



## FRANKLY FEMINIST: SHORT STORIES BY JEWISH WOMEN

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers. Brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union college's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball campus, and your host.

Welcome to this episode of the college Commons podcast, and an exciting opportunity to join a conversation with Susan Weidman Schneider. Susan Weidman Schneider has been Editor-in-Chief of Lilit, the leading Jewish feminist magazine since its launch in 1976. Her writing about Jewish women's philanthropy, the Jewish stake in abortion rights, the persistence of gender stereotyping and more have been credited with moving the needle on feminist change in the Jewish world. She's the author of Jewish and female and intermarriage, and co-author of head and heart, a book about money in the lives of women. Today we're going to discuss her new book, Frankly Feminist, a selection of 44 short stories published in Lilit magazine's 45-year history, edited by our guest and Yona Zeldis McDonough, and published in October of '22, at Brandeis University Press. Susan, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons Podcast and welcome.

Susan Weidman Schneider: Thank you. It's really a pleasure to be here, Josh.

JH: I'd like to ask an overarching question to open our discussion, because at the very outset of your book, it's evident that you're motivated by an imperative really for diversity of voices in Frankly Feminist, what you call "variegated cultures and contexts and points of view", tell us how that imperative shaped your editorial choices and perhaps some of the challenges that it posed?

SS: In Lilit magazine's first issue. I described in the editorial statement that we saw that premiere issue as a smorgasbord of different experiences, different flavors, different points of view, so even from the magazine's inception, diversity has been one of our hallmarks. And that has really changed over the years. I think initially, we weren't thinking along the lines of the racial make up of the Jewish community, the concept of Jews of color was not as part of our parlance, and over the years, the fiction that Lilit has received for consideration has caught a

pretty broad swath across what we think of now as a kind of multiverse of Jewish identities, these Russian Jews, Jews from India, Jews from Africa, Jews from Latin America, and of course, there are organizations now that are identity markers for Jews of very different backgrounds, with that we have had the tremendous pleasure of re-reading the hundreds of stories that we have published and in the first read-through, we managed to narrow down the hundreds to something like 85, and then as Yona describes it, it was a little like trading baseball cards or something, where if we take out this story, can we fit in that a constraint imposed by the book publisher?

SS: And we discovered that we indeed had some wonderful representation, and I suspect that if we do X number of years from now the second volume, that will have even more diversity, there are stories here about relationships between parents and children, mothers and daughters, mothers and sons. Intergenerational issues, but also what was it like for people who have confronted the notion of Jews as a race, you don't look Jewish, how did you come here into this Jewish space? A lot of very interesting complexities, so rather than being abstract about this, I know it will be entertaining, I hope, and also enlightening for us to look at some of the stories themselves.

JH: Indeed, but I'd like to ask a question about one aspect of diversity, which is the founding soul of Lilit, which is feminism and the experience of women, and Anita Diamant in her forward argues that Jewish women's literature has broken out of the pigeonhole of minority or perhaps minoritized literature, and that it's taken its place in the canon. I wanna ask you if you agree, has Jewish women's literature been enfranchised or is there still work to be done or both?

SS: If we take a look at the New York Times Best Seller List is one measure of what readers are looking at and presumably enjoying, we see that at the top of those lists are often novels that have some Jewish inflection, but they are not deeply Jewish novels at their core. We do still have Jewish experiences that are viewed as marginal, and one of the reasons for that is that there has been some ambivalence on the part of Jews and where we do fit in the last section of the collection *Frankly Feminist* is entitled to belong. And it foregrounds stories that are still wrestling with that. Is it okay for me to be an outspoken Jew? Is it okay for me to be an observant Jew? Is it okay for me to mark Jewish holidays in public? Is it okay to wear a Magen David, a Jewish star? And that's a question, interestingly, that comes up in Lilit magazine's content every few years, where there is a discussion of Jewish jewelry and how do people want to be. So while a lot of Jewish practice and a lot of Jewish ideas and a lot of Jewish slang have entered the public consciousness through popular media, largely, there's still a certain awkwardness, and for Jews who are doubly minoritized, that is to say if we take Ashkenazi or Ashkenormative Jewish culture as what most known Jewish-Americans think of as Jewish chicken soup with Matzo balls, etcetera.

