



A Spiritual Life: A Jewish Feminist Journey
by Merle Feld

*With Roots in Heaven: One Woman's Passionate
Journey into the Heart of her Faith*
by Tirzah Firestone

*Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey Towards
Traditional Rabbinic Ordination* by Haviva Ner-David

*The Year Mom Got Religion: One Woman's Midlife
Journey into Judaism* by Lee Meyerhoff Hendler

Generation J by Lisa Schiffman

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Flickering flames of Sabbath candles, wafting smells of holiday cooking, warm waters of the mikveh – these are the images that have traditionally represented Jewish women’s spiritual lives. Excluded from the world of public worship and Torah study, Jewish women historically expressed their religiosity through rituals in the home and the daily patterns of family life. In doing so, they transformed the mundane into the sacred.

But Jewish women’s spirituality has not been confined to these traditional frameworks. The memoirs included in this series attest to the diversity and depth of Jewish women’s spiritual journeys. Rooted in backgrounds ranging from strictly Orthodox to emphatically secular, Jewish women have grappled with the customs and beliefs bequeathed to them and embarked on their own searches for meaning within Judaism and Jewish life. For some, such as Tirzah Firestone, this process requires radical innovation, for others, such as Lee Meyerhoff Hendler, a return to some traditional practices. Many women, like Haviva Ner-David, remain firmly committed to both.

Because their spiritual lives have existed primarily outside the male-dominated public religious structures of synagogue and study hall, Jewish women have developed a broad sense of where spirituality may be found and how spiritual values can be expressed. Some have discovered the spiritual through parenthood and philanthropy, social activism and education, respect for family traditions and for the traditions of others. Many women, however, continue to struggle with the difficult task of integrating other commitments and values – such as feminism or pluralism – into the traditional framework of Jewish practice.

Another important theme in the spiritual journeys of Jewish women is the tension between the spirituality found in community and the spirituality of individual selfhood, independent of community or family. While some women

experience great fulfillment when they find their communal niche, others find the expectations and responsibilities of community to be distractions from or restrictions on spiritual growth. Instead, they seek meaning through private reflection, apart from communal rituals and norms.

In developing their own definitions of what makes a life Jewish and how to create a Jewish home, many women return to one of Judaism's ultimate values – learning through continual questioning. While conveying diverse perspectives on Judaism and Jewish life, these memoirs together remind us that spirituality is not a destination or a concrete goal to be achieved, but rather a process of living with mindfulness and integrity.

A SPIRITUAL LIFE: A JEWISH FEMINIST JOURNEY (1999)

BY MERLE FELD

Combining poetry and prose, Merle Feld traces her journey from an assimilated childhood in Brooklyn to a richly Jewish adulthood and family life. This memoir reflects Feld's expansive understanding of spirituality, recounting the moments of daily life, ritual celebration, and significant lifecycle transitions that together constitute a spiritual life. She deftly portrays her commitment to infusing marriage, parenting, writing, and activism with Jewish spirit.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Feld becomes increasingly interested in Judaism at the time she enters college and begins an increasingly independent life. What is the relationship between Feld's interest in Judaism and her coming of age?
- Why does Feld include poetry in her memoir? What does her poetry add to your experience as a reader? Does one poem particularly speak to you? Would you consider any of

these poems to be prayers?

- What does it mean to Feld to create a Jewish home? How does this compare to your own understanding?
- Feld describes her working-class childhood in Brooklyn. How do the dynamics of class influence Feld's Jewish journey?
- What transformed Feld into a Jewish feminist? In what ways is her story "a Jewish feminist journey"?
- Feld states that before her year in Israel, she did not consider herself a political person. What transforms her into someone political? What do you think is the relationship between politics and spirituality?
- How do the rhythms of the Jewish calendar shape this memoir? How do the rhythms of the lifecycle shape it?
- What is spirituality, according to Feld? What makes her life spiritual?
- Feld explores her spiritual life in the context of both community and selfhood. She ends her book with a description of spiritual meaning within community. Is she suggesting that finding community is the climax of a spiritual life? What do you think the relationship is between communal spirituality and private spirituality?

