

# SUSAN WEIDMAN SCHNEIDER

by DENISE COUTURE



Susan Weidman Schneider, founder, editor and publisher of *Lilith*, a magazine devoted to Jewish feminism, has ruffled the feathers of more than a few readers in the magazine's thirty-plus-year history, and has no plans to stop anytime soon. Reflecting on the magazine's legacy, she says, "I think we have effected change by naming problems, by allowing women to speak their own truths. It's very important that we hear those voices."

Hearing those voices – being receptive and being inclusive – is of paramount importance to Weidman Schneider, who has been at the helm of *Lilith* for more than three decades. With wide-open arms, she embraces diversity of opinion and experience, especially among Jewish women.

In discussions at both the magazine's cramped and cluttered headquarters in midtown Manhattan and at her home in Wash-

ington's Georgetown neighborhood, Weidman Schneider, who is neither grandmotherly nor glamorous but somewhere in between, repeatedly expressed her desire to understand perspectives outside her own, and, in *Lilith*, to create and nurture a compassionate forum for expressing those views.

*Lilith* was born in 1976, partly out of a desire to examine and share with others the perspectives of Jewish women who at the time felt excluded from both Judaism and the burgeoning women's movement. To Weidman Schneider, these twin exclusions "seemed unjust and in lots of ways harmful to individual women and to the Jewish polity as a whole." Jewish women in general, she says, were considered too privileged to need the kind of economic and social support the women's movement sought to foster in America. As for Judaism, Weidman Schneider recalls that this was an era when women couldn't read from the Torah in synagogue, couldn't count for a minyan, and Reform Judaism had only just ordained its first female rabbi, Sally Priesand, in 1972. Almost as scarce were baby-naming ceremonies for girls as we know them today. And, Weidman Schneider says, all of the Jewish magazines were edited by men.

Some feminists at the time were asking, "Why would Jewish women care about a parochial, patriarchal religion that puts women down? Why don't you throw out the baby with the bathwater?" says Weidman Schneider. But that approach was untenable to her – she identifies herself strongly as a Conservative Jew, though her level of observance has admittedly waxed and waned over the years. "Judaism is a kind of ineluctable part of who I am," says Weidman Schneider. "It's a tradition with a great deal to offer women as well as men, and I felt what's needed is some retooling, perhaps, but certainly not anything that comes close to outright rejection."

Having had their consciousness raised during the 1960s, American Jewish women were radically rethinking gender politics and seriously questioning Judaism's ability to adapt to social change. It was during this era, which crackled with activist excitement, that Weidman Schneider and a small group of like-minded women writers gave birth to *Lilith*. They recognized that there was an alternative

perspective, one that was true to Judaism yet could help propel the much-needed reform they believed was essential if Judaism were to remain a viable religion for a politically awakened generation of women.

The very name chosen for the magazine promised a refreshingly bold take on familiar subjects. Lilith, according to the *midrash*, was Adam's first companion in the Garden of Eden. She was Adam's equal, but she left him when he tried to make her submit to his authority. The more compliant Eve took Lilith's place. Weidman Schneider says the magazine's name came about naturally, almost accidentally, at an early planning meeting. She and the magazine's other founding mothers sat around someone's kitchen table over sandwiches. One of them simply said, "Of course, we have to call the magazine *Lilith*." Everyone agreed.

*Lilith* appealed not just to radical feminists but to women who, in *Lilith*'s first few issues, saw many of their seldom-discussed concerns blazoned across the publication's cover. In *Lilith*'s second issue, the cover line was "Beyond the Stereotypes: How Ten Jewish Women Changed Their Lives." In it, one writer came out as a lesbian and another wrote about feeling excluded from Jewish life when she was not allowed to say *Kaddish*, the mourner's prayer, for her grandmother. A third writer, recalls Weidman Schneider, described feeling as if she were slipping through the cracks. "She was somebody who cared very much about Orthodox Judaism and at the same time cared very much for feminism. Where was her place? Now there's something called the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance. If you had said at *Lilith*'s inception that the words 'Orthodox' and 'feminist' would be in the same title, someone would have said, 'What are you smoking?'"

Today *Lilith* is a nonprofit quarterly with a circulation of about ten thousand and an estimated readership of twenty-five thousand. *Lilith* is credited with being the first to publish women's Holocaust memories and women's accounts of domestic violence and incest in their Jewish families. *Lilith*, says its editor, was also the first to advocate strongly against the Jewish American Princess stereotype.

And it was probably the first publication to devote nearly an entire issue to Jewish hair.

