

Marla Brettschneider

*Jewish Feminism and Intersectionality*

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016 (ISBN 978-1438460338)

Reviewed by Rebecca T. Alpert, 2017

**Rebecca T. Alpert**, professor of religion and senior associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Temple University, was among the first women in America ordained as a rabbi, at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1976. She is the author of five books, including *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition*, *Whose Torah? A Concise Guide to Progressive Judaism*, and *Out of Left Field: Jews and Black Baseball*. She is a recipient of Temple University's Great Teacher Award, a member of the Academic Advisory Council of Jewish Voice for Peace, and a commissioner on the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations.

\*\*\*\*\*

In *Jewish Feminism and Intersectionality*, Marla Brettschneider argues that Jewish feminism, itself a phenomenon reflective of intersectional identification through the categories of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion, has not yet dealt effectively with the critical intersection between those identities and the category of race. The Jewish feminist conversation takes place primarily in the context of Ashkenazi (Jews of European ancestry) women's experience over the past two generations. Brettschneider would like to see a new paradigm that engages the realities of Jewish feminists of color. The work is directed primarily to this Ashkenazi Jewish feminist audience, although Brettschneider's secondary concern is to alert all who do intersectional work to incorporate the perspectives of Jews, which she maintains is often not the case.

The primary argument is supported by four case studies in which Brettschneider points to the possibilities of Jewish feminist intersectionality. The first is an analysis of the life and work of Jamaica Kincaid, followed by a study of the 1950s television show *The Goldbergs*, a presentation of a queer Jewish ritual for coming out that avoids essentializing that experience, and an argument about the complexity of Jewish interracial adoption from the perspective of reproductive justice. The case studies are framed by an introduction and conclusion that focus on the importance of incorporating race as a category for Jewish feminism, and the importance of incorporating Jewish feminist inquiry in the intersectional conversation.

Brettschneider's focus in the chapter about the life and work of Jamaica Kincaid is on the concept of diaspora and its relationship to home. Brettschneider's main goal is to illustrate the necessity of thinking about the multiplicity of home, rather than finding its singular locus in Zion. Kincaid, who comes from Antigua, lives in New England, and identifies as Jewish and Afro-Caribbean, serves as a case study for Brettschneider's contention that a simple Zion-diaspora binary masks the complexity of Jewish racial identification and geographical locations.

The next chapter focuses on *The Goldbergs*, the long-running radio and early television program created by and starring Gertrude Berg as Molly Goldberg, a stereotypical female head of an

immigrant family. Brettschneider argues that the program mirrors what was happening to American Jews in post-World War II America: a (failed) project of leaving immigrant roots behind and becoming white through migration to the suburbs. Brettschneider argues that the demise of the television program--which had successfully portrayed the life of Jewish immigrants for several decades, but lost popularity and was soon canceled when the characters and their story were transferred to the suburban context--was due to a lack of interest in Jewish suburban life and the concomitant failure of Jews to thrive in their newly-minted white suburban status.

In the chapter on creating a queer Jewish ritual for coming out, Brettschneider tells the story of how a group of Jewish radical queers developed a coming-out ritual that avoided the standard problems of experiencing coming out as a single moment of discovering a new identity. Based on an understanding that identities are always evolving and changing, this coming-out (or rather the invented [be]coming-out) ritual acknowledges the importance of the spiritual dimension in conversations about changing and fluid identities and intersectionality.

The final case study examines the vexed nature of interracial adoption in relation to Jewish racial identity. The chapter struggles with coming to terms with the dueling values of celebrating the formation of multiracial Jewish families, as the author did in her own life, which in turn raises a challenge to protecting and supporting the right to reproductive justice for women of color and their biological families. It also cautions US and European-based Jewish feminists to approach Jewish women in the global setting with caution and care to avoid assumptions about and appropriation of their cultures.

These case studies, perhaps because they are so very different from one another, make a strong argument for why Ashkenazi Jewish feminists should work to incorporate race as an intersectional factor in the future. They raise provocative questions about reconceptualizing home and diaspora, understanding the historical role of Ashkenazi Jews becoming white, using the turn to spirituality to incorporate a fluid understanding of identity, and working across racial differences to deal with hard political and social issues like reproductive justice. In her conclusion, Brettschneider wisely cautions that this can't happen simply by adding Jewish women (feminists) of color to the current conversation. To make intersectionality work, she contends, a new way of approaching Jewish feminist life that starts with Jewish women across the racial spectrum must be invented. Brettschneider's case studies provide an important contribution to beginning that work.

Brettschneider's secondary concern--encouraging those who do intersectional work to incorporate the Jewish perspective--is a less persuasive dimension of the work. Although critical of second-wave feminism's lack of focus on Jewish racial identity, Brettschneider continues their lament at the absence of an awareness of (or concern about) anti-Semitism in the feminist world. Yet there are good reasons why, particularly today, anti-Semitism is not counted by the left among the looming hatreds American society faces, and Jewish feminists are not counted among groups that are working against oppression, despite Brettschneider's persuasive argument that they have something to contribute. Although anti-Semitism, along with other hatreds, is more boldly manifested in Trump's America today, it's still difficult to imagine that Jews will be the

primary targets of the hate that is cropping up so broadly in this land. I wish Brettschneider had argued the opposite: that from a position of relative strength and security, particularly in the US context, Ashkenazi Jewish feminists should use their resources to support the work of other more vulnerable groups, including (but not limited to) Jewish women of color. Given how astute her critical lens for rethinking race is, I wish it had led her to that new perspective, rather than to a reiteration of the argument that Jewish concerns are ignored or discounted by other feminists.

Brettschneider is correct in asserting that groups on the left are indeed prone to what I would argue is the false equation of Judaism and Zionism. But that perspective is perpetuated not only by leftist groups and anti-Semites but also by Zionists of all types, including the liberals with whom Brettschneider identifies. As left-leaning groups, like Black Lives Matter, have become more critical of Israel and supportive of the Palestinian cause, Jews who identify as Zionist, even liberal ones like Brettschneider, find themselves in a bind: having to choose between their intersectional values and defending the American Jewish community's support of Israel.

In the conclusion, Brettschneider seems aware of this dilemma and tries to mitigate it by arguing (persuasively) that Christian evangelicals, not American Jews, are responsible for US foreign policy that favors Israel and refuses to recognize Palestine, and for the enormous amount (\$38 billion over the next ten years) of US foreign aid that flows to that country. She is correct about the importance of the role Christian evangelicals play, but it's also important to acknowledge how American Jewish organizations like AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee) play a key role as well. Brettschneider bases her claim that the Jews aren't responsible for US governmental policy on the fact that the Jews aren't as powerful as the evangelicals. She also points out that the majority of American Jews are, like her, critical of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, as documented by the 2013 Pew Survey she references. But it's also necessary to acknowledge that the Jewish lobbying groups are powerful in their own right and not beholden to those individuals, many of whom are young and most of whom are themselves not affiliated with Jewish communal organizations, so I'm not sure the argument holds.

Brettschneider has written an important book. The critique of anti-Semitism on the left and the argument about American Jewish support for Israel is merely a distraction from the volume's central idea, that Jewish feminism today is far too Ashkenazi-centric and needs to confront its own racism. Through her strong analysis and illuminating case studies, Brettschneider is making a vital contribution by encouraging Jewish feminists to work to create an American Judaism that acknowledges all of its constituencies, and seeks alliances with non-Jewish groups in the US who are thinking in new ways about intersectionality. Nothing could be more crucial for American Judaism today.