

“There Is a ‘Real’ Jewish Woman and I Am Not Her”: Too Much/Not Enough

“If I become ‘too Jewish,’ it could cost me my job...whereas someone else is looked at as ‘just having a bad day.’ I see how they act when they talk about ‘those annoying Jews,’ and I don’t want to be there.”

—Deena

Whether we grew up in working-class ethnically mixed communities on Chicago’s South Side, L.A. Jewish enclaves, or Protestant suburbs of northern Virginia, many Jewish women have been made to feel that we’re Too Much, Not Enough, or All of the Above—compared to assumptions about who a Jewish woman should be. “When people say ‘you don’t look Jewish,’” a twenty-something friend confides, “they mean it as a compliment. It’s definitely not cool to be a Jew.”

TOO MUCH-NESS

Let’s be clear: For Jewish women, “too much” is code for “too Jewish”—or “not Christian/WASP enough.” One implies the other. And anti-Jewish bias piled onto misogyny is doubly disparaging.

This terrain is a central enemy stronghold in our heads. The specific messages? We’re too intense, too needy, too hairy, too dark. Too materialistic, too large, too exuberant. Too difficult, too opinionated. Or too powerful, too whiny, and, of course, too pushy. And a few extras for Mizrahi women: too irrational or too primitive, too sexually overactive—or too repressed.¹ We’re made to feel that by showing our full Jewish selves we’ll be unwanted, abandoned.

“If I’m too Jewish,” Deena murmured, eyes brimming, “then I won’t be accepted. If I speak too loudly, I’ll be the aggressive Jew. Then I’ll be difficult, then they won’t be able to tolerate me. Then they’ll leave me.” At one group meeting, Judith’s vulnerability drew us in, inviting deep connection. But afterwards, she said, her internal demon scorned her for opening so fully: “For feeling too much, for wanting too much. That I’m too much.”

Reminding us that we didn’t create these messages, feminist playwright and activist Eve Ensler refers to how the dominant culture tries to subdue the “too-ness” of girls in general. “Get used to it!” she urges girls to say, “This is who I am.”²

Curator/author Norman Kleeblatt’s confrontational (NYC) art exhibit and anthology, *Too Jewish*, brings the issue front-and-center. On her framed linen hand towels (part of the book/exhibit), artist Elaine Reichek embroidered “J.E.W.”—provoking nervousness from Jews and gentiles alike.³

On another she embroidered: “If you think you can be a little bit Jewish, you think you can be a little bit pregnant.”⁴

Cringing

Not only do we disparage ourselves, but the voice inside tells us to hang back from other Jews who are “too much”—so that we won’t be stigmatized the way they are. We end up shoving distaste onto each other. “I look at her and cringe,” Elly admitted. “Cringe comes from embarrassment, shame, a sick feeling. It’s ‘Uch! I’m not that, don’t think of us like that!’ When my clients complain,” she added, “it makes my skin crawl, because of the whiny Jew it evokes for me.” She blushed. “I just want to slap ’em!”

Deena loves Judaism and identifies with individuals. But “I can’t be as loud or as powerful as I want to be, I’m afraid I’ll be demonized”—for being “too much.” On her Iraqi father’s side, “Jewish women were celebrated: no stereotypes of ‘brash’ or ‘pushy.’” But her Midwestern Ashkenazi mom taught her to be “refined in a restaurant, quiet.” Now in her twenties, Deena is desperate to be Cool, definitely not “too nerdy.”

Different generation, related issue: the late feminist theorist/activist Andrea Dworkin confided, “I keep quiet at meetings more than I should because I don’t like feeling singled out as the Jew with the words.”⁵ Speaking of meetings: Elly Bulkin says that when there’s more than token Jewish visibility, it’s sometimes seen as a bid for “Jewish control.”⁶ Just speaking up can engender being seen as that “unpleasant/ obnoxious Jew.” Not being an unpleasant person, but being perceived that way: and then believing that’s who we are. When J. challenged a speaker spewing anti-Semitic ideas, and then wasn’t supported by those around her, she felt, she said, “like a pushy, self-absorbed, whiny, victim-y Jew.”

And what about those Jewish women who do “make it harder for the rest of us”? Kim heard a woman rabbi on the radio advocating gay marriage, pitted against an evangelical minister. “‘Thank God she’s out there,’ I felt. ‘She’s so strong and articulate.’ But I also thought, ‘She’s too aggressive, interrupting him constantly. She’s just adding to the stereotype!’ On the one hand, I was so proud; I’m kvelling, ‘Look at what we do!’ But then, ‘Oh my god, why do we have to do it that way?’”

