On the Politics of Being Jewish in a Multiracial State

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Abstract: The 1911 fire in the Triangle Shirtwaist factory is part of the cultural repertoire with which Jews in the U.S. constitute themselves. Its telling has changed greatly in the last 50 years. Recent tellings suggest that it is performing identity work in the constitution of a progressive Jewishness, in relationship to issues of race and gender. In particular, by portraying Jewish women's identities in ways that emphasize social justice activism as Jewish, these tellings also give men a platform from which to rethink the repertoire of alternatives of Jewish masculinity embedded in the old stories.

Keywords: Jews, political identity, historical memory, race, gender, class

Résumé : Le feu de 1911 dans la manufacture Triangle Shirtwaist fait partie du répertoire culturel à la base de la constitution de l'ethnicité juive aux États-Unis. Son message a beaucoup changé durant les cinquante dernières années. Des narrations récentes manifestent un travail sur l'identité dans le sens d'une définition progressiste de l'appartenance juive, du point de vue des questions de race et de genre. En particulier, en décrivant les identités des femmes juives de façon à ce que l'activisme en faveur de la justice sociale soit présenté comme juif, ces narrations fournissent un tremplin d'où on peut repenser le répertoire des alternatives à la masculinité juive inscrites dans les anciennes versions de la narration.

Mots-clés : Juifs, identité politique, mémoire historique, race, genre, classe

My offering to this volume honours a part of Richard Lee's commitment to social justice that we share as North American Jews. I want to consider a question we both have wrestled with as socially engaged scholars: What kind of Jewishness do Jews create when they pursue social justice as Jews in North America today?

When people come together to engage in collective political action, they also gather together to construct themselves as political agents. Part of this process involves analyzing the ways in which the particular uniting issue is important to each of them. This requires explaining the parts of one's social being or the social identities through which we make our most powerful connection to the issue. Often such connections are constructions of we-ness: racism or sexism is directed against us; homophobia hurts us, etc.

However, many who participate in various movements for social justice are not part of the obvious "we." Neither scholars nor activists any longer take ethnic identity for granted as monolithic or as a natural and primordial attachment. We are becoming increasingly self-conscious about issues of identity, memory and history. The fields most attentive to issues of social identities—ethnic studies, women's studies, lesbian and gay studies—have taken the lead in deconstructing the process of identity formation, its situationally specific dimensions, the struggles over constructions of "authenticity," and analyzing ways that they interpenetrate and constitute one another. Identity making involves more or less strategic selections, interpretations and deployments of shared stories and images in order to explain oneself to self and to others. I find Paul Kroskrity's (1993) concept of "repertoire of identities" a helpful way to think about identity making as an open process. By repertoire of identities he means the panoply of identities people are given and those they embrace, the full potential of resources they have for constructing social selves. The study then becomes one of understanding why people deploy the identities they do in any specific situation.

If constructing one's connection to an issue involves strategic construction of one's situational identities, then it is also the case that the ways participants construct their identities also shapes the way a political movement is framed and the directions it takes. For example, unions have a history of presenting their issues as class issues, ostensibly to unite workers across racial and gender lines. When non-White workers or women workers connect to such struggles, they are constrained not to deploy their racial identities and to identify through class. However, as Daniel Letwin (1995) and Mike Honey (1993) have shown for race, this meant that militant union priorities in the South were those of White workers. Strategies of identity construction were deeply implicated in struggles over issue construction. Here, a class construction of issues encouraged non-White workers to connect, but the racial specificity of the actual issues undercut that connection.

A focus on how participants who do not have a seemingly natural connection to the issue construct themselves politically can help unpack the reciprocal constitution of issues and actors. At issue here is how North American Jews, who are mainly coming from a position of class and racial privilege, construct themselves as political actors when they connect to today's movements for social justice that are centred on the priorities of low-income people of colour. To answer this question I will look at the story of the Triangle Fire and changes over the last two generations in the way it is told. My argument is that feminist tellings of the tale provide a bridge for Jewish women and men to construct their Jewishness as linking them "naturally" to struggles for social justice.

Jews have a long history of participation in progressive social movements, but quite often not as Jews. Naomi Seidman has given them a name, "vicarious Jews." By this she means Jews who enact their Jewish sense of "otherness," of being marginal and not of the mainstream in defense of the rights of others who've been othered, oppressed and marginalized. It's a long, noble Jewish tradition, she tells us, ranging from Freud and Marx to Jews in the U.S. Civil Rights movement, the feminist movement and queer theorists. Richard Lee's activism beginning in the 1960s against the Vietnam war, his work from the 1970s with anti-apartheid groups in solidarity with South Africa, and his work with the Innu of Labrador from the 1980s all make him a vicarious Jew in good standing.

