



THE JWC NEW MOON

Purim/Pesach 5766
March 2006

Rosh Chodesh Kislev:

Jewish Women's Writings: by Pat Cluss

One of the JWC's oldest and most popular programs, Jewish Women's Writings, always held in conjunction with our rosh chodesh Kislev celebration, once again provided an opportunity for the readers and writers amongst us to share our favorites, engage in spirited conversation, and eat pastries! On a cold December 1st evening, we gathered in host Lois Rubin's living room. We began the evening with the new JWC opening ritual that Malke (Frank) prepared for us. The new ritual combines the familiar (introductions in Hebrew and English linking our names with those of our mothers, grandmothers, daughters and granddaughters; remembering women we have loved whose yahrzeits fall in Kislev) and the new (poems and songs) to

greet the new month. Lois got us started by reading a selection from her newly-published book and a poem from a collection she is working on during her sabbatical. Her contribution sparked spirited conversation about personal experiences and opinions on the topic of the increasing place of Jewish women writers in American literature over the past few decades, as well as the barriers women and Jewish women writers still face. A spirited socio-political discussion followed!

Back on track, others shared interesting articles from *Lilith*, poetry from a recently deceased Israeli poet, and paragraphs about women and anger. Elizabeth Gordon and Judy Sanders thrilled us with dramatic readings of their own work, some humorous and some sobering.

The evening ended with our traditional picture-taking to record the fun—this time an impromptu portraiture by Lois' husband Ira. See the next few pages for some selections from the evening.

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WRITERS & READERS
AT KISLEV



Highlights:

- Hamentashen vs. Latkes
- Our own women writers
- Pesach Women's Seder coming up!

Writings by Our Jewish Women:

Yidische Epithalamion *

by Judith Sanders

[*A marriage poem. Spenser's (1595) epithalamion invites nymphs to the celebration.]

**O! ye fair maidens
scattering rose petals and sing-
ing sweet odes
to Hymen—
Ye all can just go home.
You didn't bring a coat?
In those gauzy togas,
you'll catch cold.
Take, take a few *regelach*.
—the caterer, that *goniff*,
shouldn't get leftovers—
for your old *mammaleh*
worrying by the window.
Such *shayneh maidels*,
her heart must break
every time she looks on you!
Must be a long subway ride
back to Olympus
so pish before you go.
(We got here a ladies room
fancy-shmancy enough
for even a maiden's
pink tuches.)
Oy! fair *maidels*,
we don't need you here.
We won't be twining ribbons**

**around maypoles
or wasting good rice
when in this sad world
children go hungry.
So you might as well rest up
for your next job
maybe in the church next door.
Here we are eating and danc-
ing, yes,
before getting down to busi-
ness.
We know the others vow
to love and to cherish
till divorce do us part—
but centuries of troubles
have sharpened our wits.
We know what we promise:
to wash and to dry
to hammer and to nail
to tear and to mend
to joke and to weep
to fight and make up
to mourn and to dance
to curse and to praise
to work and to work
and work some more**

**to fix the broken world
and then to retire
to Florida—and above all
to tend the *goldeneh kin-
derleh*
—who from the muck
of our ancient suffering
spring like shining mira-
cles—
and let them go
off to medical school
or California
from where
they never call
—those ingrates.
No, even today, we won't be
starry eyed amid rose petals.
Instead, we'll stomp the glass
that held the sweet wine
and help each other
over the shards.”**



More:

Who You Callin' Ugly?

by Elizabeth Boltson Gordon

Reprinted from: http://song-of-the-siren.net/zine/2003_07_01/ugly.html



She really had us going. Wearing rags, sleeping on the floor, scrubbing and mending before dawn, after midnight. We were taken in, my sisters and me, who wouldn't be? I'm here to tell you - she was one cool customer. Oow, I'd like to go back and smack that innocent, butter-wouldn't-melt-in-my-mouth smile off her face.

From the beginning, it wasn't equal. Me and my sisters, we're what you might call physiognometrically challenged. All right, our faces stop clocks. Especially Gertrude's. Is that our fault? And ask yourself, if you looked like me, would YOU be overflowing with the milk of human kindness? With THIS nose? Even my mother - who married her father, making us stepsisters - would say, "You can call my daughters many things, but you can't call them good-looking!" Our own mother! And there SHE was - peaches-and-cream complexion, big blue eyes, curly blonde hair. Let's just say the odds were in her favor from the get-go.

