

Izzy Essman

Prof. Christine

WGSS 72: Queering Feminisms

May 13, 2021

### Microseminar Proposal

#### **Bat Mitzvot and Beyond: Journeys in Jewish Womanhood**

##### **Description**

What does it mean to come of age as a Jewish woman? How is Jewish womanhood shaped in and outside of becoming a Bat Mitzvah? How do we see Jewish women, and how do Jewish women see ourselves?

This course will explore Jewish womanhood and feminism through a variety of lenses including feminist texts, religious scholarship, personal narratives, and popular depictions of Jewish women. The seminar will begin with an overview of feminist concepts before delving into discussions of women in the Torah. Once this background is established, we will spend the bulk of the course studying Jewish feminists, depictions of Jewish women, and the different paths that lead people to Jewish womanhood. Other potential topics include the work of female and queer rabbis and unpacking the Jewish Mother stereotype. This microseminar is an opportunity to reflect on the ways that Jewish women form our identities at the intersection of gender and religion. It is also a chance to expand our stereotypical ideas of Jewish women beyond curly hair, sleepaway camps, Bat Mitzvah speeches, and Birthright trips to include Jewish women of color, queer and trans women, converts, relationships between Jewish women of different generations, and others. Let's broaden our ideas of Jewish women. Let's go beyond the Bat Mitzvah!

Participants should have very basic familiarity with feminism and Torah. We will begin with readings and discussions on the core ideas of feminism and feminist empowerment in Judaism. Course material has been selected to meet an early college level of difficulty but could easily be adapted for synagogues or high school groups. To adapt for younger students, I would suggest swapping the Adler and Greenberg readings in week 2 for more conversational texts by Jewish writers—one good choice could be the chapters "One People" and "Three Brave Jewish

Women” from Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s book *My Own Words*. Other options might include excerpts from Nora Ephron’s *Heartburn*, essays by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg or Leslie Feinberg, or Mara Wilson’s memoir *Where Am I Now?* The goal of week 2 is to introduce the class to the ways Jewish feminists create, record, and share knowledge through their experiences with life as a Jewish woman. This can be accomplished using any number of Jewish women’s narratives—feel free to get creative.

## Syllabus

### Week 1: Getting on the same page

- *Feminism is for Everybody*, Introduction and Chapter 1 (pages vii-6)
- “Jewish Feminism in the United States” from Jewish Women’s Archive
- Activity: Research a woman from the Tanakh (any woman in the Torah, Prophets, or Writings from Eve to Esther) and briefly present to the class on the role she plays in her story and what meaning you draw from her narrative. This is a great time to research a namesake or talk about a favorite figure in the texts, as well as offering an opportunity to review our Tanakh knowledge. I suggest beginning your research at <https://www.sefaria.org/topics/category/biblical-figures>.

The purpose of this class is to introduce students to basic feminist and Jewish feminist concepts to ensure that we start the class on even footing. Students who have not engaged with feminist theory should find *Feminism is for Everybody* accessible and informative. hooks’s discussion of intersectional feminism will be useful for later discussions of how gender, race, sexuality, and other identities intersect with Jewish identities to create unique experiences of Judaism. “Jewish Feminism in the United States” offers an overview on the feminist movement within the American Jewish community. Although many Jewish women participated in the American Feminist Movement, we will be looking specifically at the impact of feminism inside American Judaism. Finally, students will be asked to research and give a brief presentation to the class on a woman from the Tanakh of their choosing. The Tanakh features many interesting, impressive women, from the Matriarchs to the Midwives to Queen Esther. This activity will provide the students a chance to begin learning about

Biblical figures or brush up on their scriptural knowledge, contextualize some Jewish cultural expectations for women, and engage with scriptural characters whom they may not have studied before.

## **Week 2: Jewish feminists**

- Rachel Adler: “The Jew Who Wasn’t There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman”
- Blu Greenberg: “In Defense of the ‘Daughters of Israel’”
- *Judaism Unbound* ep. 238: Jewish Women’s Archive - Judith Rosenbaum

This week, we will look at the ways Jewish women create and exchange knowledge as well as at the particular ways Judaism and feminism often intersect. The texts we will discuss focus on the ways that modern Judaism can be shifted to center women as leaders and participants. In “The Jew Who Wasn’t There,” Rachel Adler discusses the work of Jewish women to move from peripheries of Judaism to full-fledged participants. This short essay is an important Jewish feminist text and should be considered essential reading in this course. In “In Defense of the ‘Daughters of Israel,’” Blu Greenberg demystifies traditional rituals of grooming that some Jewish women participate in every month, and in doing so discusses the importance of these rituals for honoring one’s body and maintaining connections with older generations of women. Adler and Greenberg are both renowned feminists in the Jewish community, and they can offer us examples of the kind of theoretical work that Jewish feminists have engaged in. In the podcast interview, founding member of the Jewish Women’s Archive Judith Rosenbaum discusses the ways the Archive has contributed to the gathering, preserving, and disseminating of knowledge that centers Jewish women. Rosenbaum’s interview also gives us a helpful frame for thinking about how the Internet has changed the work of Jewish feminism and enabled Jewish woman thinkers to become more prominent.

## **Week 3: Media representations of Jewish women**

- Broad City episode 3x10, “Jews on a Plane”

- Crazy Ex-Girlfriend music videos: “JAP Battle,” “Remember That We Suffered,” “Where’s The Bathroom?”
- *The Nanny* clips: “Fran Meets A Man at Temple!” and “Spend Passover with Fran!”