Seidman argues that the reason for vicarious Jewishness, or Jewishness by other means, is that the discourse of ethnoracial politics in North America equates claims to ethnic identity with claims to racial and ethnic oppression. Jews who recognize this are understandably reluctant to present their activism as specifically Jewish. To do so, they fear, might lead others to think that they are claiming that they are oppressed because they are Jewish, or that they are claiming that discrimination against Jews in North America today is like discrimination against peoples of colour. Thus, Seidman (1998: 261) notes, "In the absence of a particularist Jewish political affiliation that could also satisfy the progressive universalist agenda with which Jewish politics has been historically linked, adopting the particularist position of another group paradoxically becomes a distinctively Jewish act."

The process of self-construction is social and performative as well as situational, so that it should be possible to look at other ways that progressive Jews may constitute their Jewishness. By what social performances do Jewish activists engage with Jewish politics? With non-Jewish activists? What do the ways Jewish activists construct themselves to each other and to others in their movement, tell us about their understandings of the movement and themselves?

Self-constructions of Jewish activists today need to be set against the backdrop of Jewish politics since the mid-1960s. Those politics, especially around Israel and around race in the United States, have become increasingly conservative, as has the public face of politics in the U.S. more generally. Most Jewish organizations that filed amicus briefs around Bakke and DeFunis in their cases against affirmative action policies at the University of California and Washington medical schools opposed affirmative action, while only two, the National Council of Jewish Women and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations filed in support of it (Greenberg, 1998: 72, 86). Caught between massive Jewish support for Israel from 1967 on, and the condemnation of "Zionism" as imperialism by activists of colour and third world activists, many Jews who, like Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (1996) opposed Israeli policies found themselves accused of being self-hating Jews by Jews, and racists by anti-imperialists of color for arguing that Israel had a right to exist. The social space for progressive Jewishness on these key issues was small in the 1970s, and no doubt produced a fair number of vicarious Jews (Brettschneider, 1996)). However, some Jews have struggled to articulate a progressive Jewish identity and to make space for it in the landscape of Jewishness. In recent years, that space has grown considerably larger, particularly with respect to race and racism, though it remains considerably less so with respect to Israel.[1] Today, however, grow-

ing numbers of North American Jews, Richard Lee among them, are speaking out for peace, for Israel to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza, including the Jewish settlements, and for the establishment of a Palestinian state in those territories. In his keynote at the 2002 meetings of CASCA, Richard described Israel's systematic destruction of the infrastructure of Palestinian civil society, including its books and computers and the health and educational records they contained. He argued that willful destruction of a social infrastructure deserved to be considered a crime against humanity and for anthropologists to take that case.

In this paper I will discuss the ways North American Jews in the last decade have drawn upon a Jewish cultural heritage of collective memories—historical events, stories and images—to explain, justify, connect to or model specifically anti-racist and progressive Jewish identities. Peter Novick framed his inquiry into the Holocaust as a study of collective memory. He points out that collective memory and a historical consciousness are almost antithetical. The former expresses "some eternal or essential truth about the group—usually tragic. A memory once established, comes to define that eternal truth, and, along with it, an eternal identity, for the members of the group" (1999: 4). The collective memory of the Holocaust, as Novick shows in his book, remains a powerful organizer of a conservative Jewish identity and political performance.

Are there comparable collective memories that are shared among progressive and vicarious Jews—things by which they constitute, perform their political identities, things that at once distinguish them from and connect them to a larger palette of Jewishness? There are indeed and the story of the Triangle fire has resurfaced in recent years to perform this role. This is a story that is centred around a fire that broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist factory on New York's Lower East Side in 1911. Many young women garment workers died from the fire or from jumping out of the windows to escape it. There were no fire escapes and the doors had been locked to prevent workers from leaving their machines. On a scale much smaller than recollections of the Holocaust, the story of the Triangle fire is a collective memory, a constituent part of many Jews' repertoire of identities. It performs identity work in its present feminist telling when it is deployed to make the claim that part of an eternal Jewish identity is progressive—or, to paraphrase Gloria Steinem, progressive is what Jewish looks like. The gendered version of this story is also part of a larger discourse of Jews as workers who suffered in sweatshops, built unions and fought for worker justice. This discourse is deployed to explain to non-Jews why American Jews, who are a pretty affluent bunch, have a "natural" solidarity with oppressed workers and with people who are racially oppressed. When American Jews perform this representation for themselves, it carries an additional prescriptive message—and therefore Jews "should" side with the oppressed.