Bringing it all home, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz crystallizes our challenge: “Stereotypes of Jewish women combine with prejudice against powerful women, pressuring us to cloak our strength lest we be seen as pushy; hide our desire, lest we be deemed oversexed...mute our feelings, lest we be judged overemotional...Jewish women are asked to sit on ourselves, lest we seem...too powerful...[and] depending on the extent of our assimilation and our feelings about our own Jewishness, [we] may respond negatively to strength in other Jewish women...Loving ourselves insufficiently, trafficking too much in other people’s conception of us, we fear our own strength...The task of self-love is endless.”⁷

I remember when my gutsy (also less assimilated working-class) friend Mel and I organized an unlearning anti-Semitism workshop for our staff colleagues at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. While xeroxing handouts

beforehand, Mel yelled across the courtyard, “Penny, how many more copies of the Jewish Liberation piece do we need?” Right there in the sweet summer morning, surrounded by women who were family, I shrank into my Doc Martins, muscles tightening, blood draining from my face. “Ohmygoddess, are they rolling their eyes about ‘those loud pushy Jews?’” I worried. “We should be quieter!” Then Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz’s words floated before me. “Someone will always call us pushy. Isn’t it time to really push?”⁸I breathed again. Yep, it’s time.

“Too Jewish”—according to whom?

“We Jewesses get the message early: It’s better to be Barbie than Barbra Streisand.”⁹—Ophira Edut

Remember: Christian hegemony (the rewarding of things Christian, usually white) can cast Jewishness as undesirable, sometimes evil. Assimilation backs up the message, nudging us to replicate the WASP norm. When we misstep, even when we don’t, our inner trickster may sneer at how disgusting/deviant we are: what we’ve ingested from prejudice and historic oppression. Worse yet, we think we’re somehow to blame.

The coup de grâce? Our behavior supposedly “justifies” any mistreatment: “She’s so bossy [maybe more direct about what she thinks than her Protestant counterpart], why would we hire someone like that?” Often we sweat to trim pounds, bleach hair, alter names and noses, trying to disguise ourselves. So that we will fit in, be loved. (No wonder savvy activists advise our allies: “When it comes to telling Jews that we’re liked and wanted and totally good-looking, you really can’t overdo it.”¹⁰)

Turning WASP values on their head, writer Rhonda Lieberman fantasizes a Jewish Barbie parody in Kleeblatt’s Too Jewish collection. Asks Lieberman, What if Barbie’s Jewish roots started showing?—referring to Barbie’s creator, Ruth Handler, daughter of Polish Jews, married to the Jewish cofounder of Mattel toys. What if the slim-hipped, gentile-looking doll became “Nose-Bob Barb (with pre-op detachable beak)”?¹¹

Lieberman’s tongue-in-cheek stereotype is born in a parallel universe to (Christian) Barbie. “Everyone thinks I’m annoying,” Jewish Barbie moans, flaunting qualities Barbie repressed: brunette or frosted hair, noticeable thighs, incessant whining.¹² Her body size? “She’s too thin—you’ll love her!...I can’t get a latke into that girl.”¹³

So Jewish Barbie hangs out at the college eating disorders clinic. She’s the “Hebrew Vogue” zine cover girl, wins a Manischewitz grant in Post-Colonialism Studies, and makes her summer camp debut in “Katz,” about Jewish cats working in the garment district (before the Anglicized version became a hit). But cruelly, Barbie refuses to acknowledge her Other, leaving Jewish Barbie to wail, “I’m not evil!”¹⁴ “Too Jewish” on parade.

Switching gears, remembering our history: in Nazi-occupied Warsaw, any Jew was “too Jewish.” Hiding Jewishness was a survival strategy. Allies from the Polish Underground instructed women escaping the Ghetto “how to appear Aryan and not attract notice.”¹⁵ Jews learned to restrain gestures,

and to style hair without frizz or curls; surgeons reshaped Jewish noses. Not life-threatening like in Europe, but in the 1940s U.S. many Jews felt the need for restraint. Marge Piercy remembers her father's Christian family who were "casually and relentlessly anti-Semitic."¹⁶ "If my mother or I ever laughed, or raised our voices, or used our hands in talking,...a look...would pass between them that would silence us, as if we had been pushed under a glass bell."¹⁷

In safer times like these, the antidote is valuing who we are, just as we are. Kim noticed, sometimes when Jewish women are disagreeing, or just schmoozing, "Protestants perceive us as 'difficult and controlling.' But we're just sharing our thoughts."

"That's nothing," Rani laughed. "I was just visiting my family, and was on the phone with my (WASP) girlfriend. She heard my family in the background and asked 'Oh my god, why are they screaming at each other?'" Rani grinned. "They're talking, that's the way they talk. And this isn't even the Iraqi side," she chuckled, "who are louder."