SS: There is clearly still for Jews of backgrounds that don't fall into that, you know, we're having brisket and Kugel for Friday night dinner, there's a sense of being a little outcast in the Jewish world still, and also the flip side of this is the exoticization of Jewish women, the Rembrandt

painting of the beautiful Jewess, La Belle Juive, and those are legion in Renaissance paintings, but the image pops up in a lot of other fiction as well.

JH: Sure, like Sir Walter Scott, yeah. Well, let's dive into some of the more cutting edge facets of diversity of voices as you articulated both now and in the book, Building on the fact that you just pointed out that the book is divided into sections, and in the introduction to the section titled transitions, you point out something profound, undeniable, but also very poignant, you write "In Jewish life, there has never been an honored place for the celibate". Does feminism in particular help us to address Judaism's complicated relationship to celibacy, even though celibacy itself is not gendered?

SS: As we remember, the first injunction in the Torah is to be fruitful and multiply, and that becomes a challenge, and of course, there are figures in Jewish life who are visionaries and who do not have progeny of their own, but for Jewish women, it's particularly challenging, there has been a lot of guilt and opprobrium associated with sexual activity outside of marriage, and on the other hand, sexual activity that does not lead to pregnancy and child bearing, a lot of shame around being infertile, a lot of anxiety about not having children, and it has meant that there's a very complicated stew of expectations for Jewish women in particular, there are complicated family dynamics, there's someone who writes a beautiful beautiful story, Michelle Brafman about the protagonist, struggles to conceive and what in her family history feeds into that, and of course, post-Holocaust, the strong feeling that have more babies, don't give Hitler any posthumus victories. Now, some women, whether partnered or not partnered, are choosing to be "child-free", not child-less as the older term would have, and for some women, that means defending themselves in Jewish contexts.

SS: Why have you made this decision? And some of these short stories reflect that. But in real life too, there is a certain kind of sadness that gets expressed in the words of women of a certain age, and that age usually being well beyond child-bearing age, where if they've had aspects of their life that call into question the whole trajectory in a way that men often don't, that they ask, I did not have children. Does that mean that I don't have an appropriate legacy? You don't hear very often from similarly aged men, and it has nothing to do with the fact that men can still procreate until they are very much older than women, they can still become fathers, but there isn't the same ambivalence or ambiguity about whether it's a fate or a choice that has led to being Child-free and the stories approach that topic, not many of them, but some of them. And I have to say that in this book, as I read and re-read and revisited these stories, I was really struck by how nuanced they all are, these are not Doctrinaire short stories at all, they are really, in the most wonderful ways that fiction can do, they really bring us into the processes of lives of their characters, and what makes them feminist, of course, is that women are at the center of these stories, they aren't really window dressing.

JH: I couldn't agree more, and I'm so moved by the texture of the character development, especially in the short form, that these stories, so many of them really have. It's quite compelling and really a wonderful selection for that, I wanna capture one element of the feminist diving into

the textured human experience in the first story written by Esther Singer Kreitman called the New World, the story laments the injustice of a world that celebrates the birth of boys over that of girls. But there's another feminist subtext in the story, which is that of girls and women's quelling of their own restless spirits, and our narrator in this vein, recounts out in her mother's womb, she struggled to move around, but more or less gave up saying, "I simply gave myself a bad name. So what then?" Then as a newborn baby our Narrator also says, "I restrain myself from shouting, all I want is to eat". The stories in this volume, give a voice to that, women's restless spirit as indeed has Lilith magazine as a whole. But do you find that Jewish women are still clamoring for that voice and feeling silenced like the narrator in our story or is Jewish feminism motivated by other types of challenges?

