



the
Liberation of
the
Yiddisha Mama



by

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No more second-class balebosta!



There is a certain kind of woman who empties ash trays into paper bags at parties. One never knows what to make of her. On the one hand, you're glad to see her take the responsibility. On the other hand you wish she'd sit down and relax. I'm one of those women and I've become self-conscious. It's a hell of a problem - if I empty I'm embarrassed, if I don't I feel like a slob. Which way, Susan B. Anthony, to liberation?

Mothers serve - all the time. It's part of the brainwashing and it's very difficult to unlearn. The Jewish mother, the currently most maligned (smother love), is having a really rough time. "Do it yourself, Irving" is the magic incantation she chants to herself at least 10 times a day, not unlike Norman Vincent Peale's "think positive" or Emile Coue's "every day in every way I'm getting better and better." It is in fact a learning process. A becoming familiar with a thought, digesting it, in order to be able to spew it out when the moment demands.

If you're laughing, stop. This is a life and death struggle - no laughing matter. Look at the space the Yiddisha Mama has occupied in our literature in the last 20 years. Has she not frequently "graced" the best seller lists? "Mrs. Portnoy" has become a part of the language. Everyone knows what that means. But, I ask: why? Why is the Jewish mother the subject of so many books? And why has she been portrayed as a joke or a monster? Who will speak for her? How did she get that way? I speak for her for I am she and she is me and I too am a victim and I am trying to liberate myself. Will I ever be able to simply say "the coffee's on the stove" and not worry about not getting up?

To understand her, one must first look at the motivating dynamic from which she functions. It is the balebosta syndrome, an ancient, deeply rooted, devastating concept. And it has grown hand in hand with the tradition. A balebosta is a competent, energetic, capable, frugal, efficient, peaceful, clean, compassionate, always available Jewish mother. The burden of this concept is so heavy no one can gracefully live up to it. The emotional load therefore produces guilt. This is the prime tyranny of being a balebosta, and it is an unspoken law, no Jewish home should be without one. There are always things yet to be done, therefore she is never finished or there is always something lacking in her.

The new women are aware of this and are trying to get off that old track. Thus, the big fat compliment, "you can eat off her floors," the apotheosis of the balebosta's achievement, is getting a different response. "Who wants to eat off floors, especially when paper plates are so cheap?"

Women are saying NO. They are refusing to be sucked into this ancient double standard that has made monsters of their mothers. It is with righteous anger but also with profound respect and sympathy for their predecessors that today's women are behaving as they are.

Do not make the mistake that the Yiddisha Mama is dead. She is very much alive and well and living all around you. Not the old stereotype, for among this woman's greatest achievements are her adaptability. A detail not acknowledged enough by Jewish men. You can't recognize her because she looks like everyone else. She's in jobs (you know the type - most dependable and remembers details), in schools (as teacher, student and PTA member), and a lot of them are in the Women's Liberation Movement.

My purpose is not to set the Yiddisha Mama apart from other women, but to try to explore those nuances of difference which formed this particular sensibility. It is my own and I know it well.

Nor do I mean to imply that the Yiddisha Mama's struggle for liberation is more difficult than that of other women. Never. They are all very much related. But I would not presume to speak for all women because every ethnic group has its own hangups. An Italian or Irish woman has a different story because of the role Catholicism played in her life. And a black Mama, with the history of U.S. slavery and the Mammy stuff, evolved with her unique differences. The Protestant woman, formed from the puritanical, "godly, sober, righteous" ethic, is something else again. I sympathize and identify with all the stories, and all of them are getting told, but only a woman who grew up in a particular cultural ambiance with its respective tribal taboos and felt the pain in her own gut can truly speak, and then only for those with a similar background. It would be like the presumption of Mrs. Reuben's son David, the doctor, telling "everything you always wanted to know about sex but were afraid to ask," as if he knows, and speaks for all America, instead of just speaking for a narrow segment of Middle-class Jewish, Freudian, penis-vagina thinking. As though other facts of life in the country's bedrooms don't exist. Since it's not kosher by his standards, he turns his back on it and calls it immature or unhealthy.

(But, he tells us, Coca Cola is "the best douche available" - that's healthy? With five teaspoons of sugar - shame on you, David.) It is a though Kinsey and Masters and Johnson are liars. And this book is a best seller yet!