Naturally, we got sucked into the excitement about the ball. A chance to meet the prince! Everyone knew he was looking for a bride. I mean, we might not be the best-looking girls in town - all right, everyone says we're the worst-looking - but we were still young women, same as anyone else. We had the same hopes, the same dreams - is that so ridiculous? So, we did what we could.

We hired hairdressers, seamstresses, makeup artists, to make us look our best.

Of course, she, the girl we called Cinderella - and we meant nothing by that, you understand, to us, it was just her name - helped out. That was her job, after all. Yes, she ironed our clothes, shined our shoes, picked up after us, ran out and got the gallons of Clearasil we relied on (not that it did much good). And maybe we did laugh when she said she wanted to go to the ball. Would you have done different? I mean, a girl who sleeps on a grate in the cinders wants to go to a prince's ball - who could take that seriously?

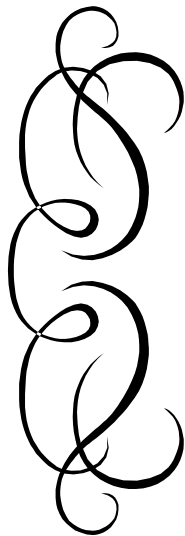
So she calls in the big guns. I mean, here we are, spending a fortune on dressmakers and hairdressers, and she invokes this fairy godmother person and is set in five minutes - perfect hair, beautiful dress, golden coach. You call that fair?

When the unknown beauty ran into the ballroom, we gasped like everyone else. People say we must've been blind or stupid not to have recognized someone we saw every day. They don't realize how sneaky she was. Would YOU have recognized some breathtaking vision if you had left her, not an hour before, on the floor, weeping, in filthy rags? We were taken in with the rest of the crowd. I guess we underesti-

mated her. I mean, who could imagine all the tricks up her sleeve?

And the shoe business. I mean, here again, we thought it was legit, that the playing field was level. When the Prince came with that shoe on the velvet cushion, we each tried hard to cram our size 12s - actually Gertrude's are 14s - into the itty-bitty thing. (You may have heard that Gertrude actually sliced off a toe or two. She does get overexcited.) Turns out it was rigged from the beginning. It was hers, her shoe! You could have knocked me over when she reaches behind the grate, pulls out the matching one! Oh, she was crafty. We didn't stand a chance.

And now this invitation. Reception at the palace. Princess Ella, as she calls herself, requests our presence. If I know her, she expects a big forgiveness scene, all kissy-kissy. I shouldn't give her the satisfaction. But she says she wants to show us around, that we should consider moving into the royal apartments. That we'd have free use of the golden coach - and don't think I didn't notice the cute coachman that goes with it. So maybe I should give her a chance, let bygones be bygones. After all, she is our sister - well, stepsister - and I always had a soft spot for the girl.



More Jewish Women's Writing:

Shadai

by: Bracha Leora bat Devorah / Sue Fenster

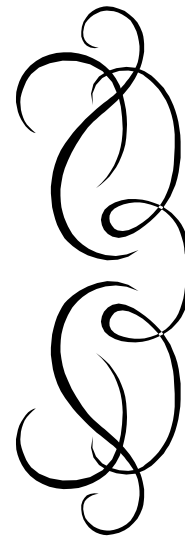
I breathe in Your breath.

I breathe out my fear.

The sssss upbeat of breathing in, nostrils chilly.

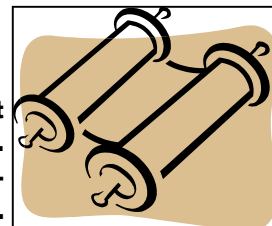
The warm downward breathing out melts away illusory terrors, almost real even as they disperse invisibly, melting into Your breeze.

**Turn me toward change
Shadaili, that I may move toward
shifting nothingness,
Sheltered in the rich emptiness
of Your release.**



Joint JWC / Temple Sinai Women's Shabbat 2006

On Shabbat, March 4, approximately 30 women, men and children came together at the Labor Zionist Center to celebrate our annual collaborative woman's Shabbat. There was *ruach* (spirit) in the room as Malke Frank, Monica Cellio, and Julie Newman led us in the blessings, readings, and songs accompanying Parsha Terumah. Torah readers Julie Newman, Aya Betensky, Joan Charlson, Arlyn Gilboa and Laurie Chikofsky chanted / read like pros. Sophie Weaver called members of the congregation for aliyot for their love of gardening, building, sewing, weaving, and other activities related to the portion. Laura Horowitz challenged us to find meaning in the parsha that describes the explicit (and I mean very explicit) details of how the Israelites were to build the *aron*, the Ark of the Covenant, in the desert with precious materials gathered and arranged just so. Larissa Myaskovsky read the haftorah about Solomon's building of the Temple with the haftorah blessings before and after chanted by all. As usual, Julie's cantorial leadership helped us fill the room with beautiful women's and men's voices to enhance the spirituality of that sunny Shabbat morning.



