The Tools of Guilt and Intimidation

by Gloria Z. Greenfield
Dedicated to Robin Tyler

The world is not any easy place for anyone to live, although our consciousness about the difficulties and struggles is relative to our respective placement within each society’s hierarchy. Those afforded a brahmin status can take for granted the comfort and security of full bellies, class mobility, job opportunities, freedom of expression (sexual, religious, political), and dignity. More often than not, each of us carries some aspect that makes us “less than,” that places us on the outside of societal respectability. Very few of us walk the earth unmired by degradation.

The women’s movement promised a haven for uprooted women to experience respectability and self-love. As we radicalized, we learned to say that the women’s movement was for all women, regardless of societal classification. And while we learned the radical things to say, we developed our own hierarchy.

Within our self-developed culture, our status became determined by new judgments on old classifications: class, race, career, religious observation, sexual preference and political perspective. Since women do not have the economic power to implement and maintain this newly-designed hierarchy, the use of guilt and intimidation became very effective tools.

In other words, the expressed pain of an individual (or a group of individuals) can be dismissed because her/her demographics may not be “movement fashionable.” There is an assumption that these individuals deserve their pain. Or, as frightening, that their pain is less important.

During the past year, I became disturbed by a pattern I saw developing within the women’s movement as otherwise well-respected Jewish women began to confront instances of anti-Semitism within the movement, their respectability and credibility began to deteriorate. This is a very effective form of behavior modification: if you don’t behave as a “good” Jew (i.e., “good” Jews are concerned with everyone else’s oppression at the expense of their own; “bad” Jews act greedily with concern for their own oppression), then you won’t be admitted into the sorority. And your confrontation of anti-Semitism will be met with dismissing comments such as “oh, it’s just that loud-mouthed Jew”; or “here they go again, trying to dominate the issues”; or “she is just trying to cover up her own complicity with classism, racism, and imperialism by talking about anti-Semitism.”

This behavior modification relies on the visibility of its results. As each outspoken Jewish woman becomes relegated to the rank of “movement creep,” how many other Jewish women become silenced with the fear that they would experience similar fates? A Boston-based Jewish friend confided to me that she was afraid to confront anti-Semitism, because she didn’t want her reputation to suffer as she perceived mine as suffering. Another feminist organizer from the West Coast wrote to me that she kept “wanting to organize a meeting, and I keep not doing it. Frankly, I’m afraid. I’m afraid of being friends.”

This also reinforces the fear on the part of the “good” Jew: “Good” Jews want to assure the movement that they outnumber the “bad” Jews, and oftentimes the “good” Jew is the first to publicize the confrontation of anti-Semitism. Last winter, I sent out a call via the feminist media for Jewish women to share with me their experiences in confronting anti-Semitism for their particular article. One of the first responses came in the form of a letter to the editor submitted to Boston’s Equal Times, with the signature of R. Feldman. Her letter to the editor was very telling, as follows:

Seven Questions for “Anti-Semitism Investigator”

Gloria Z. Greenfield

1. Do you equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism or Jewish “self-hatred”? 2. Have you ever been connected with or are you currently connected with the male-dominated Zionist movement? 3. What is your position on the right of Palestinian women to self-determination and the Israeli military occupation of Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank? 4. Are you middle-class or working-class background? 5. Are you currently a woman worker or a woman professional? 6. Given the high level of Jewish middle-class female participation in the U.S. feminist movement, what objective evidence do you have of “anti-Semitism” within the U.S. feminist movement? 7. Do you deny that Jewish religious ideology and practice, like Christian religious ideology and practice, has, historically, been anti-feminist? R. Feldman was not really interested in my answers to these questions, because she did not send me her address so that I could respond to her. Rather, it seems as though she was more interested in publicly innuimating that my demographics are too abhorrent to justify any investigation on my part.

Previously, I might have responded to a letter of this type with a knee-jerk defensive stance, quickly asserting that my credentials regarding class background and current financial status are “movement-acceptable.” Today I find the letter humorous, and I am even grateful that its author provided me with such great copy for this article. My sense of humor is a form of survival. It protects me from the grasp of intimidation, and allows me to remember a very important phrase: “the Pope’s (Marx’s/Mao’s/Begin’s/Arafat’s) feces stink, too.”

However, I have found no way to protect myself from the pain each time I hear of yet another Jewish woman having a nervous breakdown resulting from the movement’s response to her confronting anti-Semitism. And I have found no way to maintain the assumption that “sisterhood” is any less carnivorous than what it rhetorically opposes.

Oppression cannot be eradicated until it is understood that every individual and every group is capable of perpetuating oppression. Until the movement collectively and individually finds the courage to recognize our own offensiveness, we will be bound to self-destruction.