The Yiddisha Mama as a particular kind of protective woman is by no means limited to the poor shtetl wife with the kerchief on her head. In the early part of this century, when so many of this type were living on the Lower East Side, there was also a very different looking woman, also a Yiddisha Mama, living on the Upper East Side seemingly worlds apart. They were the rich German-banking Jews of "Our Crowd." The things the women had in common were greater than might seem apparent because of the vast difference in their life styles. Both were involved with the balebosta syndrome, only its execution was different. One could certainly "eat off the floors" in the homes of Mrs. Seligman, Mrs. Warburg, and Mrs. Lehman without their cleaning them. It is the implications of that statement, the concern with keeping the regular rituals operating, which give the family the

sense of strength as well as the sense of place in the group. In spite of these aristocratic families living a really “good life,” they were not in Mrs. Astor’s New York society. They kept apart. Anti-Semitism felt the same on east 70th Street as it did on East 7th Street.

In general there seems to be a correlation between the amount of rigid structure in the Jewish home and the amount of anti-Semitism around. After the organized mass murder of six million Jews by the Nazis, the whole world has changed (except Russia), and especially the United States, in its acceptance of Jews. The lifting of the restrictions, particularly in the colleges, was a great significance for a people who value scholarship.

The jokes of our Yiddisha Mama about my son, the doctor, came from her particular gestalt, a way of life through her men. If one of the group has status, wealth, etc., it enhances the whole group. Her position, rich or poor, was totally dependent on the men. And among the things the women have in common was the

strength they gave the men and the protection they gave the boys. A Jewish Mama never wanted her son to fight - the odds against the Jew were always too great, there were always more of them, the goyim. It is also part of the Jewish mother’s system of “making nice” and part of the reason for the survival of the Jews. With all the spiritual help god can give, nothing can compare with the immediacy of Mama’s warm arms when the moment demands.

So how did our Yiddisha Mama get that way? It wasn’t only the strong religious closeness for protection against the outside. It was her position inside as well. To find out we must look at the crucial moments of her life, how she was looked upon and how she related to her God. By looking at her role in birth, death, marriage, divorce, love, and sex we see clearly the Jewish woman was second class. She was less, a lot less than the Jewish man. And all through her life, on a daily basis, this was made clear. This degradation of women became an integral part of the Jewish ethos and was very much responsible for the tight knit unit which meant the survival of the Jewish culture. The rules and regulations of man’s superiority to woman were so clearly defined as to leave no ambiguity whatsoever. Need I point out that men wrote the rules, laws, books and scriptures? And Jews lived by the written word. The women had no voice.

And today, the voices we hear whining about Mama belong to Philly and Danny and Brucie, not a Shirley to be found anywhere. And do those sons ever tell, or even know, the truth about those details which created their mothers? Do they ever tell us about those phenomena that molder her, the built-in insults which violated her humanity?

Let’s take the most obvious, the biggest thing Jews are known for, Talmudic scholarship. There were no women students studying the scrolls. That was denied them. That was for men only. Women were not supposed to have heads for such

“deep” stuff. They had the genes to transmit to boy babies in their wombs but somehow the men figured those genes (with the brains) didn’t work when a vagina went with them. Maybe!

When I say there is no ambiguity about the role of Jewish women as second class, I’m not stretching the least bit for a point. The authorized daily morning prayer men have been reciting for many thousands of years and still recite today is: “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast not made me a woman.” And the woman, who isn’t really expected to pray in the morning unless she’s very old and very religious, says, “... who hast made me according to thy will” and we know what that is.

As horrid as this morning prayer is - let’s stay with it a moment. When the man relates to his God before starting the day, it’s a big deal. He faces Jerusalem, winds the phylacteries (leather straps) on his arm and head, adorns himself with his tallis (prayer shawl) with the magnificent knotted fringe and its poetic symbolism (infinite connection with the Divine), does a few very gentle knee bends, begins his melodic chanting, and rocks back and forth a little. This involvement is specifically for men. Only. The rituals of daily divine worship were not permitted her. If a woman were to envelop herself in the tallis and go through the same motions she would be looked upon as though she were out of her head. If you think this is tallis envy, you’re right!

Did they mean, then, that God was man’s business? If so, was that the reason she was not permitted direct contact with the accouterments of orthodoxy? Is that why, in the synagogue, she had to sit upstairs in the balcony, or if the architecture didn’t permit, downstairs behind a gauze curtain separating her from the men? I wonder if that is why she couldn’t sit near the ark where the scrolls were kept?