SS: Great question, I will say just to pause for a moment on the story you refer to that opens the book, the story entitled The New World. Exactly captures that the woman struggling to be heard in a world that isn't welcoming her, the rest of the story is that the family sends her off to be taken care of by Wetners, 'cause she's not a boy and they want a boy, but also the yearning to have her voice heard a bit of background about that story, Esther Singer Kreitman is the for many, many decades forgotten and unknown sister of Isaac Bashevis Singer, he of the Nobel Prize for literature, and of course, also a sister of IJ Singer, Isaac Bashevis' brother, their mother, when Esther was in her teens, destroyed all of Esther's writing, claiming that if any suitor found out, she would be rendered un-marriageable, she in fact went on to marry and it was one of her sons who was instrumental in having her first literary works come out and Lilith published a commissioned translation of this story from the Yiddish that appeared on what would have been the 100th birthday of Esther Singer Kreitman, so the story felt apropos in so many ways, not only that, it begins in Utero, how many short stories do we know that give us the voice of as some would say the pre-born and also this yearning to be heard, to be understood carries through many, many short stories here, there really is a yearning for having one's truths heard.

SS: A woman who is ruminating on all of her daughter's boyfriends and what they meant in her daughter's life, and another mother of a son, a grown up son, a divorced woman whose young adult son is off being a counselor at summer camp, and she wants to keep him close and help him make decisions in his life, and he's having none of it. So we have the characteristic Jewish mother in many different scenes in these stories, but none of them are voiceless, none of them are those women who are somehow remanded to the kitchen to make chicken soup, nor are they the nagging and haranguing Jewish mothers of cartoons and bad TV sitcoms. These are people who have a certain fluidity, a certain flexibility, and that carries, I believe really throughout the collection, there's another section entitled Intimacies, which is about deep personal connections one-on-one, sometimes a friendship, sometimes a completely transgressive relationship between romantic partners or people who are drawn to one another, bride on the eve of her wedding, who can't pull away from her non-Jewish dalliance and how she manages to live with that duality. There's another section that deals with transgressions, which is transgressive relationships, protecting someone who has committed a crime, what that means in

the life of the woman who feels that she is standing up for all the Jews by protecting another Jew and so on.

JH: You mentioned transgressive relationships, and one of the star cast of those relationships comes out in Adrian Sharp's contribution titled in Vegas that year, which depicts Bugsy Siegel's crowd in 1947 through the eyes of an underaged Jewish dancer who purposely and then ambivalently attracts a gangster's attention. The understated narration, by the way, in the story is terrifying, it eases the reader through a really horrific scene of potential sexual predation, it's remarkable and troubling, but it also, in what was only a passing line, opens a Pandora's box of Jews and racial identity. When the young dancer asks herself, "Was I too dark? Did Nate think I was a Negro?" What did this collection, both in the make-up of the contributors and in the content of its stories teach you about the complex question of race and Jewishness?

SS: Well, I think it wasn't a matter of what the collection taught me, but I think what it is that the collection brings to its readers on the subject of race and Jewishness. We have different standards of attractiveness, different standards for group identity. There's a story about a young woman who becomes a bride in Persia and what's expected of her, and what she looks like and what the standards are for her to be a beautiful bride, or even an attractive bride. And in this particular remarkable story from Adrian Sharp, which went on to become the core of a novel, by the way, she is in a universe where the California ideal of pale skin, blonde hair, blue eyes, is very much in her mind's eye at all times, her mother was a dancer in A Chorus Line, and she's 15 in that story. She is really an agent of her own fate, she figures out who the cast of characters in the Bugsy Siegel cohort are, what she wants out of them, and tries to figure out where she belongs in that panoply of female portraiture, and there are others like that in this book.

SS: There's a short story by Jane Lazarre, who has written a great deal about race in America, she herself is the mother of two black sons, and she has a story here about a woman who is white and Jewish, having her hair cut by a black woman on the Connecticut shore in 1918 or 1919, and how she imagines this other woman's life, her life in relationship to it. There are undertones and a kind of texture of race and its meaning to identity in several of the stories here, although they aren't always foregrounded.

