
PAULA HYMAN

(1946–2011)

At the Center of Change

BY RACHEL KRANSON

At the time of her death in December, Paula Hyman was the Lucy Moses Professor of Modern Jewish History at Yale University. She had been the first female dean of the Albert A. List College of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the first woman president of the American Academy for Jewish Research, and co-founder of the seminal Jewish feminist group of the 1970s, Ezrat Nashim. While still a graduate student, she authored what may have been the first social history of Jewish women, *The Jewish Woman in America* [1976], and then proceeded to transform the way that Jewish scholars think of such basic historical paradigms as assimilation and acculturation by viewing these phenomena through the lens of gender. (See her bibliography at *Lilith.org*.)

Most of the Jewish girls born in America today will take it for granted that women can be rabbis, count in a minyan, and read from the Torah. And Jewish historians being trained today are called to task when

they do not take gender into account. Paula Hyman was at the forefront of the religious and intellectual struggles that generated these changes. Her influence extended both into the academy and far beyond it, affecting the lives of Jewish females in schools and congregations in ways of which many are still unaware.

The reflections that follow give some glimpses into her legacy, and the extraordinary ways in which she shaped the Jewish feminist world we live in today.

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AMY STONE

Hyman and her daughter Judith Rosenbaum, 2010.

Martha Ackelsberg

Paula and I first met early in our freshman year at Radcliffe—probably during the first week, although I cannot remember for sure. Really, I cannot remember not knowing Paula once we were at college. Somehow, we almost always found ourselves doing the same things, in the same places—Harvard Hillel, Phillips Brooks House (the social service organization), the Committee on Degrees in Social Studies (a small, interdisciplinary

undergraduate major concentration). One semester, we actually took all four of our classes together—and this without any advance planning or coordination!

I would say that it was probably in and through Harvard Hillel that we came to be close friends—and, probably not coincidentally, began to develop at least an initial feminist consciousness. Paula and I were both products of Judaism's Conservative movement: we grew up in synagogues that educated girls and boys together, but did not count women in a minyan, and did not allow girls to be called for an aliyah as a bat mitzvah.

Paula and I were both regular attendees at Friday night dinners and services at Hillel, and also at Conservative services on Shabbat mornings. But despite the proddings of Rabbi Ben Zion Gold, director of Hillel at the time, both of us hesitated to take on the honor of leading services, because we fully accepted the view, dominant at the time, that leading services was “men's” role! I remember very clearly, however, an important “click” moment, when I was sitting with Paula at services on either Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur (I believe it may have been during our sophomore year). A fellow student

(male, of course) was leading the davening, not very expertly; and Paula turned to me and said: “We could do better than that.” For both of us, that turned out to be the first, cautious step in an awakening Jewish-feminist consciousness: before the end of that academic year, we were both taking regular turns leading the congregation in prayer. Needless to say, the foundations of Judaism did not come tumbling down!

Paula and I continued our feminist explorations together in New York, after we started graduate school—I at Princeton and she at Columbia. We became part of a feminist consciousness-raising group made up of wives of medical students, and spent many hours sharing stories and developing a more systematic analysis of the difficulties we were confronting in our lives and relationships.

Not surprisingly, then, when—as a member of the New York Havurah—I helped to organize a class on “women and Judaism,” Paula was one of the first people we invited to join. Her energy and enthusiasm—as well as her deep knowledge of and commitment to Judaism—were critical to the group. Although we began with the simple goal of educating ourselves about Jewish sources on the status of women, we eventually came to realize that we needed to take action to try to change the actual situation of Jewish women. We took the opportunity offered by the annual meeting of the (Conservative movement’s) Rabbinical Assembly at the Concord Hotel in March of 1972 to give ourselves a name—Ezrat Nashim (we took this because it referred to the women’s section in the ancient temple; but, literally, it means “help for women”)—and to present a set of demands: “Jewish Women Call for Change.” Among the changes called for in that document were access by women to institutions of Jewish higher learning, including rabbinical and cantorial schools; counting of women in a minyan; full membership in Jewish communal organizations; ability to be heard as witnesses in courts of Jewish law and to initiate divorce... (the full document is available at Lilith.org). Paula was one of the group’s main spokespersons.