The Jewish woman had no article of faith she could call her own. In the whole elaborate construction of man-made rules and regulations that governed her life, only two rituals belonged to women.

The first took place on Friday evening at sundown. It ushered in the Sabbath and really fell to her by default. It was originally utilitarian, actually, because at sundown it was usual to light candles or oil lamps. But at that time of day on Fridays the men were on their way to the synagogue so there really was no one around to do it but Mama. The simple blessings she recited after lighting the candles was of such little significance it was not even written into the scriptures. That tiny ritual was throwing her a bone. Theodor H. Gaster tells us in “Festivals of the Jewish Year” that “popular fancy supposes that neglect of this duty will be punished by death in childbirth.” Another put-down. As though she needed any more motivation. She had to work like hell for that little reward because only after everything was done, the braided bread baked, the white cloth laid, the house and kids cleaned up, as well as herself and tomorrow’s dinner cooked too (cooking is not allowed on the Sabbath) only then could she recite the blessing. Let me tell you, those women hustled. No

balebosta would be shamed by not meeting that deadline. No time clock is as threatening as that sun falling. No sir!

The second ritual was hers alone because she menstruated. It took place in the mikvah (ritual bath) before she totally immersed herself in the water. Here God existed for her, but not really, because after reciting the benediction, her real purpose in being there was to clean her (dirty - sic) self from the blood of her menses, thereby preparing herself for her husband. Her, you should excuse the expression, "servant of the species" function was operating here. The Jewish male's attitude toward the menstrual period is one of revulsion, another way to really build confidence in a woman.

The rule is, after the flow the woman must wait seven days before going to the mikvah. For people who live by the Book, there was no cheating either, because even if no one outside the bedroom would know, God would. Besides, with the kind of guilt Jews live with, those iron-clad taboos had enormous power. The Talmud devotes a lot of pages to this particular one and not until a full week has passed, when not the slightest shadow of a doubt remained about her "cleanliness," could they cohabit. Why Jewish men felt so repelled by this I cannot fathom. I guess 12 days would be the average for abstinence, and their deprivation was also involved. (This seems to have involved a kind of excessive protectiveness on the part of the men, for they shunned contact with their women during the days of her flow to the point of not permitting her even to hand them anything.) Perhaps there was something particularly unique about the physiology of Mediterranean women a couple of centuries ago. Or as some anthropologists have pointed out, the most rigid restrictions are sometimes placed upon the most desired objects.

Some studies of female sexuality have indicated that many women feel more sexual immediately after their period than at other times. If any of those feelings emerged in our Jewish Mother at that time, she was out of luck. Too bad for you, Gitl. What you feel doesn't count. Forget it. You've got to wait seven days after the flow has stopped before you can even go to the mikvah, let alone enjoy yourself. But if the juice of your femaleness is commanding our attention because it's there, and if your lubricating glands won't let you forget it because they don't know the rules - then you had to suppress those feelings for centuries. You hid them and were ashamed of them. But the modern women have learned from one of the great talmudic scholars of our time, named Sigmund, that that's no good. Repression and frustration that is harbored causes resentment and hostility. It builds up and if it doesn't come out one way, it might another (like making monsters) or else eat you up inside (headaches, ulcers, etc.). The new sisters have learned the lesson. They speak the unspeakable and they are not afraid of those feelings. Nor do they think there is anything wrong with masturbation either. They don't believe God is watching.

If ever there was a ritual that should have belonged to the mistress of the house, it was the one called havdallah, meaning separation. It is the most

magnificent of them all. Performed after sundown on Saturday, it separates the day of the rest and worship from the other days of the week. One of its purposes is to make a distinction between the sacred and the profane. The objects blessed are a spice container, a cup of wine, and a braided candle. Not only should she have had this one because it is so beautiful, but it would seem altogether fitting and proper that since she had the ritual to usher in the Sabbath, she should also have the one to usher it out.

But not only did those mean old men not let her thank God for “the fruit of the vine... divers kind of spices, and... the light of the fire” (this symbolism embodies so much, it was her rightful chance for a participating relationship to the cosmic pattern), but after the man performed the ceremony he passed the cup of wine around to the men and children. Not to the adult women. How do you think that made Mama feel? As if the fact was not humiliating enough, the fancy around it added to the wipe-out. Again I go to Theodor Gaster: “Women may not partake of it; indeed, a superstition asserts that if they do so, they will grow mustaches!” Some joke.