This discourse is part of a larger conversation—often a debate—about the politics of being Jewish in a multiracial and racist society. By constructing the iconographic American Jewish subject as an oppressed woman worker, this discourse calls into question the ethnic authenticity of Jewish garment bosses, and by implication, challenges the icon of the upwardly mobile entrepreneurial Jew, and the Jews as model minorities. But it also sidesteps a confrontation with Jewish deployment of the Holocaust in support of conservative politics with respect to Israel. Jews fight it out in part with contrasting stories, contrasting representations and memories.

But not all stories and representations work equally well, and the sides are not equal—or even always clearly opposed. The struggle is a "war of position" in the sense that Gramsci used it to refer to the continual ideological struggle in which creating and deploying representations is part of a larger effort to transform a society's prevailing "common sense" into a revolutionary common sense. Images as images can be used in a variety of ways. But images have histories of use that limit the ways one can use them. For example, it is still possible to find a political mix of Jews, none of whom are working class, to identify with the image of Jewish garment workers, and to take political stands against present-day sweatshops that exploit Latina/o and Asian workers even when the bosses are Jews. But even Jews who support a Palestinian state cannot appeal to the image of homeless Holocaust survivors to persuade other Jews to support that goal (although that image may now be gaining some purchase). The Jewish worker image has long been a staple figure in progressive and socialist Jewish narratives. The homeless Holocaust survivor has already been integrated into powerful narratives in support of Israel as a Jewish state. The power of a collective representation lies largely in its ability to perform identity work—to evoke recognizable and positive forms of Jewishness—for a broader swath of American Jews than those ideologically committed to the position. It is the "work" the representation performs, or that a variety of Jews perform with it, that gives it its hegemonic position. Let me now turn to my argument that the work the feminist representation of Jewish garment workers

has been doing of late, at least in Los Angeles, has been to carve out space for progressive Jewishness for men as well as women.

The story of the 1911 fire in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in New York City has always been an important part of my (admittedly small) personal repertoire of secular Jewish identity. Together with stories about feisty young women garment workers, I've carried it with me to explain to myself why I feel connected to progressive (in the sense of politically left leaning) causes, from the civil rights and anti-war movements in the 1960s and 1970s, to more diffuse feminist, racial and economic justice issues in the last decades.

The Triangle fire story has also loomed large in progressive and Jewish circles in Los Angeles in recent years. For example, in the mid-1990s, Jewish members of Common Threads, a women's group supporting garment worker organizing in Los Angeles, and The Jewish Committee Against Sweatshops in Los Angeles often invoked the Triangle image in a way which merged the fire with images of heroic young women garment workers and union organizing. For the latter group, that connection was especially important in its support of the Smithsonian's very controversial sweatshop exhibit hosted at the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance. Interestingly, this was the only U.S. museum to house it as a visiting exhibition, although it did so very uncomfortably. In a similar vein, a 1998 Women's History month program by the Feminist Center of the American Jewish Congress made the Triangle fire its focus. Rose Friedman, then a 102-year-old survivor of the fire spoke. Other speakers, including me, linked it to ongoing sweatshop issues and to Jews' historic responsibility to continue fighting sweatshops now as we had when those sweatshop workers were Jews. And in 2000, the theatrical fundraiser for the Sholem community, a progressive community of secular Jews in Los Angeles, "Bread and Roses," was described as being about "one Jewish family's involvement in American labor history, including the tragedy of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist fire, union organizing and in the garment industry, and contemporary labor struggles" (Sholem flyer).

Since the late 1980s, there also has been something of a mini-flood of books about the Triangle fire. A far from extensive search turned up some 12 books on the subject published since 1961. Several of the authors report being told the story as children, or of survivors telling it to their children or grandchildren (Bogen, 1993: 13; Goldin, 1992: 54; Stein, 1961: 217-218). Although, beside Leon Stein's important book in 1961 and a children's story in 1971, the rest came after 1983, with seven since 1992.[2] Especially in the children's books and works of fiction that dominate the recent treatments, the heroines are feisty young women who tend to be unionists; and unions are portrayed sympathetically as workers' weapons against such tragedies (Baker, 2000; Goldin, 1992; Llewelyn, 1986: 10, 35, 48).

