA B. NAHAI

From the moment she is born in the Jewish ghetto of Tehran, Roxanna is considered a bad-luck child. Ostracized from her family as a child because of her special gifts, she seeks shelter with a succession of other loners and outsiders and develops her own skills of independence and survival. Roxanna's sister and daughter narrate the epic journey of Roxanna and her family from Tehran to Los Angeles, where they rebuild their community with a combination of tradition and ingenuity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The book begins in the Jewish ghetto of Tehran – already a community of outsiders. On what basis are some Jews within the ghetto excluded from the ghetto community?
- Who is an outsider in this novel? Who is an insider? Who determines the boundaries between them? Are these boundaries permeable?
- How does the act of storytelling function in this book? What role does it play in creating or maintaining relationships? Do women in this novel have a special position as storytellers?
- Roxanna experiences several exiles in the course of the novel. From what is she in exile? From what is her daughter, Lili, exiled?
- America is described as a “land of choices and chances.” What does this mean for each of the characters? Is it necessarily a good thing?
- What is the role of fate in this novel? What power do the characters give it to determine their lives?
- What characterizes the Iranian Jewish community in Los Angeles? How does it compare to the Jewish community in Iran?

- Does Lili find a community? Does Roxanna?
- Roxanna says that “sometimes exile is the best thing that can happen to a people.” What does she mean by this? Do you agree?
- Although the setting of this novel is very different from the American Orthodox communities depicted in *The Ladies Auxiliary* and *Kaaterskill Falls*, can you draw any comparisons among these stories in their treatment of issues of tradition? Of women’s place in the community? Of the enforcement of communal norms and boundaries?

DEBORAH, GOLDA, AND ME: BEING FEMALE AND JEWISH IN AMERICA (1991)

BY LETTY COTTIN POGREBIN

Activist and writer Letty Cottin Pogrebin explores her shifting sense of belonging to the communities of Jews and of feminists, and her ongoing attempts to integrate these two identities. Along with the story of her personal journey from a warm Jewish upbringing to her rejection of Judaism as an adolescent and her subsequent return to Judaism as a feminist, Pogrebin examines issues of tradition and ritual innovation, Black-Jewish relations, feminist politics, and the Israeli-Palestinian problem. She models the struggles and joys of “living with a feminist head and a Jewish heart.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In the introduction to her book, Pogrebin describes herself as having “a wandering ‘we.’” What does she mean by this? Do you have a “wandering ‘we’”? If so, what are its component parts?
- What role does family history play in Pogrebin’s relationship to Judaism? Do you link your own religious beliefs and practices to your family experiences?
- Pogrebin writes, “Mine is a Judaism of compromise but not complacency. I struggle with my compromises but I see no other way to be a Jew.” What does she mean by this? Does this statement resonate with your experiences?
- What do the figures of Deborah and Golda symbolize for Pogrebin? Are these figures role models for her? Why or why not?
- Why do Pogrebin’s identities as a woman and as a Jew come into conflict? How does she negotiate this conflict?
- In Pogrebin’s article on antisemitism in the women’s movement, which she includes in this book, she draws

parallels between Jews and women, antisemitism and sexism. What do you think of these comparisons? Do they resonate with your experiences?

- What issues challenge the ideal of universal sisterhood, according to Pogrebin? Do you believe that sisterhood unites women across other divisions (such as those of race, class, religion, or ethnicity), or are other identities stronger?
- Pogrebin has devoted a great deal of time and energy to dialogue with African-American women and with Palestinian women, and she describes in detail both the obstacles faced in dialogue and the insights gained from the process. Do her accounts inspire optimism or pessimism about the future of Jews' relations with African-Americans and with Palestinians?
- In this book, Pogrebin describes her own attempts to create a place for herself as a woman in the Jewish community and as a Jew in the feminist community. How might you use some of her theories about sexism, sisterhood, Judaism, and antisemitism to analyze the situations depicted in the other books included in this reading series? Are the challenges Pogrebin has faced relevant to the fictional experiences of women in these novels? If so, how?

The Jewish Women's Archive is a national non-profit organization dedicated to uncovering, chronicling and transmitting the rich historical legacy of American Jewish women. Founded in Boston, Massachusetts in 1995, JWA was one of the first Jewish organizations to stake a claim on the new frontier of the internet, and continues to innovate in its use of the virtual world for academic, cultural, archival and educational purposes. JWA's award-winning website has the most extensive collection of material on American Jewish women on the web. JWA has become a leading advocate of and educational resource for Jewish women's history.

For more information, visit the Jewish Women's Archive website at jwa.org.

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