Paula never suffered fools gladly, and did not mince words. She insisted on women’s equality even in contexts where

some called that insistence “divisive.” So, for example, when a group of Yale students (many of whom had studied with Paula) organized a conference on “Jewish Women and Freedom” in April of 1999, and included on the program a Friday night service in which the hundreds of women present would not constitute a minyan (the quorum necessary for Jewish prayer), Paula

uncompromising in her view that it would be utterly unacceptable for a gathering of 400 women not to consider ourselves a minyan. The decision we reached, which was acceptable to the Orthodox women present, was that there would be a full service and that Orthodox women would simply not respond to *bor’chu* or *kaddish*. Women called to the Torah could recite

She was one of the most fearless people I have ever known. I remember going to a panel on modern Jewish history. Everyone paid homage to the “great minds” and she said, “I didn’t think they were great minds; they never wrote about women.” And it was breathtaking.

Riv-Ellen Prell

helped to organize resistance, insisting that the egalitarian goals for which she/we had fought for so long should not be dismissed or ignored, even in the name of “including” Orthodox Jewish women. ■

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Judith Plaskow

I met Paula Hyman at the first national Jewish Feminist Conference, in New York City in 1972. After the opening sessions, several members of Ezrat Nashim went to a hotel room to discuss how to handle the question of whether women could make up a valid minyan at Shabbat services the next morning. I was part of the passionate conversation about how we could function as a minyan at a conference with both Orthodox and non-Orthodox participants. Paula, like others of us, was

whole or partial blessings as they wished. As I recall, Paula read from the Torah. For the vast majority of people present, it was the first time we had ever heard a woman read Torah.

I spent the following Rosh Hashanah with the New York Havurah. Paula was eight months pregnant. I can still picture so clearly the way she carried the baby in the straight-out-in-front way that led people to say she was carrying a boy. Always overturning expectations, Paula had a girl (Judith Rosenbaum). At Paula’s prompting, I was given an aliyah—my first—and afterwards she congratulated me on my bat mitzvah.

When the Jewish Theological Seminary decided in 1983 to admit women into the rabbinical school, a group of Ezrat Nashim members went out to dinner to celebrate. There, I remember Paula saying that her membership in Ezrat Nashim was very important to her as a historian because it made her realize that small groups of people really could make history. ■

Judith Plaskow is professor emerita of religious studies at Manhattan College, a Jewish feminist theologian, and co-founder of the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion. Her best-known book is Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective.

Alice Shalvi

The first time I met Paula was in 1994, when we were both among the participants at a conference on gender and Judaism at Ohio State University. It so happened that Rosh Hodesh fell on the second day of the conference. I suggested we have a women's tefila and, to my astonishment, within 10 minutes everything was

Keren McGinity

When I saw Paula at the 2010 Association for Jewish Studies conference in Boston I asked her to inscribe a copy of *Gender and Jewish History* which I had just purchased. She wrote: "To Keren, Thank you for bringing our work further. All the best, Paula." These words simultaneously

We should think about what she used to call "passing it down." We can't help the older people but we can pass it down. Academia was competitive and cutthroat, and that's totally the opposite of what I got from Paula.

Marion Kaplan

organized. Paula volunteered to do both the Torah reading and Mussaf—tasks she performed with impressive skill. She wore a tallit and tefillin, for me a totally new phenomenon. At the time, such a thing could not have happened in Israel and was still comparatively rare in the U.S.

It was not until 2000 that I came to know her more intimately, when she enthusiastically agreed to partner with Professor Dalia Ofer of the Hebrew University in editing the *Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, which my husband, Moshe Shalvi, had long dreamed of publishing. Every summer she came to Israel and spent countless hours with Moshe and myself discussing the progress, both actual and desired, of the project. Her detailed comments revealed not only an astonishing range and profundity of knowledge, but also (more unusually) a punctilious attention to details of style, grammar and even punctuation. It became clear to me that whatever project she undertook she carried out with all her heart, mind and soul. ■

Alice Shalvi won the Israel Prize 2007 for her contribution to Israeli society and to the advancement of women, founded the Israel Women's Network and headed the Pelech Religious Experimental High School for Girls.

validated my research and called on me to continue the pursuit of gender equality—one small example among countless others illustrating that Paula was a consummate scholar and teacher. ■

Keren R. McGinity, Ph.D., is a research associate at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute. She is the author of Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America, and founding director of Love & Tradition (www.loveandtradition.com).

