

This Sisterhood is Powerful
D'var Torah for The Workmen's Circle
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When I was 18 I embarked on a passionate love affair that is as thrilling today as it was in those early days of new love. Like all worthy love affairs, this one rocked my world, overwhelmed my senses and ignited my soul. I, and indeed most of the women I knew, had been warned away from this suitor. Although cautioned by many that I would be wooed with lies, false promises, and turned into a non-marriageable woman, I could not deny the attraction. And of course, I was young, impetuous, and ripe for rebellion. It started in a seedy café in London, a very public setting for a profound private awakening. I threw caution to the winds that day in London and I have never looked back. By the time I had finished my cup of tea, I was thoroughly and completely seduced. I had fallen in love with the words, ideas and bravery that seeped out of the pages of Robin Morgan's **Sisterhood is Powerful**.

Here in this book I found my life, both past and future, and my first and enduring passion, feminism. Only I was not seduced by lies and false promises, but by truth, hope and the very real promise of liberation. Unlike most loves, this one never lets you down, it just keeps delivering, over and over again.

Growing up in middle-class Jewish England, I had always assumed that I would belong to a sisterhood, the same one as my mother and all the other Jewish women I knew. Only this sisterhood was not that powerful; instead, it labored in a temple basement, preparing wine and cookies for Kiddush after the service – a service conducted by men, about men, and ultimately for men. And when I go back to England today, I see my sister, my sister-in-laws, my friends, in fact all the Jewish women I know, still locked in that damn basement, still making those godforsaken cookies. It is as if feminism never happened and they are stuck in a time warp where we are still **Leaving it to Beaver**, and

Father Still Knows Best. I am the first Dines woman to come out of the basement and onto the bima – the stage, and I thank the Workmen’s Circle for providing such a place.

The Jewish women I know in England struggle to make meaning out of a life that offers them identity as Jewish wives and mothers, and keeps them relegated to the ladies gallery of the temple, lest their femininity distract men from the serious business of prayer. The Jewish women I know in America struggle with the dual identity of being Jewish and being feminist. This struggle rears its head especially at this time of the year, when even the most secular of Jewish women are reminded of their heritage, and for many, their deep love of Jewish culture; but they also distrust Judaism as a religion that honors a male g-d, and is patriarchal in teaching and practice.

Discovering feminism meant that I had to sever my ties to Orthodox Judaism. The only way out of this mess was to refuse to collaborate with the rabbis, the doctrine and the suffocating and hideous expectations that a man was going to be the head of my household. So where to go? Well, although I was not going to listen to Jewish men in general for guidance, I did stumble upon one who I found particularly appealing. His name was Karl Marx, and as long as I could ignore his affairs and mistreatment of his wife and children, here was a Jewish man who made some sense.

So with feminism and Marxism under my belt, I threw myself into the British left student movement. Only there was a problem. I was the only Jew, as my Jewish contemporaries were busy internalizing right-wing ideology, wearing designer clothes, and mimicking their parents. I went to lefty meetings, helped organize protests against the British Nazi party and moved further and further away from my community of origin. Just as I was finding my feet, disaster struck. The British student movement agreed with the UN that Zionism was racism, and decided that as racists, Jewish groups on campus would be denied any university funding.

Now, while many of us here today can see the problems with Zionism as a movement, you have to understand British University life in the 1970s. Most British

students did not know where Israel was on the map, many had never met a Jew and suddenly Jews were such a problem that we had to be banished from the university. Something was not right here, and for many Jews this felt like anti-Semitism by another name.

We also had plenty of evidence to back this up. Sunday mornings I would join with other students to cover swastikas that had been painted on Jewish houses the night before by young English males. One time when I was in a pub with some Jewish friends, we were minding our own business when the group sitting near us started singing “we can smell gas”. Another time, my roommate, at her birthday dinner for which I had cooked all day, described her boyfriend’s gentile friends who sold each other food as “real Jews”.

And now the left had jumped on the bandwagon. I was no supporter of the Israeli right and hated what the Likud government was doing. But to brand us all as racists and exclude us from campus life felt very threatening to me.

So I packed up my feminism, my socialism and my Jewish identity and moved to Israel with my partner David, another love that has never let me down. For two naive twenty-two years olds, Israel represented a rejection of bourgeois Jewish values and an acceptance of a Jewish homeland build on equality, physical labor and one in the eye to anti-Semites. We arrived in Israel young, broke and full of hope.

What a let down! Israel, if it is a homeland for anyone, it is for Jewish men. It took years working at the Tel Aviv rape crisis center, and then as a researcher on violence against women at Haifa University, to make me realize that Jewish women still do not have a safe place to call home. I saw Jewish women raped by Jewish men, Jewish women battered by Jewish husbands and Jewish children abused by Jewish fathers. I will never forget walking down Dizengoff in Tel Aviv and seeing Israeli made porn flapping in the wind at a news kiosk. There was a Jewish woman’s body, naked and subservient in the street being offered up for public consumption. The last time Jewish women’s bodies

were so publicly and openly desecrated was in Nazi Germany. This was the straw that broke my back. I imploded - was this what I had come to Israel for?

