

PROLOGUE

JUSTIFY MY LOVE

As I reflect on my coming of age in New Jersey, I realize that I had always been in some sense more of a "girl" than a "boy." A sissy who did not like sports, whose mother used to urge me, stop reading and go out and play, in fifth grade I went out for—ballet. (Of course I explained to the guys that it was a kind of sophisticated bodybuilding.) This in itself is rather a familiar story, a story of inexplicable gender dysphoria, but one that had for me, even then, a rather happy ending. I didn't think of myself so much as girlish but rather as Jewish.

I start with what I think is a widespread sensibility that being Jewish in our culture renders a boy effeminate. Rather than producing in me a desire to "pass" and to become a "man," this sensibility resulted in my desire to remain a Jew, where being a sissy was all right. To be sure, this meant being marginal, and it has left me with a persistent sense of being on the outside of something, with my nose pressed to the glass looking in, but the cultural and communal place that a sissy occupied in my social world was not one that enforced rage and self-contempt. In a quite similar account another male American Jew of my generation, Harry Brod, writes: "I found the feminist critique of mainstream masculinity personally empowering rather than threatening. As a child and adolescent, I did not fit the mainstream male image. I was an outsider, not an athlete but an intellectual, fat, shy and with a stutter for many years. The feminist critique of mainstream masculinity allowed me to convert my envy of those who fit the approved model to con-

tempt. It converted males previously my superiors on the traditional scale to males below me on the new scale, for I had obviously shown premature insight and sensitivity in rejecting the old mate mode. I could pretend that others' rejection of me had really been my rejection of them. Of course, I could not have admitted this at the time. To do so would have seemed effeminate, and confirming of my fears of others' worst judgments of me." Brod moves on to a critique of this sensibility, referring to it as a "shield against other men." While I share his concern about the self-serving (and triumphant) countenance of the "use of my Jewishness to avoid being categorized as a 'real' man, 'real' understood as a term of critique rather than praise,"¹ I want to use the sissy, the Jewish male femme as a location and a critical practice.

I am interested right now in investigating what critical force might still be left in a culture and a cultural memory within which "real men" were sissies. The vector of my theoretical-political work, accordingly, is not to deny as antisemitic fantasy but to reclaim the nineteenth-century notion of the feminized Jewish male, to argue for his reality as one Jewish ideal going back to the Babylonian Talmud. I desire also to find a model for a gentle, nurturing masculinity in the traditional Jewish male ideal—without making claims as to how often realized this ideal was—a male who could be so comfortable with his little, fleshy penis that he would not have to grow it into "The Phallus," a sort of Velvet John. He whom a past dominant culture (as well as those Jews who internalized its values) considers contemptible, the feminized Jewish (colonized) male, may be useful today, for "he" may help us precisely today in our attempts to construct an alternative masculine subjectivity, one that will not have to rediscover such cultural archetypes as Iron Johns, knights, hairy men, and warriors within.

I am increasingly called upon to clarify something that I have never quite been able to explain until now, namely, the grounds for, and possibility of, a dual commitment to radical reclamation of traditional Jewish cultural life/practice/study and to radical reconstruction of the organization of gendered and sexual practices within our society (including necessarily the Jewish subculture). The first commitment is generated out of a sense of cultural/religious continuity as a value in itself and of Judaism as a rich, sustaining, and fulfilling way of life; the second derives from a deeply held conviction (and the affective stance) that

1. Brod, *Mensch*, 7, 8.

Jewish practices have been oppressive to people in ways that I cannot stomach.

I have learned these dual commitments through living experience. Growing up in a way typical of most American Jews of my generation (the 1960s), I experienced Judaism as a vaguely attractive, sometimes silly, sometimes obnoxious set of occasional intrusions in my life, called Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Pesah. On the positive side, it represented for me a compelling passion for social justice which led me in high school to (almost) join the Communist Party of America. I finally turned, again like many American Jews of my time to Far Eastern mysticism as a mode of escape from the arid, nonspiritual microclimate that the synagogue had become and the equally arid possibilities and promises of a life without spirit at all.