Embedded in these tellings is a moral lesson about American Jews' relationship to other ethnic groups in the United States: that Jews have an ethical responsibility to align themselves with the struggles of non-White peoples and peoples who are oppressed even though American Jews are not now numerous among the economically or ethnically oppressed. Jews as a people have an obligation to fight for social justice—or, this is what Jewish should look like.

This is not the same moral lesson I heard in the story when my mother and aunt told it to me in the early 1950s. The memory that sticks has my aunt Fannie or my mother taking me on a day out in the garment district in Manhattan—shopping, lunch at the Automat. They pointed out the Triangle Building to me and told me the story of the fire, the locked doors, the girls jumping and burned to death, the greed of the garment bosses; the indifference of the city authorities. It was a vivid story, as if they had been there, even though they were not. And either they showed me the wrong building or I confused the Flatiron Building at 23rd street with the Triangle fire. Nevertheless, the lesson I took away from this version is consistent with that of Leon Stein's 1961 book, that tragedy resulting from greed is the result of business left unchecked, and that poor Jews could not expect justice from the courts. Yet, despite the fact that Stein started as a garment cutter and went on to write for the ILGWU, there is remarkably little in his book about union struggles or heroic young women. This is consistent with John McClymer's observation (1998) that his documentary history was the first analysis to link fully the story of the Uprising of Twenty Thousand of 1909-10 with the story of the fire. It would appear then that the emphasis in the telling of this story has changed in the last several decades from one in which women are tragic victims of capitalist greed to one in which they are active fighters for social justice against that greed.

How do we account for the changes in the telling between the 1950s and the 1990s? And what is it about this story as it is presently told that makes it loom so large in the performance of progressive Jewishness? I suspect that the deployment of the linked stories of the Triangle fire and union justice are doing important identity work in constructing a progressive Jewish identity.

This work is done among Jews, and by Jews for a larger than Jewish audience. As an example of the former, at the formative meeting of Los Angeles' Progressive Jewish Alliance in 1999, Rabbi Steve Jacobs invoked the Triangle fire to indicate Jews' connection to other oppressed peoples and our continued moral responsibility to economic and social justice. Turning outward to an audience that was not Jewish, the Triangle fire was a prominent part of an occupational safety and health curriculum developed by progressive Jews, among others, in the Labor and Occupational Safety and Health program at UCLA for working-class African American and Latino high school students. In a Jewish context, the shared memory linked being Jewish to experiencing oppression and the "natural" or consequent obligation to fight alongside anyone being oppressed. In a non-Jewish context, the work of the image was to explain to others why Jews, who are perceived as a particularly well-off group in Los Angeles, are likely to side with those fighting oppression.

The progressive Jewish identity version of the Triangle fire story is also one answer to the "Jewish question" in post World War II America: How have Jews reconciled Jews' history of poverty and oppression with their present mainstream acceptance and affluence? What does it mean to be Jewish in a society that has accorded them the privileges formerly reserved for the white Protestant mainstream and allowed Jews extraordinary economic success in the last 50 years? I think of this tension as wrestling with whiteness, an issue of some importance in recent Jewish critical scholarship. But why should the working-classness of the Triangle fire story work for today's Jews to explain why Jews are (or should be) "naturally" progressive, especially about ethnoracial issues?

I suspect that it is the centrality of women in its telling today. More than victims, women are active subjects, fighters against their own oppression and that of others. Told this way, I believe the story makes a Jewish feminist bridge to other contemporary struggles. It is easy to understand why progressive Jewish women might embrace the identities presented in this story. Less obvious is what a story whose central characters are strong women does for the identities of Jewish men. To understand that we need to examine the background from which it emerged, namely the changing place of Jews in postwar America.

Gender and Wrestling with Whiteness

Postwar America was good for the Jews. As I've argued elsewhere (Brodkin 1998), institutionalized barriers fell in higher education, in many occupations, and in where Jews could live. Anti-Semitism fell from fashion (even as racism did not), and Jews were arguably embraced as among America's most visible and favourite ethnics. But postwar America was also deeply sexist. Its prosperity and opportunities were reserved for men. Women's prescribed access to the good life was through marriage.

