Using Women's Studies/ Feminist Periodicals as a Resource for Researching Jewish Women

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SERIALLY SPEAKING

Using Women’s Studies/Feminist Periodicals as a Resource for Researching Jewish Women*

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Abstract: Articles on Jewish women are frequently published in women’s studies/feminist periodicals, where they may not readily come to the attention of Judaica researchers owing in large measure to the difficulties inherent in the indexing of this new interdisciplinary field. From her vantage point as publisher of Feminist Periodicals: A Current Listing of Contents and with a background in Judaica librarianship, the author has taken note of a wealth of material on Jewish women, covering both religious and secular aspects of Jewish women’s identity, upbringing, and psyche; the status of Israeli women and feminism in Israel; the Holocaust, antisemitism, and women (including antisemitism within the women’s movement); and creative expression by Jewish women on Jewish themes in the form of short stories, poetry, and art work. Examples from this material are provided, in order to encourage consideration of these periodicals as a resource in studying Jewish women.

Introduction: Becoming a Women’s Studies Librarian

For many years I held positions as a Judaica librarian. I worked in the Hebraic Section, Library of Congress; in the Melton Library, Jewish Theological Seminary; and I was in charge of the Jewish Law collection of the New York University Law Library. When my husband took a faculty position at the University of Wisconsin in 1990, I initially explored possibilities for continuing in this field in the University libraries, but found that the library system did not have the funds to create a position for a Judaica specialist. Just at the time I was looking, however, a position opened: Women’s Studies Librarian for the University of Wisconsin System (initially acting, later permanent). Various administrative and publishing experiences in my background as well as Jewish feminist activities—and, frankly, being in Madison at the right time—led to my selection. I soon found myself running a unique office, with a statewide mandate to keep students, librarians, and women’s studies and gender scholars apprised of new resources on women. The office had been created in the late 1970s, when women’s studies programs were being developed on all the campuses of the University of Wisconsin System—there are 14 four-year campuses, 13 two-year campuses, and an extension division, serving some 160,000 students.

My predecessors soon realized that they would need to rely on publications to disseminate resource information to such a wide audience; thus, the University of Wisconsin System women’s studies librarian essentially heads a publishing operation. Our staff produces a semi-annual, subject-arranged bibliography, New Books on Women and Feminism; a reviewing publication, Feminist Collections: A Quarterly of Women’s Studies Resources; and a quarterly, Feminist Periodicals: A Current Listing of Contents (which reproduces the tables of contents of over 125 feminist/women’s studies journals). In order to produce these publications, the office operates like a giant sieve, through which flows a steady river of items (sometimes approaching a torrent), and from which we sift the women-focused material.

With my Judaica background, I take special interest every time I see something on Jewish women—and this is often. I am particularly intrigued by the amount of attention to Jewish women in the periodical literature of those 125-plus periodicals.

These periodicals:

- investigate aspects of Jewish women’s identity, with an emphasis on ethnic/secular Jewish womanhood, but also including articles on religious life and status in Judaism;
- explore the meaning of Jewish upbringing through autobiographical accounts;
- probe the psyche of Jewish women in therapy and as therapists;
- publish creative works with overtly Jewish themes, including short stories, poems, and art;
- deal with antisemitism, including antisemitism within the women’s movement;
- cover the status of Israeli women and feminism in Israel, and of Jewish lesbians in the Jewish and women’s communities;
- take a look at news of events of interest to Jewish feminists;
- analyze the works of Jewish women writers; and
- review books about Jewish women.

In this paper I provide a glimpse into the world of women’s studies periodicals in order to help reference librarians keep this category of material in mind when assisting patrons researching topics concerning Jewish women. Background information on women’s studies periodicals and their principal indexing tools is followed by illustrations of recent articles representing the coverage of Jewish women in this body of work.