Chance encounters—with a lulav-wielding Lubavitcher, with a therapist who gave me an English translation of the Zohar, with a young disciple of Zalman Schachter—began to hint that there might be more to Judaism than I had been misled to believe by American liberal Judaism. One night, in my second year in college, I dreamed that I was in Israel, and so came to spend my third year of college in Israel thinking that I was destined for a life as a kabbalist. I wasn't.

The Talmud tempted me away from kabbala. Most American Jews don't have an inkling even of what the Talmud is. I certainly didn't. Sometimes I think I imagined it as a sort of commentary on the Torah (confusing it, I suppose, with midrash); sometimes as something like Euclid's geometry applied to precisely what I couldn't imagine, since my image of Jewish "Law" was that it was something unambiguous and found in a book called the *Shulkhan Arukh*. I had never seen even the outside binding of the Talmud, let alone the *Shulkhan Arukh*.

My friend, the aforementioned disciple of Shachter, had said to me: "Before you can understand Zohar, you have to know Talmud," so at the Hebrew University I signed up for the preparatory course in reading the Talmud and was charmed—in the full antique sense of the word—from almost the first sentence we read. Here was a world so strange and rich, so colorful and exciting, with myths and legends, challenges to the intellect, and, most of all, personalities rendered so vital that they seemed living men, men, moreover, who devoted their lives to the elaboration of what it means to live correctly, as a Jew. And this was all mine." I became Orthodox for love of the Talmud. I admit freely, if ruefully, that it was so absorbing that I hardly noticed they *were* all men, or that the text was primarily addressed to me just because I was

a Jewish *man*—I didn't recognize the exclusions and oppressions that those facts encode and mystify.

I believe there is no textual product of human culture that is quite like the jumbled, carnivalesque, raucous, bawdy, vital, exciting Talmud, nor is there anything quite like the practices of study that characterize it and the whole way of life that it subtends.² These are not, of course, the adjectives that have been traditionally used, either from within or from without, to describe the talmudic life. I make it sound, and indeed I experience it, as if it were almost Rabelaisian. When after a year and a half of study I came upon a text that described the death of Rav, I underwent an emotional experience akin to hearing of the death of a beloved teacher. It had become, I realized, almost unimaginable to me that Rav was not alive, because he was so alive in the text—alive I would add because not idealized, because the Talmud was as open to the flawed humanity of its heroes as the Bible had been to its. I have discovered that I am not alone: there are many people, including many women and lesbian people, who are just as entranced by the Talmud as I have been and just as passionate about devoting their lives to it.

I deeply love and feel connected to rabbinic texts and culture, and even more to the Rabbis themselves, but there is much within them that I find deeply disturbing as well, and much of that has to do with the oppression of women.

This awareness also came to me from significant encounters. In the late 1980s I attended the School of Criticism and Theory at Dartmouth College, and for reasons that I cannot now quite remember or reconstruct, I joined a feminist reading group, as one of two men in the group among approximately twenty women. This little community provided me with my first direct experience of feminism as theory and the experiences that had produced it as practice. Although very different from the affect that had compelled me to devote a life to the study and practice of Talmud, this experience was no less compelling. At the end of the summer I could no longer describe myself only as an Orthodox Jew; I had now to say (for a long time only to myself) that being a male feminist was constitutive and definitive of my experience of self. The

2. Astonishingly to me, I know not why, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has captured perfectly my sensibility when she writes of "Talmudic desires, to reproduce or unfold the text and to giggle" (*Epistemology*, 240). I am grateful for that sentence, as for much else in her work. In contrast to this, I wonder at Christine Delphy's repeated use of "talmudic" as a pejorative for the discourse of false feminists. This remains a stumbling block for me in my appreciation of her otherwise quite wonderful work.

contradictions seemed so ungappable that I just endeavored to live with them for a number of years until I could no longer do so. Unable, however, to let go or even diminish either one of these fundamental components of my self, I discovered that I had to find ways to theorize a rapprochement (or at least to make the contradictions creative).