Are Jewish women jokes? Why are we portrayed in certain ways in popular media? This week, we will discuss several arguably iconic Jewish woman characters from television. We begin with Fran Fine from the 1990s sitcom *The Nanny*. These two clips from *The Nanny* provide a glimpse into the show’s humor that both caricatured and humanized its characters; in spite of its issues with their portrayal, *The Nanny* nevertheless presented a rare Jewish main character. Jumping ahead to the 2010s, we will look at a classic episode of *Broad City* in which best friends Abbi and Ilana get into their classic hijinks on a parody Birthright trip. The show both engages with daring Jewish humor and pokes fun at stereotypes like typical Jewish names and the older generations’ obsession with grandchildren. Finally, we will look at three songs from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*: “JAP Battle,” which recounts a longstanding rivalry between main character Rebecca and fellow “Jewish American Princess” Audra; “Remember That We Suffered,” in which Bar Mitzvah partygoers remember their bittersweet heritage; and “Where’s The Bathroom?” in which Rebecca’s mother arrives for a visit, complaining and criticizing as she settles in. Although these two later shows generally took their main characters’ Judaism more seriously, they were often quick to trot it out for an easy joke. Each of these shows makes different claims about how Jewish women want to be portrayed, which stereotypes are offensive and which are true, and the precious individuality that lies beneath every Jewish woman’s stereotypical behaviors. What common threads can we find? Are these shows saying something true about Jewish womanhood, and, if so, what is it?

#### **Week 4: Many paths to Jewish womanhood**

- Abby Stein: interviews with TODAY and Alma
- Tiffany Haddish: BBC News article by Lebo Diseko, Alma article by Rebecca Pierce, interview with Jimmy Fallon on The Tonight Show

Tiffany Haddish and Abby Stein are two incredible women whose journeys through Jewish womanhood have looked different from many people’s coming of age experiences. Abby

Stein is a trans woman who was raised in an insulated Hasidic community in New York. In these interviews, she describes her experience of being raised in a thoroughly Jewish community that still does not acknowledge the existence of trans people. Stein's story offers us a perspective from someone who has been Jewish her whole life but who has not always been seen as a Jewish woman. She describes the intense gender segregation in the Hasidic communities and the ways that her life and her relationship with Judaism changed after she began her transition. Comedian and actress Tiffany Haddish, meanwhile, has been a Black woman all her life, and discovered her Jewish heritage as an adult. The articles and the interview highlight the poignancy of Haddish becoming a Bat Mitzvah on her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday and the power that Haddish's proud claiming of Judaism holds for Black Jews around the world. As a person who has always identified as Black and as a woman but claimed Judaism as an adult, Tiffany Haddish's story is a meaningful narrative of embracing Judaism once already in womanhood. In learning about Stein and Haddish's experiences as Jewish women, we will consider what being a Jewish woman looks like when you were not raised as one.

## Full List of Texts

### Week 1

"Biblical Figures." *Sefaria*, <https://www.sefaria.org/topics/category/biblical-figures>. Accessed 4 May 2021.

hooks, bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. South End Press, 2000.

Hyman, Paula E. "Jewish Feminism in the United States." *Jewish Women's Archive*, 27 Feb. 2009, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jewish-feminism-in-united-states>.

### Week 2

Adler, Rachel. "The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman." *Off Our Backs*, vol. 2, no. 6, off our backs, inc., 1972, pp. 16–17. JSTOR.

Greenberg, Blu. "In Defense of the 'Daughters of Israel.'" *Feminism and Theology*, edited by Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 229–44.

Libenson, Dan, and Lex Rofeberg. *Jewish Women's Archive - Judith Rosenbaum*. 238, <https://www.judaismunbound.com/podcast/episode-238-judith-rosenbaum>. Accessed 5 May 2021.

### Week 3

*Fran Meets A Man At Temple! | The Nanny*. 2021. YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OP5nK-m5XmQ>.

*JAP Battle (EXPLICIT) - "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend."* 2016. YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TQmo5TvZQY>.

"Jews on a Plane." *Broad City*, 3x10, 20 Apr. 2016.

*Remember That We Suffered - Feat. Patti LuPone & Tovah Feldshuh - "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend."* 2017. YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLNa-ocdryY>.

*Spend Passover With Fran! | The Nanny*. 2021. YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pS\\_IuPwpqAw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pS_IuPwpqAw).

*Where's the Bathroom? (Feat. Tovah Feldshuh) - "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend."* 2015. YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJg1zRgkbno>.

### Week 4

Diseko, Lebo. "Tiffany Haddish's Black Mitzvah and Her Journey of Jewish Discovery." *BBC News*, 16 Dec. 2019. [www.bbc.com, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50686266](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50686266).

Pierce, Rebecca. "Tiffany Haddish's Bat Mitzvah Is a Powerful Affirmation for Black Jews." *Alma*, 5 Dec. 2019, <https://www.heyalma.com/tiffany-haddishs-bat-mitzvah-is-a-powerful-affirmation-for-black-jews/>.

Stein, Abby. *From Hasidic Rabbi to Transgender Activist, Abby Stein Is Paving Her Own Way*. 20 Nov. 2019. YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v3M1aVT86w&list=PLGAOZDy50dxlMHLPGsb17QJOEU9jjtAa6&index=3>.

Stein, Abby. *Transgender Woman Chronicles Journey From Rabbi To Her True Self*. 19 Nov. 2019. YouTube,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ph0RldjPcUk&list=PLGAOZDy50dxlMHLPGsb17QJOEU9jttAa6>.

*Tiffany Haddish Is Ready to Celebrate Her Jewish Heritage with “Hava Nagila.”* 2019.

*YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBemM8qgPlo>.