Women's Studies Periodicals

For this analysis, "women's studies" and "feminist" are interchangeable terms. Both terms may be used to describe the body of material spanning publications from grassroots activist newspapers to academic journals on women. The original impetus for women's studies in the academy came from the women's liberation movement, and women's studies scholars continue to honor that origin. Women's studies is still a very young field. From twenty women's studies courses in 1969, there are today over 600 programs sponsoring over 30,000 courses.¹

The periodicals have seen a related growth curve. One cannot actually pinpoint the "first" feminist periodical of the modern women's movement, because there are organizational newsletters and women's peace publications that go back earlier. Many short-lived local activist publications appeared in the mid- to late 1960s, but none of them were represented in the first volume (1969) of Alternative Press Index (API), the tool that continues to index such publications to this day. But the second volume of Alternative Press Index indexed five feminist periodicals: Everywoman (Venice, CA); Women: A Journal of Liberation (Baltimore); Ain't I a Woman (Iowa City); the Journal of Female Liberation (Cambridge, MA); and off our backs (Washington, DC). A series of articles in Serials Review 5 (October 1979) assessed feminist magazines, describing 37. In 1995, Feminist Periodicals recorded the tables of contents of 128 publications, from Nora: Nordic Journal of Women's Studies to Hysteria: Women, Humor & Social Change; Minerva: Quarterly Report on Women and the Military; Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society; and many "Women and . . ." periodicals (Women and Criminal Justice, Women and Environments, Women and Health, Women and Language, Women and Performance, Women and Politics . . .) Of the early feminist periodicals, only off our backs is still publishing.

Off our backs was also the first to carry significant material on Jewish women. In fact, vol. 2 (February 1972) had an entire thematic section on Jewish women, with an article on Queen Esther, a defense of Jewish mothers, an excerpt of "The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman," by Rachel Adler, and some creative writing.

Indexes and Bibliographies

By 1972, women's studies had its own index: Women Studies Abstracts (WSA). Examples of articles on Jewish women published in women's studies periodicals indexed by API or WSA in the 1970s include "Women's Movement Leaders Are Jewish," by Julia Stein, in Sister (1975), and the first issue of Feminist Studies (1975) carried a report from Israel. Frontiers (Summer 1977) covered Jewish grandmothers, in a thematic issue devoted to women's oral history (Krause, 1977), and Ms. ran E. M. Broner and Naomi Nimrod's "A Woman's Passover Haggadah and Other Revisionist Rituals," in April 1977.

Most of the articles on Jewish women indexed in the early years of API and WSA, however, did not appear in women's studies periodicals, but rather in other alternative publications and Jewish periodicals. API, for example, did a good job of indexing Chutzpah, which published many articles on women in Judaism, and WSA cited articles by Trude Weiss-Rosmarin in The Jewish Spectator and The Journal of Jewish Communal Services, on the Jewish family and intermarriage; papers on diversity from the American Jewish Committee; the Response issue on the Jewish woman; and a smattering of citations from American Jewish Historical Quarterly, Judaism, Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies, Studies in American Jewish Literature, and others.

Aviva Cantor's bibliography The Jewish Woman, 1900–1985 (2nd ed., Fresh Meadows, NY: Biblio Press, 1987) provides substantial coverage of this period. The bibliography Women and Judaism: A Select Annotated Bibliography, by Inger Marie Ruud (NY: Garland, 1988), also includes citations concerning religious dimensions, from 11 of the feminist periodicals.²

One should not leave the 1970s without mentioning the most significant happening for the study of Jewish women in feminist periodicals: the founding of Lilith in 1976. In its 20-year history, Lilith has explored gender inequities in Jewish schools and the Jewish establishment, women's writings from the Holocaust, the legacy of radical Jewish women, new feminist rituals, feminism among Orthodox women, and much more. WSA and a newer indexing annual, Women's Studies Index (WSI; 1990– ) are both replete with citations to Lilith articles. WSI also indexes Bridges (1990– ), a second important periodical entirely devoted to Jewish feminism. Bridges is especially useful for its coverage of class and lesbian issues.