My endeavor is to justify my love, that is, both to explain it and to make it just. I explain my devotion in part by showing that Judaism provides exempla for another kind of masculinity, one in which men do not manifest "a deeply rooted concern about the possible meanings of dependence on other males,"³ and thus one within which "feminization" is not experienced as a threat or a danger. I cannot, however, paper over, ignore, explain away, or apologize for the oppressions of women and lesbian people that this culture has practiced, and therefore I endeavor as well to render it just by presenting a way of reading the tradition that may help it surmount or expunge—in time—that which I and many, others can no longer live with.

In this dual aspect of resistance to pressure from without and critique from within, my project is homologous to other political, cultural acts of resistance in the face of colonialisms. For some three hundred years now, Jews have been the target of the civilizing mission in Europe. In her recent dissertation, Laura Levitt makes palpably clear the homologies between the "liberal" colonizing impulse directed toward those Others within Europe and toward the colonized outside of Europe insofar as for both it is constituted by a demand that their sexual practices be "reformed" to conform to the liberal bourgeois regime.⁴ One of the most common of liberal justifications for the extension of colonial control over a given people and for the maintenance of the civilizing mission is the imputed barbarity of the treatment of women within the culture under attack.⁵ The civilizing mission, and its Jewish agents among "the Enlighteners," considered the fact that Jewish women behaved in ways interpreted as masculine by European bourgeois society to be simply monstrous.⁶ Modern Jewish culture, liberal

3. Edelman, "Redeeming," 50.

4. Levitt, *Reconfiguring*, 152–73.

5. Butler, *Gender*, 3; Geller, "Of Mice"; Hyams, "Weininger"; Sharpe, "Unspeakable Limits."

6. In an earlier version I had written: "its Jewish agents, the 'Enlighteners,'" but as Naomi Seidman has correctly admonished me, this was not entirely fair, since there was a genuine feminist impulse animating a not insignificant component of the Jewish Enlightenment as well. Nor am I prepared, of course, to entirely disavow the Enlightenment project as part of who I am. Nevertheless, the insistence of the Jewish Enlightenment that

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and bourgeois in its aspirations and its preferred patterns of gendered life, has been the result of this civilizing mission. As Paula Hyman has recently demonstrated, the very Jewish religiosity of the modern bourgeois Jewish family is an assimilating mimicry of Protestant middle-class piety, not least in its portrayal of proper womanhood.⁷ The richness of Jewish life and difference has been largely lost, and the gains for Jewish women were largely illusory.⁸ This having been said, however, the Jewish anticolonial project—like any other—cannot refrain from a trenchant, unflinching, and unapologetic internal critique of the harsh oppressions within the very traditional culture that it seeks to protect from destruction from without, namely, the structure of systematic exclusion of women from the practices that the culture most highly regards and especially the study of Torah. This exclusion has been a breeding ground of contempt—sometimes quite extreme—for women and a perpetrator of second-class status within Jewish law.

I repeat that I deeply love and feel connected to rabbinic texts and culture, but there is much within them that I find deeply disturbing as well. If Jewish culture has been a place of safety for a sissy, it has hardly—to understate the case—provided such felicitous conditions for Jewish women. This is a feminist project, at least to the extent that it owes its life to feminism and the work of feminist critics. Male self-fashioning has consequences for women. I feel an inner mandate to see to it that a project of reclamation of Judaic culture from the depredations of the civilizing, colonializing onslaught to which it has been subject does not interfere with (even perhaps contributes something to) the ongoing project of feminist critique of that same traditional culture from within—to see to it, as best I can, that is, that my practice, whether or not it is part of the solution, is not part of the problem. I thus try to meet the challenge implicit in Tania Modleski's observation