Jews responded to this goodness in varied and complex ways. They seized them, but they also struggled to understand the meanings for their newfound success: Why us? How could one be simultaneously Jewish and mainstream American? In part because racial segregation in the United States remained legal and deeply institutionalized in practice, answers to the question of "why Jews," were racially charged, especially with regard to African Americans. And in part because white America in the 1950s and 1960s was deeply masculinist (more people probably actually lived "traditional" middle-class patriarchal domesticity than ever before or since), the mainstream offered very different things to Jewish men and Jewish women. The active subjects—those who spoke publicly and wrote, and those about whom they spoke—of Jewish attempts to understand the secrets of their success were men. Jewish women appeared in their relationship to Jewish men, seldom in their own right. When Jewish men pondered the causes and consequences of Jewish success, they pondered it as stories about the virtues of Jewish masculinity and the impact of worldly success on men. Even if what was good for Jewish men was supposed to be good for Jewish women, it was far from clear even to Jewish men what was good for them.

An important celebratory story was told by an influential cohort of Jewish public intellectuals, including Nathan Glazer, Norman Podhoretz, Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol. They updated and elaborated a theme in the American Jewish repertoire of identities, that Jews were better Americans than mainstream white Protestants. The version prevalent in the early 20th century stressed Jewish commitment to American ideals of democracy and social justice by pointing to Jews' anti-discrimination efforts in concert with African Americans (Diner, 1977). The version developed in the 1950s and 1960s created the concept of a model minority as an ethnic culture that has what it takes to help its members succeed in mainstream America, and Jews were it. In this case, purportedly Jewish traits of strong families, deferred gratification, hard work, and sticking together were deployed to explain—to Jews and non-Jews—the steep upward rise of Jewish educational and occupational attainments and Jewish income. Where the earlier

story of Jews-as-better-Americans highlighted Jews' cultural passion for democracy, this story emphasized the Weberian connection between the Protestant ethic and worldly success for both Jews and WASPs. The moral of both stories was to urge mainstream white Americans to embrace and emulate Jews as one of themselves. The particular irony of the post-World War II version was that it persuaded Jews and non-Jews alike that Jews were exemplary Protestants, and that Jewishness was an exemplary cultural way to be white Americans. However, the ways in which the newer celebratory story explained Jews' extraordinary success in comparison to African Americans—linking persistent African American poverty to an inferior culture rather than to persistent and institutionalized discrimination—set the stage for conflict between the two groups and for tension between Jews and other peoples of colour in the United States.

A different, less celebratory story that was deeply anxious about the negative consequences of upward mobility and patriarchal domesticity for Jewish masculinity was told by postwar Jewish writers like Phillip Roth and Herman Wouk. Were Jewish men losing their souls in the quest for material affluence and middle-class domesticity? By casting Jewish women as obstacles to Jewish men's ability to combine Jewish authenticity and mainstream affluence without pain, they ignited a gender war between Jewish women and Jewish men that continues to be a player in the construction of Jewish identities today.

Both the celebratory story and the anxious masculinist story (and the same writer might tell both stories) presented Jewish identities that were politically conservative by the racial and gendered standards of the late-1960s onward. To the extent that they were borne out in racially and gender conservative Jewish politics, they explained Jewishness in a conservative way and presented Jews to non-Jews in the same way.

The celebratory story and its invidious contrasts have been keystones of Jewish organizational conservatism, including that of opposition to affirmative action. This much bigger story is beyond my scope here. However, it is worth noting that the celebratory embrace and presentation of Jewish identity as prefiguratively white, Protestant middle class and model minority has been an impediment to understandings of Jewishness as progressive, especially when it comes to racial justice, by a non-Jewish, non-White public.

There was a gender issue as well. The virtues and rewards Jewish intellectuals claimed for themselves as good Jewish sons also depended also upon showing how similar Jewish culture was to 1950s white gender ideals. What were the ways in which Jewish identity was presented as specifically male? What baggage came with those presentations? If Jewish intellectuals and artists embraced the models of male success, they did so with a strong dose of ambivalence about the masculinity it entailed. Jewish men's ambivalence revolved around the promise and the reality of patriarchal domesticity upon which so much of 1950s white masculinity depended. Norman Podhoretz analyzed the ways his childhood construction of African American men was implicated in his anxiety and ambivalence toward his own white Jewish manhood. Even as he appreciated his good grades and his mother's solicitousness, he wished he had the tough, independent masculinity of the bad black boys and feared being called a sissy.