We learned later that a *shechecheyanu* was due to several participants: Arlyn Gilboa for reading Torah (flawlessly) for the first time; Aya Betensky for putting on and wearing a tallit for the first time—one that belonged to her husband's father; and Lois Rubin for holding the Torah for the very first time. *Yasher Koach, All!!*

Member News

Barbara S. is currently enrolled in the *Morei Derekh* training program, under the auspices of Yedidya Center for Jewish Spiritual Direction (<http://www.yedidyacenter.org>)

Spiritual Direction is a relationship in which one dedicates a regular period of time to the exploration of the divine presence in one's life. Spiritual companions (or "directors") support individuals in recognizing their unfolding experience of God's presence in daily life as they seek to deepen their relationship with the Holy. This practice is a potent tool for helping individuals notice the sacred dimension that underlies all life, open to experiences of oneness, and recognize the ways in which they may be guided or accompanied along their life journey. During the second year of the program students are asked to offer spiritual guidance to a limited number of directees. If ! you are seeking to affirm and deepen your spiritual life, please contact Barbara at 412-389-XXXX for more information.



What's new?

We like to know what is happening with our members. E-mail us at jwcpgh@yahoo.com with your news

Judith F. and her husband **Seymour** have moved to an apartment in Johnstown -- 305 Southmond Blvd. She welcomes visitors.

Elizabeth G. and her husband **Jerry** are grandparents again! **Myles Wechsler G.** was born on 1/3/06 to delighted parents **Assaf G.** and **Robyn W.**

Judy G. sadly reports that her beloved dog **Augie** died in February. Judy says, "I'm doing okay and also feeling terribly sad. I'm glad that he didn't suffer but this morning I am working at home and really feeling his absence." Many of us came to know **Augie** over the years and understand how she will miss her devoted friend.

Sherri R. has a piece called "Tumult: Forward in Every Direction" on display at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts. The Exhibit, called "Up Over and Down Under" is a cooperative effort between the Fiberarts Guild of Pittsburgh and the Australian Textile Arts and Surface Design Association. The show runs through April 23rd and then travels to Australia.

Thanks to contributors to this edition of the newsletter:

◇ Sue Fenster ◇ Elizabeth Boltson Gordon ◇ Judith Sanders ◇ Laura Horowitz ◇ Pat Cluss

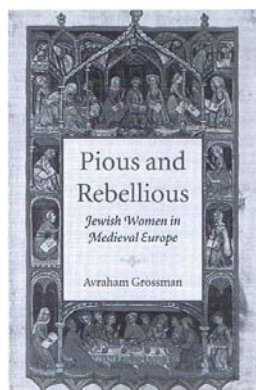
Have an idea for an article? E-mail Pat Cluss at clusspa@upmc.edu

Medieval Jewish Women Make Great Role Models

Book review by C. Devora Hammer

Reprinted with permission from the fall 2005 issue of the magazine *Lilith: independent, Jewish & frankly feminist*.
Subscribe and read more at www.Lilith.org.

It is hard to imagine a book about medieval Jewish women being a bestseller, but in Israel this book was. In *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe* by Avraham Grossman (Brandeis University Press, \$29.95), there is no retelling of



potboiling stories, or unearthing of scandal. Grossman is a cautious historian, refusing to make grand statements about his sources, or to speculate about events he cannot know. So what makes this book so compelling? Why did I find this dry history so difficult to put down? The answer, I think, is this: Grossman loves these ancient Jewish women, and indeed, there is much to love.

Often married off in infancy, and certainly between the ages of 12 and 16, the girls/women Grossman describes were frequently left by their husbands for years at a time while the men engaged in international trade. As a result, the women supported their households and raised their children alone, and in this they excelled. The primary activity of Jews in Europe was money lending, and the women, too, ran loan portfolios, sometimes with their husbands and families, some-

times on their own. Many amassed considerable personal wealth, and prestige as well, because women's businesses created opportunities for alliances with the gentile ruling classes.

