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Three Decades of Jewish Feminism

By Rebecca Phillips

For more than 30 years, Susan Weidman Schneider has been, like Letty Cottin Pogrebin and Gloria Steinem, a pioneer in feminist issues. But unlike these other two women, Weidman Schneider has focused her attention specifically on issues of concern to Jewish women. As a founder and the Editor-in-Chief of **Lilith** magazine, the Jewish women's magazine that just celebrated its 30th anniversary, she has brought attention to issues as diverse as sexual abuse in the Jewish community, immigrant women's experiences, women's philanthropy, single mothers, and many others.



Lilith is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. What are some changes in Jewish feminism that you've noticed over the past 30 years?

I've been struck by how much respect there is for diversity. It's something I've always been interested in. In my book, *Jewish and Female*, I was fascinated by the variety of Jewish women's experience, both across the religious spectrum and also with the ethnic piece of that mix. If you had grown up as a Persian Jewish-American or as a Russian Jewish-American, there were differences in the dynamic, differences in the expectations about women's education and professional lives, and differences in their degree of religious participation. I've continued to find that very interesting, and so has the rest of the world.

I think it's useful to remind ourselves that the approach to these subjects has changed, too. When *Lilith* first started, we thought that part of our mission was defining "The Problem." What is wrong with Jewish practice and Jewish community life that women aren't fuller participants? Defining that problem doesn't seem to be where we are at the moment. It's much more nuanced now.

Lilith launched around the height of the feminist movement in general. Was there something missing for Jews from the broader feminist movement?

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I think there were several things going on. There was a spate of women's periodicals—some of which have survived and some of which haven't. In those periodicals, there was really not a sense that Jewish women's experience was in any way different or worthy of examination. Instead, I think there was a strong sense that if you view this religion as sexist, you should walk away. Why stay and beat your head against the proverbial brick wall?

Many Jewish women wanted not to vote with their feet and leave Judaism, but instead wanted to explore the growing room that existed within the tradition. In some ways you hear this today from Muslim feminist activists, like Irshad Manji, who says, I'm not going to leave until I get this religion to respond.

Two things were going on there. One, there was a very real need to express the energy for change that was going on within Judaism. There was a very strong drive to explore the ways in which Judaism had given women a bad shake. There was more room in the tradition, even in the most traditional expressions of Jewish practice, for women's participation and growth. There were plenty more doors that could be opened easily.

There was another piece of it also. In the early days of the women's movement there was a sociological thrust away from Jewish women's concerns. There was a certain kind of prejudice—were Jewish women all women of privilege? Were Jewish women all women who had no problems in their lives? There was a lack of respect for diversity. Jewish women were experiencing what other women were.

Where did that sociological thrust come from?

There were stereotypes about Jewish women which exist to this day which placed them as people for whom the struggles of womanhood might be less difficult. That was just not the case.

There were lots of reasons why a magazine that dealt with Jewish women's particular concerns seemed very necessary [at the time]. In fact those distinctions exist today, as *Lilith* explores not just theological issues within Jewish practice and Jewish thought but also explores the way we live our lives.

What would you say are the top concerns of Jewish women today?

I get asked that all the time, and my answer often depends on what I'm exercised about on that particular day. Very often I feel that reproductive rights are something that we have to mobilize women for. Jewish women were very active in the very early days of reproductive rights. But in part because Jewish women, who are the best educated in the country, tend to postpone childbearing because they are in school for longer and they are involved in a profession, infertility has become the issue of primary concern rather than unwanted pregnancy. So we need to educate Jewish women about the threats that any trammeling of

reproductive rights will bring to their lives and the lives of all women. Reenergizing Jewish women for those general women's battles has become very important.

Judaism has always been rather non-doctrinaire. There will be women who want to move Judaism in all sorts of non-traditional ways, and there will be women who say we just want traditional Judaism to open up so we can read Torah in front of a mixed group, or so that we can be fully enfranchised as traditional Jews. I think there's a real challenge involved in moving younger women into a feminist consciousness. There's a split among younger Jewish women: there are those who identify as feminists and identify around Jewish women's issues and are very savvy about what that means politically and religiously, and then there are those who feel "Oh, that was my mother's issue."

Speaking of younger women, there was a piece in *Lilith* recently by six or seven Jewish women who were born the year *Lilith* launched, looking at what they think about Judaism now. Did any of their answers surprise you?

Those answers brought home what had been tickling at the edges of my consciousness already. I've spent a lot of time talking on college campuses, and so I've heard the resistance to feminism. One of the things that was so striking here was that just as the statistics say, a number of these women were linking their lives to non-Jewish men. But what we clearly saw from the submissions we got for this piece was that at age 30, there was a certain kind of reevaluation of their mothers' lives.

That's interesting, because I imagine reevaluating mothers' lives was a big factor in your own decision to start *Lilith*, and in Jewish feminist consciousness in general.

In my own life, my mother was an interesting role model. I grew up in Winnipeg, Canada. My mother was an only child, and her parents didn't want her straying very far from home, but she did a lot in that community. While I don't remember her ever working for pay in my lifetime, she was a writer and a painter and a singer and an actress and a director of plays and had a real public role in that community. So I grew up very comfortable with the idea of speaking out, with having a public persona. I left home to go away to school very young—I think it was my mother's own experience of not being able to leave that let me fledge myself and fly away.

But certainly I was a product of my era, a product of the 50s. I have spent a good deal of my adult life thinking through what those constraints on all women were. I went back recently to a college reunion, and I was struck when I was hanging around with seven or eight other women. Four or five of them were physicians. But only one of them had decided when she was in college to be a doctor. For everyone else, this was a second career. You could see another generational fracturing. These were women who were in school in the sixties. For women in school in the seventies and eighties, the career expectations were a little more clearly grooved in when they were young. I've spent a lot of my professional life thinking about this intersection of the social forces of the moment and people's own talents and goals.

Who are the Jewish women you most admire today?

I am an enormous admirer of Jewish women politicians here and in Canada and Israel. I am a big fan of the written word, and the kind of writing that has emerged from Jewish women — Letty Cottin Pogrebin writing about Jewish feminist concerns, **Cynthia Ozick**, who is so smart about everything she writes even if I don't agree with every word, some young authors like **Dara Horn**, who leaves me breathless. We learn a great deal from story, from anecdote. We don't learn a lot from anger. So the Jewish women I admire are often the women who are changing the world with words and deeds rather than with flags.

What are you most proud of about *Lilith* over the past 30 years?

I am enormously proud of the fact that *Lilith* has been a nurturing matrix of many young women who are exploring that interface of Judaism, feminism, and journalism. We've had more than 100 interns since *Lilith* started.

I'm also proud of the issues *Lilith* has covered. We keep a file that's labeled "*Lilith* Did It First," full of the articles that really broke new ground. We were the first to report on women's sexual abuse. We did a groundbreaking issue on Jewish women's hair. That was really a memorable issue. It got a lot of press coverage everywhere — *USA Today*, *Glamour*. I'm proud of stories like that, where we take a very frank look at aspects of Jewish lives that have never been covered before.

Rebecca Phillips is a producer at Beliefnet.com, the multifaith religion and spirituality website. She lives in New York City.

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