JH: I'd like to foreground it for a moment with you and follow up on that story by Jane Lazarre titled 1919: At the Connecticut Shore, and in this story, Lazarre takes Jewishness and Blackness as you described, to the intimate moment between two women, intimate, but also poignantly unbridgeable in some ways. And the Jewish woman, having had her hair cut by a Black woman, whom she knows from town, thinks to herself in the story "That she understands how prejudice can frighten and harden you, that being a woman is a blessing and a curse too." Have you found that art and womanhood or feminism have been meaningful bridges across human divides?

SS: Well, certainly, feminism and the arts have been a very fertile common ground for women to cross what might have been unbridgeable barriers, not only in race, but also of class, and of geography, and of culture. That wasn't always so, when the second wave of the women's movement got its start in the late '60s, early '70s, there was a real reluctance to see specificities in the lives of women who in any way seemed to have an ethnic component to their identities. That is when Ms. Magazine, when a well-known article, "Is It Kosher to Be Feminist?" In the early years that was there, one moment to address the fact that in Jewish life, there were certain issues for women that didn't exist in the lives of women of other backgrounds. As we said, issues around having children or not having children and certainly other concerns as well. But there was an erasure of those differences, so that often Jewish and Muslim women got the message that, "If you're part of the patriarchal religious culture, just walk away from it. What is the point?" And as a Muslim feminist wrote in Lilith some years ago, she said, "I am not going to leave this religious tradition until I have rung out of it, every bit of meaning that I know is there."

SS: It's sort of a misreading of various traditions to see them only as patriarchal and misogynistic. And of course, there are many including Blu Greenberg, a well-known Orthodox Jewish feminist who also was writing and has appeared in Lilith and elsewhere, where she is very clear, my belief in a just God includes the belief that, I'm paraphrasing her awkwardly, but that the injustices of misogyny, for example, are socially inflicted and inflected and aren't necessarily at the core of the religious practice. And feminism as a praxis for how we want to operate in the world and how we want the world to be, gives us a chance to work with women of very different backgrounds to find common ground, just as the arts do. And, of course, you're right, we enter imaginatively, the lives of others through fiction. The fact that fiction can inspire empathy is one of its most, most salient values, we can enter into the lives of people unlike ourselves.

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JH: I wanted to ask a question about the story titled, Raised by Jews by Naomi Seidman, who is a friend and colleague and a virtuoso of stylist and rock Lantos, she depicts the trajectory of a young Orthodox Jewish woman who is spreading her wings in the secular world, and she

develops the generational tensions that emerge when our protagonist comes home to her parents. And in a childhood remembrance close to the beginning of the story, our narrator describes her mother's cooking thus, "In Brazoria of the chopping block, she dies the onions with the virtuosity that in a better world would meet with drum rolls and applause." In this one sentence, I hear our narrators or Seidman's feminist Ambridge on her mother's behalf, a desire for her mother to have had her due recognition. And I see that Ambridge on behalf of her mother as reaching across the generational divide that otherwise is yawning between her and her parents. I wanna ask you as an observer of many years, how has our current generational shift today reshaped feminism and vice versa, how has feminism shaped our current generational divide?

SS: When you spoke about the Esther Singer Kreitman story that begins the book - with Naomi Seidman's short story, you have landed upon the one that concludes the book on purpose. It's a quite wonderful code to the collection, beautifully written, and it has some laugh aloud lines. Here she is, a returning young academic and scholar with her hair shorn and a buzz cut and narrator searching around in her childhood home for the stash of marijuana that she remembers having left somewhere in one of her mother's kitchen drawers. And very different from her immigrant mothers, very traditionally observant universe, nonetheless, there is a tremendous amount of empathy and understanding, and not sympathy, which would be at a remote, at a distance, but she's really right there understanding all parts of it. And the fact that you hone in on the line about her mother's cooking and in another world, there would be a drum roll for this kind of virtuosity is very telling.