Gradually, as the number of women's studies periodicals increased, WSA began to focus on such journals, and today it abstracts exclusively from them. WSI covers them as well. A third resource, Studies on Women Abstracts (SWA; 1983– ) continues the practice of selectively abstracting articles about women from a variety of academic journals, occasionally covering Jewish women. Until recently, none of these indexes cumulated in print beyond a year at a time, nor were they available as databases. WSI and WSA are both now available in electronic databases.

Many of the women's studies journals are not covered by any of the standard indexes that are available electronically, such as Humanities Index; Social Sciences Citation Index, SocioFile (online version of Sociological Abstracts), MLA, and PsycLIT, and one cannot therefore rely on them to provide adequate coverage of material published on Jewish women in women's studies journals. An article on Jewish feminists in On the Issues (Chesler, 1989), featuring women praying at the Kotel on the cover, is not included in any of the standard indexes. Nor could one find "Memories of a Cochin Jewish Woman," (Daniel, 1991), published in Manushi, a feminist periodical from India, in any of them.

Some women's studies periodicals are included in these databases, especially when there is an obvious match between the database and the journal as a whole (e.g., Feminism and Psychology, in PsycLIT), but this approach to an interdisciplinary field creates barriers to successful retrieval even for experienced women's studies faculty. For topics on Jewish women, this hurdle may be even higher. Would one think to try PsycLIT to find a critique of the Diaspora Museum from a gender perspective (Izraeli, 1993) published in Psychology of Women Quarterly, or SocioFile to research the meaning of adult bat mitzvahs, articulated in an article (Kahn, 1995) in Affilia, a feminist social work journal? I suspect not, and favor stressing the usefulness of WSA and WSI as wider gateways to the litera-


ture in women's studies periodicals. These women's studies tools are also more comprehensive than the broad-brush databases, such as CARL/Uncover, ArticlesFirst, and Expanded Academic Index, though each of these is better for women's studies retrieval than any of the standard indexes.

Articles on Jewish Women in Women's Studies Journals

What follows is a list of articles from women's studies journals that are suggestive of the range of topics covered and of the scope of the periodicals themselves. These are but a few of the hundreds of articles and thematic sections on Jewish women that have appeared in women's studies journals since 1972.

Because Lilith and Bridges are presumably held in Judaica collections and are familiar to Judaica librarians, the examples below are taken only from periodicals that are lesser-known from a Jewish perspective.

Except for citations to articles mentioned above, the material has all been published in the late 1980s and 1990s. I hope that the breadth of subjects addressed by the examples will inspire Judaica librarians, students, and researchers to dip into the well of women's studies periodicals.

Bibliography: Selected Articles on Jewish Women in Women's Studies Periodicals


Ankori, Gannit. "Yocheved Weinfeld's Portraits of Women that have appeared in women's studies tools are also more comprehensive than the broad-brush databases, such as CARL/Uncover, ArticlesFirst, and Expanded Academic Index, though each of these is better for women's studies retrieval than any of the standard indexes.

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Alpert, Rebecca T. "Sometimes the Law Is Cruel: The Construction of a Jewish Antiabortion Position...
Indexing and Contents Resources in Women's Studies


Jewish Feminist Periodicals

Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends, 1990–P.O. Box 24839Eugene, OR 97402ckenberg@pond.net http://www.pond.net/~ckenberg/bridges


Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal, 1997–c/o Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations University of Toronto 4 Bancroft Avenue Toronto, Ontario MSS 1C1Canada

Refereed journal available only online at http://www.utoronto.ca/wjudaism

Bibliographies on Jewish Women


Phyllis Holman Weisbard has been the University of Wisconsin System Women's Studies Librarian since 1991. She and her staff publish Feminist Collections: A Quarterly of Women's Studies Resources; Feminist Periodicals: A Current Listing of Contents; New Books on Women & Feminism, and subject bibliographies in women's studies. She is the author of Jewish Law: Bibliography of Sources and Scholarship in English (with David Schoenbergl); The History of Women and Science, Health, and Technology: A Bibliographic Guide to the Professions and the Disciplines (with Rima D. Apple); and numerous articles in Feminist Collections.
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