And then Sabra and Shatilla happened and yet another straw on my broken back. We had been at some friends for Rosh Hashanah and, together with the rest of the country, switched on the television for news after the two-day holiday silence. The images were devastating, hundreds of slaughtered women, men and children lay in the rubble. As David and I looked at each other with horror, one of our dinner companions turned round and said “magia la’hem” - they deserve it. The next day news started to filter out about Israel’s - and especially Sharon’s - role in the massacre. Not long afterwards, David was in Lebanon, as part of the Israel army. He went to Lebanon the same week the suicide bombers started and we were thrust into Zionist politics at its worst. Sharon was out of control, and Prime Minister Begin had to listen to the BBC to find out how far the Israeli army had penetrated Lebanon. As I listened to the radio, dreading the news of another bomb in Lebanon, I cradled my baby son. After he was born, the nurse had said beaming, “od chayal” - another soldier. No I thought, not this one; you are not having him for your dirty war. We are not loving him, nurturing him, tending to his every need so that you can send him to war, to be dehumanized, or even worse, blown apart because Israeli and Arab masculinity is running amok over some piece of land. Land that, by the way, should not have been privatized by individuals or nations, but is rather a part of all our birth right by virtue of being born human.

What does it mean to be a Jewish woman in a country that prides itself on raw masculinity, both in the military and in the rabbinate that controls family law? What does it mean to be a woman in a country that sees itself as remasculinizing Jewish men after the holocaust? What does it mean to be a woman in a country where the best selling fashion magazine, Monitin, advertised clothes with a photo-shoot of women draped over gas ovens and running alongside cattle cars? I will tell what it meant for me--- a profound betrayal as a Jew and as a woman.

But I also remember wonderful Israeli feminists who organized against male power in all its forms. Women who did the unthinkable twenty years ago and worked alongside Palestinian women in the occupied territories to stop male violence, both sexual and economic. In my living room in Haifa, a group of us, all in our early twenties started the now robust Israeli feminist organization, Isha L'isha. In our founding document, we stated that we were a feminist group dedicated to the liberation of all women, not only Jewish women. These were strong and brave women whose pictures never appear in Jewish Agency literature, who are written out of the official Israel story that prides itself on its military, and who still work today to make Israel a tolerable place for all women, Jewish and Palestinian.

As the final straws mounted up, we decided we had had enough and we packed up our belongings, and moved to another Promised Land. When we came to live in America, I joined the radical feminist movement and found what I had always been looking for, a home that was mine. The founders of this revolutionary arm of feminism had truly created a sisterhood. Andrea Dworkin, Phyllis Chesler, Gloria Steinem, Robin Morgan. Susan Brownmiller. In fact, all women who had offered me a powerful sisterhood in place of a temple sisterhood turned out to be Jewish. I don't think that it was an accident that an unapologetic, in your face feminism that made no compromises was founded by women who identify culturally as Jewish. This ischutzpah at its best. Refusing to be intimidated by power, standing up for what is right and just, saying enough is enough and refusing the crumbs on offer to those who acquiesce, capitulate and sell their soul.

This year, my sisterhood lost one of its most brave and beloved members. Andrea Dworkin died on April 9th after a long battle with illness, and an even longer battle with patriarchy. Andrea Dworkin was known for her fierce, take-no-prisoners feminism, but she was also a Jewish feminist who saw the holocaust as the inevitable result of a world populated not just by evil people, but by cowards who refuse to take an active moral stance in the face of unspeakable cruelty. This fueled her activism and her writings, and she unflinchingly stood up against the pornographers for inflicting sexual cruelty against women. She insisted that feminism fights for all women, especially the most oppressed

whose lives are so limited that the concept of choice is meaningless. She warned us against falling into the trap of seeing people as generic people, rather than as gendered beings whose lives are mediated by unequal power structures. The Israeli occupation is horrible for all, women and men, but as Jewish feminists, we have to go beyond the usual dichotomy of Israeli/Palestinian and call for gender justice.

When the Israeli army oppresses Palestinians, we rightly speak up but what about the private occupation of Palestinian women's lives that occurs inside the home? Why do we mourn female loss of life when it is an Israeli man who murders, yet have nothing to say when they are victims of so-called honor killings. The leading cause of death for Palestinian women on the Gaza strip is domestic violence, yet I don't see any international organization, Jewish or otherwise, turning this into a human rights issue.

As women, we need our own Geneva Convention that recognizes that for us, there is no separation between the public and the private, that there is no such thing as a cease-fire for women. And we have yet to see men sign a treaty that gives us some brief respite from sexual violence. Whatever peace comes to the Middle East, will women really be safe? I doubt it. What binds Jewish women to Palestinian women, and indeed women all over the globe, is that the most dangerous people in our lives are the men we live with, fathers, husbands and brothers. This is our sisterhood and our lives are forever intertwined. We may be Jewish women but we belong to an international movement that knows no race, no religion, no ethnicity, and hopefully, eventually no gender. What we do know, is that we are powerful, and that our power knows no limits when as women we join forces and demand a world that is free of violence, suffering and degradation. As feminists, as progressive Jews, and as part of the human race, we should strive for nothing more, and accept nothing less.

Gail Dines is a professor of sociology and women's studies by training, and an activist by nature. Born in Manchester, England, she lived in Israel before coming to America with her husband David Levy, and her son Tal. Gail has authored books and articles on media, pornography, feminism and violence against women, and is a nationally known speaker.

She has spent many years organizing against the multi billion dollar pornography industry, and her success can be measured by the fact that when she started this work, pornography was only a multi million dollar a year industry. She is a relatively new member of Workmen's Circle and would like to thank you for giving her the opportunity to speak.

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