SS: It turns out that food is immensely important, not only as something that gives pleasure, but that it is very much a kind of intergenerational glue. I had a fascinating conversation a while ago when I was called by someone doing graduate work, a scholar who is not Jewish who said, you know, I have been going through various feminist periodicals in the early years of the recent women's movement, and well, it seems to be the only periodical that doesn't see food as Parole. Either food is terrible because it's linked to body image in bad ways, or food is a way of keeping women chained to the kitchen, and in this conversation with her, I realized it's absolutely true that we have, and by we, I mean not only Lilith's editors and writers, but I think the larger Jewish Feminist Movement has seen food as a very important transmitter of identity. And that, again, gets into the Jewish diversity, the fact that there's a marvelous Ethiopian-Jewish chef in New York who operates Cafe Tsion and who has done video programs for Lilith, where she's cooking various ancestral foods and talking about them, and no one sees the preparation of "ethnic" foods as anything other than a complete delight.

SS: So Naomi Seidman's just side long observation of her mother's talents in the kitchen are part of the large appreciation of how women who were closed out of formal Jewish study for millennia, or many of them were, found in recipes. I mean, all you have to do is say to women of a certain age, your mother's recipe box and comes forth a flood of memories of various sorts, and when you speak to any of the authors, we occasionally interview at Lilith, the same comes

through. I think there are not quite the same unbridgeable divides between generations in Jewish life that we might have nervously predicted when Lilith got started.

JH: That's an interesting observation for the moment couched in a retrospective view, which you, in particular bring because you are the founding editor of Lilith, which means that this project was not one just of reading and editing, but much more specifically, and particularly one of re-reading. What idea story or theme surprised you in this process of revisiting and re-reading these stories?

SS: I was surprised not by one individual theme, but by how across the years that Lilith has been publishing fiction, how well the stories talk to one another. And that was one of the reasons why the stories created themselves into these categories, but we could have arranged the stories chronologically, we could have arranged the stories alphabetically by author, we could have arranged them by Geography, we could have arranged them by the age of the narrators, instead there were themes that arose again and again, almost encounter point to one another. There is a brief section entitled War with remarkable courage, but also tremendous insight. There is a short story by Rachel Hall, called La Poussette, about a woman who is in hiding in Vichy France with a very small child, an infant, and even the understanding that she's able to muster toward her enemies, the dreadful woman who cast her out, sort of to meet her fate was very striking to me. Again, a lot of empathy, but clearly in this section on war, an understanding of the ambiguities, these are not stories that tie themselves up neatly with a bow, as Yona Zeldis McDonough points out when we talked about the collection, these are very modern stories, they're very complex, and again and again, I was impressed with the ability of these short story writers to hold sometimes conflicting ideas at the same time and express them well with, again, a real mixture of empathy and an understanding of the ambiguities in our lives.

SS: There's a section that we haven't talked about called Body and Soul, which is, again, some of the deeply Jewish themes around blood, around going to the mitzvah, about the girls first period, and a little bit about bodies in danger. A story by Carolivia Herron, who is an academic Classics who teaches at Howard University, who is Jewish and black and writes in a short story called The Comet NEOWISE, listens in about what it was like for her to be in Black Lives Matter march in Washington, DC with her sister and brother convergence. And how it felt to be both in danger and being willing to put oneself into danger for a cause. So rather than picking out one particular theme, I think what really pleased me and wouldn't have occurred to me in the same way had I not re-read these stories, in several huge batches rather than one by one, as I had been reading them when they were first published, there was a sense of evolutionary development, if you will, but also how much we learn when we hear different voices or we read different voices on similar subjects.

JH: I wanna congratulate you, your co-editor, Yona Zeldis McDonough and all of the contributors and authors on an incredible work, and I also just wanna say it's a great read, [laughter] it's an amazing read, I enjoyed it so much. I think it's just a wonderful contribution, thank you, Susan



Weidman Schneider, for joining us on the College Commons Podcast and for the delightful conversation.

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SS: Thank you so much for having me.

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