The fear of persecution played a big part in the construction of the cohesive system the Jews adopted. The rules of conduct supplied a sense of order as an antidote against the chaos outside. They were an alien people living among enemies. Those wise old men who set up the rules knew that Mama was the key figure (and that’s why I’m so mad at them - they knew her strength but robbed her of her dignity). It was her responsibility to keep the community, through the family, together. They circumscribed the radius of her existence, which was a way to protect her from the enemy. That’s great. And it was also a way to keep her an obedient wife. That’s terrible. We know what happened to the Black Mammy when she went into Mister Charlie’s house. The other, the exotic, the forbidden, has always been sexually attractive and no one will deny what contact does. It breaks down rules. My beef is, why didn’t they give the Jewish woman more latitude within that orbit?

One can sympathize with the need for tight group control when survival is at stake. History has shown that those Jewish groups which did not employ it perished. Therefore a sense of identity with the group becomes crucial. That is why the feeling for community permeates so much of Jewish culture.

This sense of belonging, with personal identification, is the thing most lacking in our world today. It is not strange that Paul Goodman, who comes from the talmudic tradition, writes so many feeling books about alienation and community. The young people who gathered at Woodstock found this communal thing there, and it is so unusual in our lives that that occasion became historic. The idea is not necessarily Jewish. It’s just that they have used it to an extreme and other people have found it offensive when they carry it outside.

But this community business had an important effect on Mama, our chief concern. Where and how she fit and felt. One must go into it because this emphasis on the community created a de-emphasis on the one-to-one relationship. It was interwoven into the total fabric of life. How it worked in terms of sex and love on a private level is of great relevance. The talmud prescribes that men should satisfy their wives sexually. Es steht geschrieben. It stands written. Kinsey tells us that married Jews have sexual intercourse more often than the national average. Interesting. Let's take a square look at the Jewish attitude toward sex and see how it affected Mama's psyche. Sex is a necessary, delightful evil is what the position comes down to. It is more functional than romantic. Like eating and sleeping, it should be automatically available. One shouldn't be without it, yet one shouldn't waste time on it either. The Hasidim are very direct about "hide not from thine own flesh." Jews like their young to marry and settle down. They nag at them until they do. Adult single people worry and weaken the group. There is grave concern that time will be wasted in wishing and longing and searching. Jews were impatient with that sort of thing; it did not fit into their ethos. Love, grand passion, those are luxuries for people who are secure. Not for serious scholars.

With the woman's position in this patriarchal society second class, we know whose whims will be met and who is conditioned to serve, to emotionally support. Mama kept the house, cooked the meals, and spread her legs according to the rules. Her feelings were not considered. Her husband was chosen for her, her duties were laid out - fit or fail. Faking orgasms didn't begin in August 1970 when it was first written about in a mass publication, the Ladies Home Journal. One can guess at servitude in the dark when people are not equal, particularly when their lives are controlled by the fear of offending their God. When self-sacrifice has become an intrinsic part of the Jewish character, why should Mama be different under the covers? Remember, her husband's view of her has already conditioned her view of herself. His expectations are to be fulfilled, not hers. Her mother didn't teach her she was important. She doesn't know she might, let alone dare, assert herself in the most delicately balanced area of human contact. If she permitted domination everywhere else in her life, may we not assume she was consistent?

The total concept of love is involved here. God is love is a Christian idea, not a Jewish one. The Jewish God is a taskmaster always searching for proof of one's worth. He is never indulgent. In the daily morning prayer man recites: "At all times let a man fear God as well in private as in public." Not love God, mind you, but fear Him. The conspicuous absence of joy in the Jewish structure must surely be related. In the literature when a woman is praised, it is for being a dutiful wife, for taking care of her family well. How practical can practical be?

This idea is so beautifully grasped in a song in "Fiddler on the Roof." Tevye asks his wife, "Do you love me?" She sings back, "What do you mean, do I love you?" with the intonation implying you must be crazy. He: "I said do you love me?" "I'm paraphrasing. She: "I've been living with you for 25 years, haven't I?" with a look that says what has love got to do with it?