Along the way, Weidman Schneider emerged as a major voice in Jewish feminism. She has commented on issues affecting contemporary Jewish women on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Good Morning America* and CNN and in the *New York Times* and *Newsweek*. Cementing her status are the three books she authored, including *Jewish and Female: Choices and Changes in Our Lives Today*, first published by Simon and Schuster in 1984. In 2000, Weidman Schneider was awarded the Joseph Polakoff Award for distinguished service to Jewish journalism. She has also received Hadassah's Golden Wreath Award and the American Jewish Congress's Woman Who Made a Difference award.

"I think she's had a great influence on Jewish feminism – an influence on women and men," notes Blu Greenberg, who cofounded the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) in 1997, more than two decades after *Lilith's* arrival. (Interestingly, like *Lilith*, JOFA was conceived by a group of women at a kitchen table.) Greenberg, a widely published Orthodox feminist writer who has served on *Lilith's* advisory board, says the magazine is "the only feminist publication that actually reaches the masses in the community." She credits Weidman Schneider's "special," "compassionate," "*neshama*" (soulful) personality with enabling her to reach the Jewish establishment. "She made Jewish feminism accessible to all sectors of the community." Moreover, notes Greenberg, Weidman Schneider "has dedicated herself to this publication. For many years she worked without a salary."

Weidman Schneider was born in 1946 and reared in Winnipeg, the capital of Canada's Manitoba province and home to a sizable population of Russian immigrants. "Winnipeg was a very comfortable place to be Jewish," says Weidman Schneider. "It had a very active, lively Jewish intellectual tradition – everything from free thinkers who didn't believe in marriage and didn't believe in religion but felt they were culturally Jews or politically Jews, to more traditionally religiously observant people."

Her early Jewish education was remarkably non-sexist,

especially given the era, and likely was a key factor in Weidman Schneider's taking on a leadership role as a feminist activist in Judaism. "I was part of a Conservative synagogue's junior congregation where girls had completely equal participation with boys," she recalls. "I was very comfortable at the age of ten or eleven leading services along with the guys. There were two Israeli men who ran this junior congregation. They were very progressive educators."

Her identification with Judaism was reinforced at home – her Winnipeg kin were "very Zionist," she says. "I certainly learned to sing 'Hatikva' long before I learned to sing 'O, Canada.'"

Her mother, who was born in 1904, was active in Yiddish theater and taught Weidman Schneider that being different didn't necessarily mean being wrong. "Given the era in which she grew up, she probably was somewhat unconventional." Although her mother was much more interested in the arts than in politics, she "lived as much of an intellectual life as the women of her generation were permitted or expected to live," says Weidman Schneider. "She had a coterie of friends with whom she gathered once a week for about forty years. And they read all the Bible, then all of Shakespeare, then all of James Joyce, then all of Anaïs Nin. They were thoughtful, smart women. Whether they bared their souls to one another and tried to make a dramatic change in the universe...I suspect not. They were intrigued by ideas."

Typical of her own generation, Weidman Schneider married in her twenties and began having children relatively soon thereafter. She had met her husband, endocrinologist Bruce Schneider, while at Brandeis University, and reared their three children – a son, Benjamin, and two daughters, Rachel and Yael – in the various places Schneider's work took him. These days Weidman Schneider commutes weekly to *Lilith's* office in New York from their home in Washington, D.C. "People ask, 'How'd you end up in Washington?' And I say, 'A good feminist answer: My husband took a job there,'" she jokes.

Shortly after their marriage, the Schneiders lived for a time in South Dakota, where Schneider was assigned to a Bureau

of Indian Affairs hospital – and where Weidman Schneider, with a manual typewriter on her lap, wrote freelance articles on parenting and other topics for American newspapers while sitting inside her young son’s large playpen with him. She had had an interest in writing from a very young age. As a teenager in Canada, she edited the newsletter *B’nai Brith Girls* and worked for her high school newspaper. Before that, when she was just eight years old, she worked on a newspaper at summer camp in Gimli, an Icelandic fishing village in Manitoba.

Not long after her husband’s tour of duty in South Dakota, he signed on for a six-month stint at a Jerusalem hospital. Weidman Schneider recalls that it was “thrilling” to find herself living in Israel. When she was about four years old, her paternal grandfather had given her a small bronze key ring decorated with Israel’s statehood symbol. “I couldn’t understand why they were making a fuss that there was a State of Israel – like, of course there’s a State of Israel. Wasn’t it always there?”

In some ways, Weidman Schneider’s transition from trailing spouse to trailblazing feminist seems unlikely. But upon her return to the U.S., Jewish groups began inviting her to speak about her experiences in Israel, where she had been struck by the paradoxes in a society that had plentiful childcare because it was expected that women would have a work life, but also so many impediments to women’s career advancement. Weidman Schneider, who insisted that onsite childcare be provided during her appearances so as not to exclude women with small children, found she was good at expressing in public what she had witnessed in private as a young wife and mother living in Jerusalem.