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only an eradication of the "talmudic spirit" could fit the Jews for civilization is an unremittingly colonialist project. As my student Abe Socher has pointed out: "Jewish Enlighteners (*Maskilim*) even identified the mortifying 'jargon' of Yiddish with the Aramaic of the Talmud. Just as Yiddish was a corruption of the pure language of German and, as such, an impossible vehicle for anything but *unbildung*, so too was Aramaic a corruption of the pure Hebrew of the Bible. This equation between the two pure languages of biblical Hebrew and eighteenth-century German was epitomized in Mendelssohn's *Biur*, a Hebrew Bible with a running translation into High German, rendered in Hebrew letters. Almost a century later, the great nineteenth-century historian Heinrich Graetz summed up the *Maskilic* attitude when he wrote of the eastern European Talmudists' love of 'twisting, distorting, ingenious quibbling,' which has 'reduced the language of German Jews to a repulsive stammer'" (Socher, "Magus")—QED. See also Aschheim, *Brothers*, 14–15.

7. Hyman, *Gender*, 26–27.

8. Magnes, "Pauline."

that male critique of masculinity is feminist when "it analyzes male power, male hegemony, with a concern for the effects of this power *on the female subject* and with an awareness of how frequently male subjectivity works to appropriate 'femininity' while oppressing women."⁹ The dual movement of the political project, to resist the delegitimization of Judaic culture from without, while supporting the feminist critique from within, dictates the structure of my work.

Thinking about the sissy body of the "Jewish man," I think simultaneously about another discourse and practice—possibly but not necessarily liberatory—that constructs the male body in a very different way. The "gay male gym body" is an example of another male body constructed as an alternative to the heterosexual male body. David Halperin (following in part D. A. Miller) has recently given us a brilliant and moving rejoinder to "straight, liberal" attacks on gay male bodybuilding by arguing for an absolute, total differentiation between the "macho straight male body" and "the gay male gym body": "What distinguishes the gay male gym body, then, in addition to its spectacular beauty, is the way it advertises itself as an object of desire. Gay muscles do not signify power." He further makes the impeccable point that the (ideal) gay male body does not look like at all like the straight macho body

they [gay male bodies] are explicitly designed to be an erotic turn-on, and in their very solicitation of desire they deliberately flaunt the visual norms of straight masculinity, which impose discretion on masculine self-display and require that straight male beauty exhibit itself only casually or inadvertently, that it refuse to acknowledge its own strategies. If, as Foucault hypothesized in *Discipline and Punish*, those whom modern disciplinary society would destroy it first makes visible, then gay male body-builders, in visibly inscribing their erotic desires on the surfaces of their bodies, have not only exposed themselves to considerable social risks in the course of pursuing their ethical projects but have also performed a valuable political service on behalf of everyone, insofar as they have issued a challenge of defiance to the very mechanisms of modern discipline.¹⁰

This is inarguable—and I am hardly insensible to the attraction of that "spectacular beauty"—but it nevertheless remains the case that the very standard for male beauty that is being prescribed is one of a certain form of muscular development that emphasizes the dimorphism of the gendered body and thus participates, to this extent, in the general cul-

9. Modleski, *Feminism*, 7.

10. Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 117.

tural standard of masculinity rather than resisting it.¹¹ The pale, limp, and semiotically unaggressive "nelly" or sissy male body is not seen within this construct as beautiful or erotic at all, but this exclusion as well can be shown to be culturally specific and limited.

Lori Lefkowitz makes the point that Joseph in the midrash is described as having a body that is explicitly designed to be an erotic turn-on, but it is not at all the body of a Muscle-Jew. He penciled his eyes, curled his hair, and lifted his heels, and, moreover, his was a beauty like that of his mother Rachel—and it was *this* beauty that so attracted Potiphar's wife and indeed all the noblewomen of Egypt!¹² Thus, on one hand I think that Halperin clearly is right that "the hypermasculine look of gay clones is deceiving. What the new styles of gay virility represent, paradoxically, is a strategy for valorizing various practices of devirilization under the sign of masculinity, thereby forging a new association between masculinity and sexual receptivity or penetrability, while detaching male homosexuality from its phobic association with 'femininity' (conceived in phallic terms as 'passivity' or as an absence of phallic aggressivity)."¹³ On the other hand, I fear that this strategy backfires insofar as it continues to register only one kind of male body as desirable, thus "clonedom" (and I do not claim, of course, that this is true for all gay male culture). Thus, in addition to the dislodging of sexual receptivity from "femininity"—conceived of as lack, castration, and the negatively encoded "passivity"—that the gay male gym body enacts, there also has to be a parallel dislodging of the penetrating penis—gay or straight—from masculinity, conceived as "phallic aggressivity," as well as from the ways that, as Foucault has pointed out, such "topness" is still valorized over receptivity in nearly all sectors of our sexual culture.¹⁴