Beth Wenger

I met Paula Hyman in the middle of her career and was the first graduate student to study with her after she went to Yale. I was not a part of the pioneering generation of Jewish feminists, but instead reaped the benefits of their efforts. I have always felt that there are two different approaches taken by women from that generation. One group says, "I had it so tough; you should appreciate what you have now," and the other group does not want today's women to experience what they did, but rather wants to make it even better for the next generation. Paula certainly fell into the latter category.

Once Paula supported a cause, a movement, or a principle, she was unshakeable. Likewise, when she believed in someone, she never wavered, though privately she would always tell people what she felt they needed to hear. When times were tough, and even when she did not agree with my decisions, Paula remained in my corner. ■

Beth S. Wenger is Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania and director of its Jewish Studies program. Her books include History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage and The Jewish Americans: Three Centuries of Jewish Voices in America, companion volume to the 2008 PBS series.

Rebecca Kobrin

From the moment I stepped into Paula Hyman's classroom in 1990 as a Yale undergraduate, her passion for teaching and for bringing the past to life inspired me. Her course on the Jewish immigrant experience provoked me to rethink the ways in which I conceptualized and narrated this chapter in Jewish history. She persistently questioned everyone in this seminar on their views, left no argument unchallenged and made everyone feel they were part of a larger mission to uncover aspects of the past no one had yet examined.

One of the great fortunes of my career was being able to return to Yale in 2002 as a postdoctoral fellow. Paula saw it as her task to provide me with crucial mentoring not only on teaching and scholarship, but balancing my personal life as well. When I once noted that I felt that I had failed as a postdoc because I had not yet found a publisher for my book, she retorted without missing a beat, "if you do not produce a sibling for your daughter, you have failed as a postdoc." Indeed I have met few women like Paula in the academic world who remained steadfastly committed to making sure her students remain fully engaged in politics, community, academic life and family. ■

Rebecca Kobrin, Knapp Assistant Professor of American Jewish History, Columbia University. Her first book, Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora was a National Jewish Book Award Finalist.

Anne Lapidus Lerner

If I had to choose from among the decades of my memories of Paula Hyman just one, it would be her daughter Judith's bat mitzvah in our little shul, Paula in her purple dress walking confidently up the stairs on that clear November Shabbat in 1986 with her husband, Stanley Rosenbaum, and their daughters Judith and Adina.

On the surface it was a familiar scene: a couple with their children approaching the synagogue to mark the coming of age of their elder child. But things are not always what they seem. For weeks preceding the bat mitzvah Paula had not been feeling well. She seldom complained, but she was clearly concerned—headaches, dizziness. She was relieved when she was running a fever because, as she said, people who have had cancer can get the flu, too. She was willing to go to the doctor, but wanted to wait until after the bat mitzvah; no point upsetting things.

Finally, on Friday morning, eight days before the bat mitzvah ceremony, she called to say that Stan insisted that she wait no longer to see a doctor, so we might have to postpone our scheduled foray to the Lower East Side where I was going to buy our gift for Judith—a pair of *tefillin*. Eventually Stan called to say that they were doing tests. He sounded calm when he called again to tell me that Paula's breast cancer had metastasized into a brain tumor that they would take out on Sunday. A doctor, he claimed that it was not very complicated surgery.

Saturday night it seemed as though the whole New York Jewish world was in Paula's hospital room to wish her well. She was composed, assured that by Friday she would be able to be home.

Paula did return home that Friday afternoon and appeared in shul on Shabbat morning, fully prepared to *leyn* the *aliyot* she had planned to read. No dry eyes in shul that morning. Her one concession to her illness was allowing me to lead *shabarit* in her stead. That night at the bat mitzvah party, the dancing, which Paula prudently sat out, was the most energized I have ever experienced. It was completely cathartic as we gave physical expression to our relief.