Riv Ellen Prell has insightfully unpacked male ambivalence in Jewish fiction as being about the rebellions of Jewish sons against the second-generation hard-working, middle-class breadwinning domestic Jewish life. Both Prell and Paula Hyman have analyzed Jewish fiction to show how Jewish men expressed their ambivalence about mainstream masculinity by projecting their anxieties onto Jewish women. In these works, Jewish women appear inadequate as women because they refuse to be self-denying mothers and deferential helpmeets. Jewish women are presented as stereotypic mothers who henpecked their husbands, made their sons neurotic. Somewhat later, they became Jewish American Princesses (JAPs), defective lovers and wives who forsook Jewishness and sensuality for unfettered materialism—the crasser the better. They are also distinctly less up to the task than Jewish men of gracefully managing to combine an authentic Jewish soul with mainstream prosperity. The subtext here is that were it not for the inadequacies of their mothers and wives, Jewish men would have it all. Hyman argues that although the tension around assimilation was not new, its particular gendering was a postwar product. As part of their responsibility for preserving Jewish culture, Jewish mothers were supposed to make sure their sons became nice Jewish boys and married nice Jewish girls. But some boys didn't want to be so nice and Jewish, and some even aspired to non-Jewish trophy wives as visible and seductive symbols of their masculinity and their success in entering the white mainstream. Prell argues that Jewish American princesses (JAPs) are Jewish men's projective nightmares about their own whiteness. Where Jewish mothers hovered and smothered and guilt-tripped their sons into forsaking the hard-earned pleasures of white mid-

dle-class masculine materialism, JAPs were the metastasizing cancer of that materialism. Perhaps they emerged a decade or two later because they reflected anxieties that came from several decades of life in mainstream consumer culture.

For Jewish women the mainstream was even more of a mixed blessing than it was for men, since the rewards and their identities were contingent mainly upon their relationships with Jewish men. Regardless of how Jewish women felt at the time about the ways they were portrayed, their available responses were limited. Before the women's movement came along, feminist perspectives that asserted a woman's right to personhood over and above her relationship to fathers, husbands and sons were not readily available. Absent the concept of a woman's entitlement to an identity in her own right, Jewish women had no social place from which to effectively critique Jewish misogyny. Instead they were constrained to talking back from within a male-centred framework. Thus, Zena Smith Blau (1969) defended Jewish mothers against negative stereotyping by inverting the stereotype: Yes, Jewish mothers controlled their sons through love and guilt; yes, this might make them neurotic, but Jewish motherly control was also responsible for teaching the Jewish virtues that made Jewish men so successful. Betty Friedan, author of the 1963 classic, *The Feminist Mystique*, from which the rebirth of the feminist movement is often dated, was among the few women who did have access to feminist ideas in the 1950s. As a labour journalist for the United Electrical Workers, she knew about left labour ideas and struggles for equal pay for equal work for women. But she wrote as a white middle-class suburban woman, not as a radical, not as a Jew. For her no more than for Blau was there a Jewish place to stand in which to engage Jewish misogyny. The anger and the desire to speak out is still there. When I spoke to a largely community audience at San Diego State University's Jewish Studies Program in 1999, women in their seventies still spoke angrily of Philip Roth's "male chauvinism," suggesting the longevity of the Jewish gender wars.

These linked stories, the celebratory and the anxious, are still with us. But the political context within which Jews are constructing their identities has changed. On the one hand, the celebratory story of Jews as model minorities has had by now a long association with conservative Jewish social politics, particularly around race. Peter Novick has argued that the story of the Holocaust and its "lessons" came to be used within this political field by conservative Jewish organizations to be players in a discourse of victim politics, and to legitimate their opposition to such "special treatment" efforts. The power of the Holocaust together with the almost canonical status of the Jewish success story scaffolded a hegemonic sense of Jewish identity that was fairly conservative and which left little space for American Jews to advance alternative politics as specifically Jewish politics, especially about race.