One place to find the eroticized sissy is at a reading of the rabbinic textual tradition. On one hand, this tradition clearly privileges—to understate again—sexual connections between men and women¹⁵ and also clearly prescribes social domination of men over women; at the

11. Put another way, and granting once more the plausibility of Halperin's construction, is there not at least the possible danger of misreading—not only by "straight, male liberals"—this "devirilizing" performance as being complicit with an earlier, peculiarly Teutonic reading of the homosexual male body as the quintessence of virility? For the latter, see Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 134 and, especially now, Mosse, *Image*, 32.

12. Lefkowitz, "Coats," 6.

13. Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 90.

14. Kritzman, *Michel*, 300.

15. But see D. Boyarin, "Are There Any Jews?"

same time, it does not privilege "masculinity" over "femininity"—"tops" over "bottoms"—nor stigmatize "femininity" in anything like the ways that hegemonic European culture has come to do particularly since the nineteenth century. In part, Jewish culture demystifies European gender ideologies by reversing their terms, which is not, I hasten to emphasize, a liberatory process in itself but can be mobilized—strategically—for liberation. In any case, the modern Jewish abandonment of our sissy heritage has been a noxious force in modern Jewish culture, an ill wind that has brought no one good. As Paul Breines has written, "[T]he cult of the tough Jew as an alternative to Jewish timidity and gentleness rests on ideals of 'masculine beauty,' health, and normalcy that are conceived *as if their validity were obvious and natural*. They [Muscle-Jews] have, in other words, internalized unquestioningly the physical and psychological ideals of their respective dominating cultures. In doing so they forget that, far from being self-evident cultural universals, those ideals are predicated on a series of exclusions and erasures—of effeminate men, pacifism, Arabs, gentleness, women, homosexuals, and far from least, Jews."¹⁶ For a member of several of these intersecting categories, the politics of this recovery work has, then, a sharp urgency.

The politics of my project to reclaim the eroticized Jewish male sissy has, however, two faces. The traditional valorization of "effeminism" for Jewish men hardly secured good news for Jewish women. There is no question that women were disenfranchised in many ways in traditional Jewish culture. The culture authorized, even if it did not mandate, efflorescences of misogyny. If the ideal Jewish male femme has some critical force vis-à-vis general European models of manliness, at the same time a critique must be mounted against "him" for his oppression of Jewish women—and indeed, frequently enough, for his class-based oppression of other Jewish men as well, namely, the ignorant who were sometimes characterized as being "like women."¹⁷ Any attempt at a feminist rereading of Jewish tradition must come to terms with this material fact and the legacies of pain that it has left behind. My goal is not to preserve rabbinic Judaism "as we know it," but to reconstruct a rabbinic Judaism that will be quite different in some ways from the one we know and yet be and feel credibly grounded in the tradition of the Rabbis. My work is one of changing ethos and culture and I hope it

16. Breines, *Tough Jews*, 167.

17. Weissler, "For Women."

joins with a stream of feminist work on rabbinic Judaism that includes the research of Judith Baskin, Judith Hauptman, Miriam Peskowitz, Laura Levitt, Susan Shapiro, and others.