“I think I’m a convincing public speaker in part because I’m able to temper the message with a personal approach, personal anecdote, humor, wherever possible,” says Weidman Schneider. “Maybe it has to do with my Canadian background and a certain kind of Anglophilia.” She has a strong sensibility about what is and isn’t appropriate, she says, adding that after more than forty years in America, she is still uncomfortable if people argue at the dinner

table. “It’s okay to have political differences, but you always hear the other person out. That’s not necessarily the New York Jewish way of expressing things.”

While Weidman Schneider is loath to argue forcefully at home, she has had no such reservations about using her voice to fight for justice and equality through her magazine. Sometimes, she admits, it has taken a good deal of courage to publish certain stories, such as ones that shine an unflattering light on a Jew. “We often hear people say, ‘So many people don’t like the Jews anyway, why do you talk about domestic violence?’” Weidman Schneider responds, “We need to, of course, be worried about protecting Jews and this is why I’m concerned about violence in Jewish homes. Where does this leave the victim if what we’re worried about is the reputation of the Jews as a whole?”

The *Lilith* article that garnered the most controversy was a 1998 story covering the sexual misconduct of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. Prior to publication, the magazine received warnings from people trying to dissuade Weidman Schneider from running the article. “It was not a comfortable time for us,” she says. Before she made a final decision, she turned to others for guidance. It was her husband’s words that struck the strongest chord. “He said, ‘This is a terrible experience that these women went through and you have an obligation to the truth,’” recalls Weidman Schneider. “We ran the article.”

For many of the magazine’s readers, like twenty-two-year-old Melanie Weiss, a college senior and *Lilith* intern, Weidman Schneider’s courage to live up to the magazine’s subtitle – *Independent, Jewish & Frankly Feminist* – has made an enormous difference. An avid reader of the magazine for years, she believes it is as relevant to her generation as it was to young women three decades ago. *Lilith* tackles articles on topics “not being published anywhere else,” says Weiss, noting that it meant a lot to her to learn that “there are alternative voices inside the Jewish community.”

Weiss says she appreciates the willingness of the editorial staff to seriously consider any subject that could be interesting or useful

to readers. “It all emanates from Susan. Working here has been the best thing that could have happened to me.”

Former intern Ilana Kramer, now a PhD candidate in clinical psychology with a focus on gender violence, has fond memories of sitting around the table at *Lilith*’s New York office, eating apples, honey, hummus and pita, and discussing article ideas. “When you have someone as successful and respected as Susan telling you that you can write, it’s a powerful thing.”

Weidman Schneider takes her interns seriously, and perhaps her receptiveness to the younger generation has helped to keep the magazine relevant. *Lilith*’s interns – more than one hundred over the years – have been “fabulous, smart and stimulating” and “we learn a lot from them,” Weidman Schneider says. “We’ve provided a very safe and supportive place for people who are looking for ways to merge their Judaism and their feminism and their interests in changing the world through words.”

Weidman Schneider, however, isn’t ready to turn her life’s work over to a new generation just yet. She is too busy ushering *Lilith* firmly into the twenty-first century – with podcasts, blogs and digitizing *Lilith*’s back articles for web postings – and overseeing a network of salons, or discussion groups, around the country where women meet face-to-face to explore issues raised in the magazine.

“I was recently at a *Lilith* salon that [Weidman Schneider] hosted and she’s really wonderful at bringing together different generations of *Lilith* readers,” says Rahel Lerner, twenty-nine, a New York book editor and occasional contributor to the magazine. “She’s lovely. Very enthusiastic. Very welcoming of new ideas.” Adds Lerner, “I grew up in a Jewish feminist household and *Lilith* was always around.”

Weidman Schneider recognizes there are many fights yet to be won – for instance, redressing the inequities suffered by female rabbis, who are often paid only seventy-five percent of what their male counterparts earn, she says.

But the tone of her voice is softer now, perhaps the effect of looking at so many tough issues over the years from a multitude of



perspectives. The cover of a recent issue of *Lilith* features a photograph of an Israeli woman, rifle slung over one shoulder, the young child she carries looking over the other. It illustrates the issue's main feature, "A Different Lens on the News? Women Reporting from Israel." Provocative, but not shocking, as some of the early covers were.

"I think it's useful to take a more nuanced look at what's going on than you are able to do when blinded by anger," says Weidman Schneider. "The people who are involved with *Lilith* as writers and as editors tend to be able to see complexity. I like that, and clearly our readers do, too. I think you get a much richer view of the world."