WITH ROOTS IN HEAVEN: ONE WOMAN'S PASSIONATE JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF HER FAITH (1998)

BY TIRZAH FIRESTONE

Tirzah Firestone, a rabbi in the Jewish Renewal movement, traces her search for God from a strict Orthodox upbringing to a journey through other spiritual traditions, and finally to her rediscovery of Judaism. She explores the richness of innovation and the strong pull of tradition and addresses the

challenges and blessings of interfaith exchange – including her marriage to a Protestant minister.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Firestone’s early spiritual journey is defined by her rejection of the religion in which she was raised. What elements of her parents’ traditions and ideology is she reacting against? Does she ultimately inherit a spiritual legacy from her family?
- What insights does Firestone gain from her travels through the ashram, the Arica Institute, and Hinduism? What does she bring from her own heritage to these experiences?
- What does the Jewish command to “choose life” mean to Firestone? What role does this concept play in her spiritual development? Is it a compelling concept to you?
- What enables Firestone to rediscover Judaism? How does her relationship with Frederick help her in this process?
- Firestone considers her psychoanalytical practice and her Jewish practice to be part of the same spiritual work. Would you distinguish between these types of practice?
- So much of Firestone’s spiritual journey is an individual one. What role does community play in her spiritual life? What role does it play in yours?
- Firestone believes that religion and spirituality are two different things. Do you agree with this distinction? What do these terms mean to you?
- Firestone presents her reunion with her family as a significant milestone in her spiritual life. What role does this reconciliation suggest family plays in one’s spiritual life? Do you think alienation from one’s family poses an obstacle to a complete spiritual life?
- Reb Zalman calls Firestone’s marriage to Frederick and

her diverse spiritual influences a “hyphenated life,” and he encourages her to see the hyphen itself as a blessing. Do you agree with Reb Zalman’s position that God can be found “especially in the hyphen”?

- Why does Firestone’s marriage come to an end? Were you surprised? How would you answer Firestone’s question “How can a marriage stay strong when each partner is involved in a different spiritual tradition?”

LIFE ON THE FRINGES: A FEMINIST JOURNEY TOWARDS TRADITIONAL RABBINIC ORDINATION (2000)

BY HAVIVA NER-DAVID

Haviva Ner-David, an Orthodox woman studying for rabbinic ordination in Israel, describes the ongoing process of integrating her deep commitments to traditional Jewish practice and to feminism. She recounts her upbringing in a Modern Orthodox family in America, her rebellious adolescence, and her trailblazing choices as a Jewish feminist in the United States and in Israel. She also explores the joys and challenges of creating a richly Jewish, egalitarian family life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Ner-David begins her book by wondering how her choices will impact her children’s lives. Why does she begin here? How does being a mother influence her spiritual path?
- How does Ner-David structure this book? Did you find that the chapter headings, drawing on central themes in Jewish life, reinforced Ner-David’s messages about Jewish practice and community?
- Although Ner-David now chooses to live a Jewish life different from that of the community in which she was

raised, how did her upbringing inform her current Jewish values? What legacies did she receive from her parents?

- Do you find any of Ner-David's religious practices – such as wearing *tzitzit*, laying *teffilin*, or covering her hair – surprising or hard to understand? Do her explanations of her choices change your perspective on any of these issues?
- At one point in her story, Ner-David asks herself, "Am I doing this for the sake of God, or for the sake of feminism?" What do you think is the answer to this question? Do you think it matters?
- How do feminism and pluralism occasionally conflict for Ner-David? How does she deal with this conflict?
- Ner-David describes the tension between autonomy and authority in her life. In what situations does this tension arise and how does she deal with it? Is this a tension you've experienced? If so, how do you deal with it?
- Ner-David has been criticized for her decision to seek rabbinic ordination and told that she is doing a disservice to the Orthodox feminist movement. Do you agree with this claim? Why or why not? How do you believe change happens in the Jewish community?
- At various points in her journey, Ner-David becomes very frustrated with the ways traditional Judaism excludes her because she is a woman. She decides to stay within the community, however, so as not to allow those who would perpetuate the exclusion of women to win. Do you agree with this decision?
- Both Ner-David and Tirzah Firestone were raised in the Orthodox community, identify as feminists, and have chosen to become rabbis. How would you compare their journeys?