Shall we look at divorce, Jewish style? A friend of mine got one last month and he said, "You wouldn't believe it, the way it degrades women." "I believe it," I said. Getting a get, the word for divorce, is a highly symbolic affair between a man and God. A most convoluted dialogue takes place between the special rabbi who grants the decree and the man seeking it. It is a question and answer construction worked in such a way as to prove the wife has failed in her task. The purpose is to make clear to God, with an official scribe duly recording everything in the most beautiful calligraphy, that under no circumstances is this man acting against his own free will, that nowhere in his mind or thought has he been influenced by any man or woman to take this step. This absolves him of having made a mistake and of any guilt whatsoever. It's all laid on the woman. To top it off, there is a symbolic chasing her out of his house they must enact. No wonder so many Jewish women are getting divorced these days, and not by rabbis either.

Our case for the Jewish Mama begins at birth. No fuss is made over girl babies. If a boy is born that's another story. While the mother of the boy is lying in kimpit, the period of recovery after birth, all kinds of activity goes on about her preparing for the circumcision celebration which happens eight days after the birth. The infant boy is taken into the fold with an elaborate ritualistic blood-letting that has the earmarks of a pagan offering to the gods. Sir James Frazer has taught us the most valued object is sacrificed. Jews tell us it is hygiene. Maybe.

More to the point is how little girls are affected by the prevailing attitudes they absorb. She sees magical festivities when boys are born. And she sees the same thing happen at puberty, at thirteen when boys have a bar mitzvah, the passage to manhood. (Very recently, among modern Jews, particularly in the suburbs, a bas mitzvah has been instituted for girls at 13, but it is not taken seriously. It is, after all, not functional in the total religion, but I suppose it is an attempt at some sort of correction.)

Among the many reasons the birth of boys had such value is the Jewish attitude toward death. The living are supposed to remember the dead. Death is made easier if one is certain Kaddish will be said. It was not uncommon, if a man were so unfortunate as to have had only daughters, for him to adopt a son so he would have someone to pray for him after he died. Alfred Kazin in "A Walker in the City" gives the full flavor: "My father always introduced me around, very shyly but with unmistakable delight, as his Kaddish. What an intense pride that word carried for him..." This about a man who was not devout.

One wishes those old writers of the good Book has been a little more influenced by the Greek god, Dionysus, so there might have been a little more fun about making love and babies. As it is, all women living in the Judaeo-Christian tradition have had to suffer the instructions the wise Jews had God utter to Eve in Genesis 3:16: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception: in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children, and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule

over thee.” Talk about male chauvinists, wow! Why couldn’t she have been told to bring forth in joy? If she had, the conditioning about childbirth would certainly have had an enormous effect on those contractions of the uterus at the crucial moments.

I can hear some men say: pain is pain. But it simply isn’t true. The feelings and attitudes surrounding pain are crucial in how it is handled by the body. Specifically, it has been proven in an overwhelming majority of cases that child-bearing pains are enormously alleviated by unequivocal thinking. The new women aren’t buying the old myths.

What was in the heads of those men anyhow? Why did they have to lay the apple on her? Why were they punishing her? Was it jealousy of her giving life? Or was it their guilt for enjoying sex? Or was it both?

Another myth women aren’t buying any more is that “biological necessity” line (destiny and/or achievement is not limited to child-bearing) which flowered in the dark 1950s. It gathered momentum from Helen Deutsch’s two volumes of Freudian “Psychology of Women” with its presumptive mistakes compounding the errors of her master. One wonders if Freud got those ideas from the old Talmudic scholars who also believed that the longing for motherhood is the most powerful instinct of women. Why didn’t they ask the women, instead of telling them what they felt?

Now that women are in revolt they don’t have to wait to be asked. They’re stating it loud and clear. A baby sucking on a mother’s tit, or a grown man for that matter, is not the answer to her fulfillment. Nobody’s knocking it, it’s just being placed in its correct context, merely a part of the whole. Women are tired of being over-simplified.

With the structure breaking down, what happens to the Yiddisha Mama? She’s trying to be herself: first class. And it’s rough because the men must become liberated too.

When I hear the Blacks talk about 300 years of oppression, I nod and think of three millennia of oppression. But I do not weep, I speak. And I wonder, how can I employ the heroic courage of my female ancestors to give my three daughters my Yiddishkeit (Jewishness) without violating their humanity. I wonder about that!

Could a woman in one generation go from a feeling of servitude to a feeling of self-esteem? I used to think I liked to serve until I did some very hard searching and discovered I only like to serve some of the time and love being served some of the time. But it doesn’t come natural. I’m still nervous. Shouldn’t I be getting up?

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