Economics, says Grossman, is the key to understanding the status of Jewish women in the years 1000-1300. The significant advances made by women in this period can be linked to their financial power, as well as the status of women in gentile Europe. The changes in family law during this era were most far-reaching. Beginning in the seventh century, Jewish women were able to obtain a divorce against their husbands' will and take their own money as well as their marriage contract settlement with them when they divorced. This rule lasted 500 years, during which period the breakup of marriages became so rampant that rabbis began issuing a series of increasingly draconian monetary penalties on women when they exercised the power to force divorce on their husbands. Despite these financial discouragements, women's apparent desire to be separated from their husbands continued unabated. This is remarkable both because it showed women were confident in their ability to support themselves, and because it was in such contrast to the situation in the Christian world, where divorce was nonexistent.

The Jewish ban against polygyny

was enacted in Western Europe in this era, perhaps in response to married men traveling to other lands for business, and taking second wives while away. The first wives were often abandoned, and the rabbis abhorred such behavior. A twin ruling forbade a man to divorce a wife against her will. The net result was that for a couple of centuries, a woman could divorce her husband against the man's will, but not vice versa!

These powerful women, 1000 years ago, supported themselves, ran financial empires, and could unilaterally dissolve a marriage.

Also at this time, the penalties against men for abusing their wives greatly increased, and included imposing corporal punishment, "cutting off his hand," and excommunicating the abusive husband.

In the spiritual realm, Western European women battled for, and won, the right to say blessings over rituals which they were permitted, but not obligated, to perform—for example, the blessing over *lulav*

(cont'd from the previous page)

and *etrog* on Sukkot. In Germany, women acted as *sandakiot*—holding their sons or grandsons during the circumcision. Rabbinic leaders fought to end this practice, as an immodest intrusion of a woman into the synagogue. But for a long time, the women prevailed, perhaps because the infants' fathers were so often away.

On the negative side, rules regarding modesty and restricting the activities of the menstruant

evening. She taught other women how to pray and embellish the prayer with music." Women like Dulca played critical roles in the persecution of the Jews in the medieval era, becoming martyr figures, encouraging their husbands and children not to give in to the rioters' demands to convert. This also increased their prestige in the eyes of their husbands and leaders.

There is not a single work written by women from this era which

women, of their drive to survive, and succeed? Why are they not as impressive as works of philosophy and mysticism?

Ashkenazi Jews exist today because of the resourcefulness of the women Grossman describes, their financial genius, their flexibility in the face of constantly changing circumstances, their refusal to submit to the Christian oppressors. The voices of medieval Jewish women sing to us today in our blood—in our very existence.

"What of those money lending ledgers? Why are they not evidence of the creativity of [medieval Jewish] women, of their drive to survive, and succeed?" —Reviewer C. Devora Hammer

were strengthened in this era. Partly due to the influence of the Jewish mystics and pietists, the rulings may also have been related to the atmosphere disdaining sexuality amongst the Christians. Whatever its causes, the new rules limited women's ability to participate in Jewish ritual life, but not in business, so it is not surprising that it was in the latter area that they concentrated their energies. Grossman has a particular soft spot for one woman, Dulca, murdered by Christian rioters, and elegized by her husband in a moving poem. She "was among those who assisted in providing supplies for the synagogue, and...visited [there] frequently, taking care to arrive early for prayer and to leave the synagogue late, so as not to make her prayer appear as if it were a burden...[she took] care to pray daily, morning and

Grossman has uncovered, not in law, mysticism, or kabala. He is shocked by this, particularly since creative writing by both Christian and Muslim women has survived. He theorizes that women's work was centered around the home, and that, in a hostile Diaspora, bearing children and keeping them alive to adulthood was immensely difficult, and has recognized spiritual value. There were no equivalents to nunneries where Jewish women could immerse themselves in learning and creating. They were involved in household and business management immediately upon leaving childhood.

I disagree with Grossman that nothing in writing survives from our female Jewish medieval ancestors. What of those money lending ledgers? Why are they not evidence of the creativity of

NOTE: In the process of requesting permission from *Lilith* to reprint this article, we heard from the author of the review, C. Devora "Viva" Hammer, who lives in Washington, D.C. She said, "Susan W. Schneider (*Lilith* editor) passed on your request to use my review... in your [newsletter] and I welcome that. I would love to hear what came out of the discussion and what parts of the review were most useful." Any comments about the article? We will pass them on to her. E-mail us at jwcpgh@yahoo.com.





Part of Pittsburgh's Pesach Experience



*celebrate a special woman-focused seder
with the Jewish Women's Center!*

Sunday, April 16, 2005 at 6:00 PM

Labor Zionist Center, 6328 Forbes Ave.