THE YEAR MOM GOT RELIGION: ONE WOMAN'S MIDLIFE JOURNEY INTO JUDAISM (1999)

BY LEE MEYERHOFF HENDLER

At the age of forty, Lee Meyerhoff Hendler, a member of the prominent philanthropic Meyerhoff family, discovered a hunger for greater understanding and experience of Judaism. An energetic and ambitious woman, she embarked on an exploration through synagogue life, text study, and ritual. As she deepened her own Jewish identity and commitments, she also negotiated the questions – and resistance – of her husband and children.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The first step Hendler takes in her exploration of Jewish life is to begin attending synagogue services regularly. Why is this important to her? What does she find difficult about it? What role does communal prayer play in your spiritual life?
- How does the study of Jewish texts further Hendler's spiritual growth? Do you think the fact that she learns in an all-women Torah study group has an impact on Hendler's experience of text study?
- One of the biggest challenges in Hendler's journey is how to balance her newfound interest in Judaism and Jewish practice with her family's lack of enthusiasm about it – what she refers to as "*unshared* transformation." How does she deal with this problem? If you were in her position, would you do anything differently? Have you ever faced a similar conflict?
- Much of Hendler's book describes the ways Jewish study and communal participation enrich her Jewish identity. What are the bases of your Jewish identity? If you have a family, how have you tried to transmit that sense of identity? Do your children/parents/partner/siblings identify in the same way?

- Hendler discusses how our society’s discomfort with religious language made it difficult for her to articulate her religious transformation to her family in a way that felt inclusive and non-threatening to them. Do you feel you have a vocabulary to describe religion and spirituality? Does your family share this vocabulary?
- After studying more about Judaism, Hendler wants to introduce rituals and objects into her family life to create a “Jewish home.” What do you think makes a home Jewish?
- Hendler admits that she does not like the word “spirituality.” Why is she suspicious of this word? What does it mean to her? Do you agree or disagree with her perspective?
- How does Hendler’s privileged background influence her exploration of Judaism? How might her story have been different if she did not come from a prominent and wealthy family?
- Hendler is the only one of the authors included in this series to embark on her spiritual journey at middle age, when she had already created a family life. What impact does her life stage have on her exploration?

GENERATION J (1999)

BY LISA SCHIFFMAN

Lisa Schiffman, part of what she terms the “post-assimilation” generation, embarks on a quest to figure out what it means to be Jewish in contemporary America, where identities are fluid and choices are abundant. In search of a sense of belonging, she examines her own identity and interviews others about topics such as intermarriage, Jewish Buddhists, mikveh, kabbalah, and keeping kosher.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Schiffman describes the pain of being rejected by rabbis who will not perform a wedding between a Jew and a non-

Jew. How does her discussion of her own intermarriage experience relate to the anti-intermarriage position of much of the Jewish establishment? Does her account change or confirm any of your beliefs about intermarriage?

- Schiffman discusses the power of names and considers whether Jews should claim words such as “kike” or “yid” as positive identifications (as lesbians and gay men have done with the label “queer”). What do you think of this suggestion?
- Schiffman tries going to the mikveh in search of holiness and transformation. She’s not sure that she has found it, and she asks herself “what does it take to transform a moment into holiness?” How would you answer this question?
- Why is Schiffman’s encounter with Anna, the German bodywork therapist, so important to her?
- Exploring the meaning of *kashrut* (keeping kosher), Schiffman discovers that eating pork evokes in her a feeling of Jewishness. What is the relationship between food and spirituality?
- Schiffman arrives at the realization that she no longer wants to avoid the things that make Judaism difficult. What role does facing what is difficult for you play in spiritual life?
- When considering hanging a *mezuzah* on her front door, Schiffman distinguishes between an act of faith and an act of identity. What is the difference? Which kinds of religious acts resonate most with you – those related to faith or to identity?
- What does Schiffman learn from her exploration of Judaism? Is she changed by her journey? If so, how?
- Schiffman is the least religious and least religiously observant of the authors included in this series. How would you compare her spiritual exploration with those of the other authors we’ve read? What is spiritual about it? Do you find her approach more or less satisfying than the others we’ve encountered?

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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