As significant as the different gendering of Jewish men was, so was there a significant difference in the gendering of Jewish women. While their men were sitting indoors and studying Torah, speaking only a Jewish language, and withdrawn from the world, women of the same class were speaking, reading, and writing the vernacular, maintaining businesses large and small, and dealing with the wide world of tax collectors and irate customers. In short, they were engaging in what must have seemed to many in the larger culture as masculine activities, and if the men were read as sissies, the women were read often enough as phallic monsters. In certain apologies for Judaism, the fact of women's economic activity in traditional Jewish culture has been used as an alibi for the entire system of oppression of women. This economic power, however real, was a double-edged sword. Iris Parush has captured something of this paradoxical double charge of gender politics in early modern European Jewry: "Over the years, the lifestyle which crystallized in Jewish society caused the men to cluster under the sacred tent of Torah study, and the women to stand at the front line of the daily confrontation with the outside world.... An interesting combination of weakness and power—of inferiority in terms of the traditional Jewish perspective, and superiority in terms of the trends of Europeanization—opened the 'door of opportunity,' so to speak, for certain circles of the female population."¹⁸

The "fact" then that Jewish women (of certain classes) had opportunities in the secular world and access to education and economic power and autonomy beyond that of their husbands must not be permitted to erase the fact that, nevertheless, within Jewish culture these roles were genuinely less valued than those of men. The time for the apologetic strategy of pointing to "positive" structures or ideals and allowing them to excuse whole systems of repression has passed, and I have no desire to return to it, for it is a fundamentally reactionary strategy. My

18. Parush, "Women." Pappenheim makes this point herself in quite similar terms: "Particularly the indifference with which everything women and girls learned was treated (at the time of early marriages 'girlhood' as we understand it hardly existed) compared to what men and boys were to learn and know, introduced a continuous current into the women's world.... Particularly among the Jewish women a thirst for education clearly marked by German culture grew that made new cultural elements accessible to the bilingual, often trilingual (if French was added) women of the higher classes" (Pappenheim, "Jewish Woman").

desire is not to discount, excuse, or pretend that there was not powerful oppression of women but rather to displace that oppression by arguing that such abuse is a product of a particular reading of the past and its canonical texts. This reading, while not "inauthentic" or "invalid," is nevertheless not the only one possible, nor even a uniquely compelling reading of the tradition. I hope, then, to be making a very different discursive move here, one that maintains the passion of critique of what has been and yet seeks to mobilize that same past for a different future by reinterpreting it.

What I want is to produce a discursive catachresis, not a quick fix by a halakhic committee but a new thing in the world, the horizon of possibility for a militant, feminist, nonhomophobic, traditionalist—Orthodox—Judaism. The reasons for Jewish conservatism are not essential but accidental. The force of my writing is to avow not that traditional Judaism does not need radical change but rather that it can accommodate radical change and still remain viable if the terms of the change themselves can be seen as rooted in the documents, traditions, texts of the Rabbis. The only reason—other than divine mandate—for seeking this accommodation is that such practice brings to many men and women an extraordinary richness of experience and a powerful sense of being rooted somewhere in the world, in a world of memory, intimacy, and connectedness, a pleasure that I call *Jewissance*. Note that I am *not* arguing for a continuation of Judaism on the grounds that it makes people better, although in some sense my justification for indulging in the extreme pleasures of Jewishness is the assumption that it does have something to contribute to the world as well. I treasure in principle and with deep emotion cultural difference per se—not only my own—and for me the disappearance of a cultural form is attended with a pathos and pain not unlike that experienced by many people when a species of bird goes out of the world. The demand for cultural sameness, universalism, has done much harm and violence in the world, but cultural difference as well has to work hard to do no harm; to participate in this work is the calling of the scholar.

My role model for this kind of scholarship is Bertha Pappenheim, cohort of such giants of Jewish scholarship as Shmuel Krauss and, among her many accomplishments, teacher in Rosenzweig and Buber's *Lehrhaus*. I want to claim Bertha Pappenheim here as a model for an alternative to the pseudo-objectivity of *Wissenschaft*. Although I can barely stake out my claim here, I would suggest that it was her first-wave feminism that fueled her achievements in Judaic scholarship, just

as it is second-wave feminism that has empowered engaged, politically frank scholarship and critique in our generation. Let her become the foremother of another genealogy for Jewish cultural studies, one that enacts passionate love for the culture and devotion to its continued creative and vital existence without losing sight for a moment of the necessity for equally passionate critique.

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