This year a ***Chocolate Seder!*** How could you miss it?

Everyone bat/bar-mitzvah age & older is welcome.

Bring your kiddush cup.

RESERVATIONS REQUIRED

RSVP by April 9 to 412-422-8044 or jwcpgh@yahoo.com and return your check made out to JWC with the form below to JWC, PO Box 81924, Pittsburgh, PA 15217.

Name(s): _____

Address: _____

Phone & E-mail: _____

Number attending: _____ @ \$15 each = Total enclosed: \$ _____

Programming Update:

ROSH CHODESH NISAN

Wednesday, Mar 29 7:30 PM at
Larissa M.'s new home.

**Incorporating women's stories
into your family seder.**

WOMEN'S

PESACH SEDER

Sunday, April 16th
6:00PM, Labor Zionist
Ctr.

**See flyer on
previous page**

ROSH CHODESH IYAR

Thursday, April 27
7:30 PM, Location TBD

**Creative Beading:
Counting the Omer**

CALENDAR CORRECTION: In the JWC calendar that was distributed in the fall, the day listed for Rosh Chodesh Sivan is incorrect. The correct day is Tuesday, May 30th. Please change this on your calendars.

Roshei Chodesh Shvat and Adar:

Biblical Women's Midrash (Commentary) with Rabbi Sharyn Henry

On rosh chodesh Shvat (1/29/06) and rosh chodesh Adar (2/27/06), Rabbi Sharyn Henry led the JWC in discussions about women in the Bible. On Shvat, we studied the wives of King David: Michal, Avigail, and Batsheva. The group studied text and learned what a, shall we say, "difficult husband" King David perhaps was. Rabbi Henry challenged us to think about the nature of relationships in Biblical times and how they had little to do with love and everything to do with politics, especially for women.

In Adar we studied the women of Purim. We planned to talk about Vashti, Esther and Zeresh, Haman's wife, but the discussion about the first two was so robust we had to save Zeresh for next time. We focused on the various arguments upon which the assumption of Esther's piety is derived and the different ways that the rabbis interpret details from the Megillah to indicate that she was an observant Jew. Rabbi Henry also noted that earlier Rabbis also have a difficult time dealing with the relation-

ship between Mordechai and Esther, in various texts describing them as cousins, as uncle and niece, and as husband and wife (the latter from midrash). In the Megillah, they are described as cousins.

At the end of these roshei chodesh, we all agreed that we would like to continue the study theme for several of our programs next year. We invite members to submit ideas for topics that would interest you.

CORRECTION: In the last newsletter, the article on the JWC book group gave an incorrect e-mail address for Stefi Kirschner. Her correct address is sikirschner@gmail.com. Contact Stefi if you want more information about the group.

Ta'anit Esther: The Fast of Esther

And what it has to do with Purim

Everyone knows that Esther is the hero of the Purim story (and that Vashti is the Bad Girl..., but that's a feminist story for another day.) Even those familiar with the story of how Esther saved the Jewish people from the evil Haman and King Achashverosh may not know the part of the story that leads to our yearly celebration of *Ta'anit Esther* or the Fast of Esther.

Esther and Mordechai had learned of Haman's plan to annihilate all the Jews and Esther had conceived her plan to be the front person in the attempt to dissuade the King from taking that step. The story goes that Esther was focused on her coming challenge and knew that she (and her people) would need to be totally prepared for the task before them. Esther proclaimed a fast on the day before she was to go to the King and prescribed that all her maidens fast with her as well. She asked Mordechai to proclaim a fast day for all the people by saying, "Go and gather all the Jews who are found in Shushan and fast over me, and do not eat and do not drink three days, night and day; and I and my maidens will also fast thus" (Esther 9). Because Esther "authored" the fast, we call it by her name. On this day we remember the dire situation that faced the Jews in those days and many other times throughout history. As Purim begins at sundown on March 13th this year (14 Adar), we celebrate the fast on 13 Adar, or March 13th. Although in earlier days, the fast was actually celebrated for three days, in modern times we only fast in the daylight hours of the Fast day.

So get ready for the Megillah reading by remembering Queen Esther and the fast that helped her prepare to speak with grace and wisdom on behalf of her people. And then prepare to celebrate her victory with hamantaschen!