On the other hand, the feminist movement opened up a conceptual and discursive space for Jewish women to critique the male dominance of post-World War II Jewishness, and from there, to rethink Jewish identity more generally. Although Jewish women arguably have been overrepresented among feminists, specifically Jewish feminism has been a long time coming. It has only flowered in the last decade. Jewish feminist scholars, nurtured in Women's Studies programs and feminist committees of their professional associations through the 1970s, produced powerful critiques of postwar Jewish stories and identities in the 1980s and 1990s. They have also begun to recover and rethink the past to develop alternative stories that underpin new identities for Jewish women. Their work is restoring working-class Jewish women's personhood, agency and sexuality. It shows their central roles in Jewish community, leftist and labour politics, as well as the historical persistence of Jewish women's voices and agency in popular culture. In the process they also have produced analyses that rehistoricize American Jewish culture. By so doing, they challenge the ahistorical "lessons" embedded in the old stories. They show us Jewish identities of the past that did not conform to the timeless ones presented in the Jewish stories of the 1950s and 1960s, and they help us to understand how and why the palette of Jewish identities has changed (among others, see Antler, 1995; 1998; Ewen, 1985; Hyman, 1980; 1995; Kessler-Harris, 1976; 1979; 1982; Moore, 1981; 1992; 1994; Orleck, 1995; Prell, 1993; 1996; 1999; Simon, 1982)

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The new telling of the Triangle fire story embodies these feminist critiques, and by so doing may well be performing identity work about Jewishness in relation to the wider world, as well as about its constructions of womanhood and manhood. With respect to identity work around gender, the telling presents an alternative range of Jewish womanly virtues like assertiveness, dreams of personhood, sensuality, political entrepreneurship, left activism and political theorizing that figure most positively. As Susannah Heschel (1998: 113) has argued, Jewish women have a particular vantage

point—as a minority within a minority. Where Jewish men may well have an outsider sensibility, it is largely one of memory; but for Jewish women, their second-class gender status within the Jewish community provides them with a lived outsider vision that helps to animate a progressive politics. By opening up Jewish women's identities in ways that emphasize social justice activism as Jewish, these tellings also give men a platform from which to rethink the repertoire of alternatives of Jewish masculinity embedded in the old stories—hardworking materialist and paterfamilias or personally rebellious and somewhat irresponsible luftmensch. Neither the nice Jewish boy nor the luftmensch is an identity for changing an imperfect world. The representations and discourses of Jewishness surrounding the Holocaust and Israel present another range of masculinities. The discourse and politics of "never again" plays off anti-Semitic stereotypes of effeminized Jewish men, and docile, timid Jews being herded to the gas chamber, the ultimate victim, the ultimate non-agent. The conservative discourse of "never again" organizes a wide swath of Jews around its message of military strength and evocation of the old counter-representation of muscular and male Zionism in the service of righteousness (or self-righteousness). Until the growth of the Refusenick movement of military reservists in Israel, this story was too fully occupied by the Jewish right to have room for a progressive Jewish masculinity to retell the story. However, Jewish feminists' reinterpretations of particular pasts have made progressive social activist identities visible and again available. As such, the Triangle fire story may serve as a place for Jewish men as well as women to rethink the relationship of Jewishness to contemporary North American society. All these stories or collective memories are part of a larger dialogue within the Jewish community about the meaning of being Jewish today, about the nature of our connections, contradictions and affiliations, about our commitment to social stasis or social transformation. In that dialogue, I suggest, stories and how they are told are part of the repertoire with which we think, that we deploy sometimes strategically, sometimes unselfconsciously. They are cultural tools, the dramatic repertoire of argument and display for reshaping Jewishness to adapt to changing times and changing politics.

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Notes

1 Nevertheless, there were Jews who struggled to create a place within Jewishness to develop alternatives to the right-wing positions on Israel promoted by much of the Jewish organizational lobby and to make a place for Jewishness as anti-racist in the wider society. On the early 1970s Porter and Dreier 1973. More recently there has been much more critical Jewish scholarship on race and racism, and a rise in progressive and anti-racist Jewish activism. A few examples include works by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (1996), Marla Brettschneider (1996 a, 1996b), Adams and Bracey, 1999; Satzman, Back and Sorin, 1992; Kleeblatt, 1996; Jonathan Boyarin, David Biale et al.

2 A good bibliography of garment worker unionization and the Triangle fire can be found in McClymer, 1998; 173-178. I thank Deborah Dash Moore for suggesting that I look at children's books on the fire. I conducted an on-line book search by subject and title words in OCLC, the University of California libraries, Santa Monica and Los Angeles Public libraries, and Amazon.com. Of 12 books, half were children's, five of the six published since 1989; the sixth in 1971. Two were fictional and two were poetry, leaving only two scholarly studies of the fire, one published in 1961, the other in 1998.

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