

Jewish-Positive

*“I will use my gift to only uplift and maybe change just one heart tonight
I’m...the nonconspiracizing always-questioning hip-hop-listening
torah-scroll-reading all-people-loving pride-filled jewish girl.”¹*
—Vanessa Hidary

“Say it loud,” Deena shouted, “Jewish and proud!” Laughing, “I have James Brown in my head!” Tagging onto Deena and Vanessa Hidary: what do twenty-first century “Jewish-positive” lives look like?

Cultivating new eyes, or polishing up lenses tarnished by self-disdain. Celebrating hyphenated identities, our bodies, our relationships. Digging into multiculturalism and music, maybe secularism and spirituality. Passing these to our children in ways that delight and intrigue. Building bridges, not walls.

Going for joy over suffering, relinquishing victimhood. Taking pride in our flourishing, reclaiming what assimilation stole from us, and then focusing forward. Shining a light on inclusivity, opening up our tent; blasting minority voices from rooftops. Celebrating resistance based on an ethical tradition of justice, focusing on who has fought for us. Relishing our resilient complex past, our privileged present, our future brimming with possibility.

Noticing that our struggles count, that Jews are worth fighting for, while not at the expense of other precious peoples—seeing how our interests are bound together in one dazzling fabric. And although our up-front presence can invite anti-Semitism, welcoming the chance to hone skills at taking it on.

Above all: reveling in the diverse richness of Jewishness, of tikkun olam, of healthy self-love as a people (casting off superiority, exceptionalism). “There are so many good things about being a Jew,” says Jamaican-born director of the Center for Afro-Jewish Studies, Lewis Ricardo Gordon.² “Beautiful things...that you cherish and want your children to remember.”³

Joy! in Jewishness!

“We...are hardwired for joy.”⁴ —Rabbi David J. Cooper

In our group, Rani stood out: “I’m so proud of being Jewish and Iraqi,” she grinned. “I’m ecstatic! I’ve never felt too Jewish. I’ve felt outstandingly Jewish.” Chuckling, she added, “The idea of being gentile would be disappointing. I’m considering having a Jewish star tattooed on my arm; I want to flaunt it!”

But Elly admitted, “When you asked, ‘What brings me joy as a Jewish woman,’ I wondered ‘What language is that? Does not compute!’” Exactly why we need to excavate fear, self-hatred: to make room for repressed exuberance: Radical amazement.⁵ The more we focus there, the more we feel it.

For Emily, the high is playing North African/Middle Eastern Jewish music, “where I feel my roots,” while Amy is inspired by Jewish resistance fighters who transformed Yiddish songs into political anthems. Walking into the overflow theater of the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival is a yearly highlight, Amy adds. “Seeing the older folks, the queers, the straight-looking, they’re all there.”

Or delighting in Jewish humor. When Judith went to a “hysterically funny” evening called Faegele/Shmagele (Yiddish for “silly fag”), she loved it, “cuz I got the jokes, you know?” The crowd reminded her of the belonging she felt in Jewish youth group days, “where I felt popular, was looked up to, felt some esteem.” Deena also adored her Jewish youth group. “It was so nurturing; it saved me after the horrible anti-Semitism in seventh grade. People there thought I was beautiful before I had my nose job, I couldn’t believe it! I still have close friends from that time.”

At Rabbi Julie Saxe-Taller’s synagogue on Friday nights, congregants share “simchas—sources of happiness big or small.”⁶ Often, she says, eyes twinkling, “a certain couple of seven-year-olds” jump up and down, “hands raised, awaiting their turns to share simchas...barely able to contain themselves.”⁷

“Collective effervescence”⁸—Émile Durkheim

Then there’s that special quality of Jewish holidays, like Passover liberation seders, that weave issues of climate change, gender equality, and Middle East peace into traditional liturgy. Or Chanukah parties “with lots of kids, wild dreidel [a Jewish top] games. It’s a blast!” laughs Emily. And despite sexist gender roles, Rani relishes holiday cooking with women relatives, having “catch up” time in the kitchen: “a power can be taken from it.”

Elly loves the sense of community at High Holiday services, “being part of rituals practiced around the world,” especially the “collective effervescence” that draws everyone together, embracing wonder, caring for each other. Joyous spirituality—like in ancient times, we are told, when giant lamps lit the sky for Sukkot, and Rabbi Shim’on ben Gamliel juggled eight torches, kissing the ground in between without missing a beat.⁹ In Rabbi David J. Cooper’s childhood in Brooklyn, exuberant conga-lines danced from shul to shul for blocks, for Simchas Torah at the end of Sukkot. Now, his Oakland synagogue has started a “joyfully Jewish” program for kindergartners.

Although not observant herself, Jessie loves the Orthodox practice of “saying a blessing over everything, like being able to get up in the morning, to have your body parts move. Or eating a meal. It makes ordinary things become extraordinary.” Also amazing, she muses, pouring tea, “is a kind of Jewish spirit, like in Fiddler on the Roof. Even after the tragedy of the pogroms, the joy is still there, the aliveness. Jews can be beaten down, and still we come up and say there’s beauty in the world.”

“What’s a Jewish woman?”

While we’re at it, think Jewish-women-positive. It’s a no-brainer: Jewish

flourishing entails equality and liberation for women. Edgy provocateurs “Jewish Women Watching” published a front-page ad in the New York Times one year, just before Rosh Hoshana, “Jewish Women/Girls: Hold your community accountable. Sexism is a sin.”¹⁰ Their button? “We are the Jewish vote.”

Opening up synagogue life to women’s leadership, the late writer/ritualist Esther Broner created a seder table of women’s voices with her groundbreaking Women’s Haggadah, sparking feminist seders worldwide. And it’s terrific that women rabbis are being ordained in record numbers, affecting our spiritual practices¹¹—but as of 2011, most major, mainstream Jewish communal organizations were still male-run (though we know who does the grunt-work), and women leaders earned sixty-one cents for every dollar earned by male counterparts.¹²

Bent on multiple ways to value ourselves, also to validate our diverse challenges, Jewish/Women’s studies professor Bonnie Morris generated variations on “What’s a Jewish Woman?”¹³ A woman:

- § who plays in a Klezmer band
- § who is the only Jew in her small town...
- § who is a Jew of color preserving the cultural traditions of her Ethiopian, Yemenite, Iraqi, Moroccan, Syrian, or Sephardi community...
- § who will not use her electric wheelchair on Shabbat
- § who grew up speaking Yiddish...
- § who challenges her Jewish friends and family to examine their...racism
- § whose employer will not give her time off for Rosh Hoshana or Yom Kippur
- § who was raised in an Orthodox home and who has chosen to abandon all religious traditions
- § who moans “Oy!” in bed
- § who feels guilty for enjoying Christmas
- § who grew up in the 1940s and ’50s being asked to leave “whites only” beaches
- § who...supports the struggle for Palestinian self-determination
- § who speaks Ladino...
- § who incorporates Wicca, goddess worship, and recovery steps into her personal Judaism
- § who was raised in a nonobservant, socialist Jewish home and who has chosen to embrace ultra Orthodoxy...
- § who is fired from her job as a Hebrew teacher after coming out as a lesbian
- § who finds much of Judaism patriarchal and uncomfortable, but who still keeps kosher
- § who is under constant pressure to marry a nice Jewish boy and have children
- § who loves her Jewish self even when she is frustrated with Judaism.