Preparing Your Haggadah: Resources for Women

by Laura Horowitz

It's always helpful to warm up with *The Passover Survival Kit* by Shimon Apisdorf. It helps me get in the mood and think about the holiday, since I usually start preparing our family haggadah well before Pesach. My favorite general haggadot are *A Different Night* by Noam Zion and David Dishon and the *Santa Cruz Haggadah* by Karen Roekard. That's closely followed by *A Night of Questions* by Joy Levitt and Michael Strassfeld and *The Open Door* by Sue Levi Elwell. All of those are egalitarian and include lots of options and extra readings from which to choose.

The less formal haggadot I like are *A Growing Haggadah* by Mark Hurvitz, available online at <http://www.davka.org/what/haggadah/> and the *Dancing with Miriam Haggadah*, available at <http://www.alljudaica.com/detail.asp?bid=100&catid=10950>. The mother of all women's haggadot, of course, is the Ma'yan Women's Project's *The Journey Continues*. It's something that all Jewish women should own. If you're looking for material for and about women, the two collections *The Women's Passover Companion* and *The Women's Seder Sourcebook*, both edited by Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, Tara Mohr and Catherine Spector.

Finally, I always do an extensive web search for new material. Some years there's a lot and some years a little, but I always find something interesting and thought-provoking by searching seder, haggadah or Passover. That in itself is a great way to prepare for the holiday. Chag Pesach sameach!

Ever heard of the Great Latke-Hamantash Debate?

Hadassah Magazine (March 2006) reports on a 60 year old tradition at the University of Chicago Hillel—a yearly debate among usually-serious academicians that makes use of the Purim tradition encouraging silliness and good-humored excess. Capped-and-gowned professors debate the relative merits of the Hamantash vs. the latke, bringing together Nobel prize winners and notable scholars from fields as diverse as mathematics, biology, ethics, comparative literature, and ancient Greek poetry and prose. A recent book, *The Great Latke-Hamantash Debate*, edited by Ruth Fredman Cernea (University of Chicago Press, 2005, 214 pp., \$18) compiles the highlights of the “highly absurd, yet deeply serious”¹ debate in essays and lectures from the past decades. Examples of past talks:¹

“The Hamantash in Shakespeare” by Lawrence Sherman

“Jane Austen’s Love and Latkes” by Stuart Tave

“The Latke vs. the Hamantash in an Age of (M)oral Crisis” by Herbert C. Kelman

“The Voyage on the Bagel: In Honor of the Darwin Centennial” by Elihu Katz and Jacob J. Feldman

“The Latke and the Hamantash at the Fifty-Yard Line” by Milton Friedman

“The Hermeneutics of the Hamantash” by Emilie S. Passow

“The Scientific Method and the Latke-Hamantash Issue” by Edward W. Kolb

“The Secret History of the Hamantash in China” by Judith Zeitlin

“Latkes and Hamantashen as Dominant Symbols in Jewish Critical Thought” by Marvin Mirsky

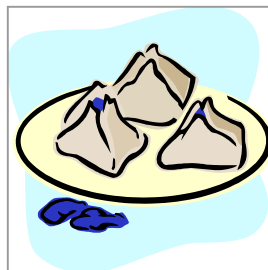
[AND LEST YOU THINK THAT THERE IS NO ROOM FOR FEMINIST DEBATE ON THIS MATTER:]

“Latke vs. Hamantash: A Feminist Critique” by Judith Shapiro

“Latke vs. Hamantash: A Materialist-Feminist Analysis; A Reply to Judith Shapiro” by Robin Leidner

and

**“The Archetypal Hamantash: A Feminist Mythology; An Exercise in the History of Religious Methodology”
by Wendy Doniger**



Which do you choose???

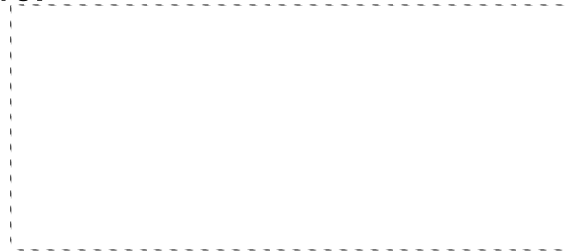
¹Reprinted from www.press.uchicago.edu

Jewish Women's Center of Pittsburgh

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TO:



The JWC Mission:

The Jewish Women's Center is a community of women of all backgrounds that provides educational opportunities and spiritual experiences rooted in Jewish values and feminist ideals. The JWC is a supportive environment for broadening our knowledge and involvement in Jewish life. The programs and resources of the JWC create opportunities for Jewish women's learning, leadership, spiritual growth and ritual practice.