Reflections on

Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia

by Deborah Dash Moore

We engaged in our own gendered mini-who-is-a-Jew-debate when, in the mid-1990s, Paula Hyman and I pondered which women to include in our *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*. Our arguments occurred in the midst of heated debates among American Jews around intermarriage and a feared hemorrhaging of numbers of Jews to a Jewish future. For us, questions revolved around non-halakhic criteria since we considered either a Jewish mother or father as bringing a woman potentially within our domain. How important is self-identification as Jew? How critical is recognition by others as Jewish? How do we evaluate conversion to Judaism? How interpret conversion to Christianity?

Paula's steadfast feminism shaped this enormous project to rescue unheard of numbers of women from undeserved obscurity. Her vision prompted me to join her and motivated most of the other female scholars to devote their energy, expertise, and time to an uncompensated adventure. It shaped our decision to include only women on the advisory board of the encyclopedia and in the end it led to the vast majority of entries written by women (many men turned us down when we asked them).

The project raised our consciousness and that of all of the women who participated. In many ways, the encyclopedia represented that very special intersection of feminist activism with popular scholarship that Paula had pioneered as a graduate student. Designed to open new territory, the encyclopedia radically challenged ways of thinking about the American Jewish past.

One of our decisions in the ongoing who-is-a-Jewish-woman discussion excluded Marilyn Monroe, who converted to Judaism before marrying the playwright Arthur Miller. We consulted our children (our feminism meant that they were never far from the project—several of them wrote entries), thrashed the issue out with our advisory board, and concluded that the conversion was expedient. Had we known what subsequent research revealed, we probably would have included her.

Nevertheless, like many feminist projects, it was fraught with controversy. When it came time to celebrate publication of the encyclopedia, a number of feminist activists, angry over those who were excluded, picketed the party. A few joined the celebration at the Jewish Theological Seminary to protest. I was distraught. Paula, however, was unfazed. ■

Deborah Dash Moore is Frederick G. L. Huetwell Professor of History at the University of Michigan and director of the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies. Most recently she edited with Marion Kaplan, Gender and Jewish History (2010), a collection of essays in honor of Paula Hyman that won a National Jewish Book Award.

Once more Paula had courageously kept her cancer at bay, as she did for 33 years, just more than half her life, without compromising her standards, her love of family, of Judaism, of Hebrew, of Torah, of learning, and of joy. ■

Anne Lapidus Lerner is the author most recently of Eternally Eve: Images of Eve in the Hebrew Bible, Midrash, and Modern Jewish Poetry. At the Jewish Theological Seminary she has served as vice-chancellor, dean of List College, and associate dean of the Graduate School; she is founding director of its Jewish Women's Studies Program.

Hasia Diner

Paula Hyman managed with grace and aplomb to combine the roles of activist and scholar. She did not feel, as far as I could tell, obliged to bifurcate these two crucial concerns, nor did she consider herself obliged, when doing the one, to bracket the other.

The easy marriage between scholarship and political commitment which Paula both fostered and lived with is not something that makes me comfortable.



Deborah Dash Moore and Paula Hyman, 1981.

I like to think of myself as an activist, engaged in the public sphere, and as well being a dedicated scholar. But I believe that the two should never meet. I do not want them to touch, or not very much.

Yet Paula's willingness and ability to fuse the two helped make her a leader among scholars. Bringing the two togeth-

women had made history and that the subjects they studied would be enriched and changed if they bothered to think about gender. She cajoled them into realizing that by valorizing some subjects, primarily intellectual and textual, and downplaying others, namely social history, they pushed women to the side and rendered them

er—writing politically charged books and articles and citing her expertise as an historian in her public works—allowed her to reshape the nature of modern Jewish history as a scholarly endeavor. Paula the feminist forced the field to change. She pushed and she prodded other scholars, men in the main but not only, to recognize that

invisible. She demanded that they redefine what constituted ideas and texts so that women could become part of history.

It is highly likely that the revolution in modern Jewish history as a field would not have taken place had Paula Hyman behaved more like I do, saving my activism for one part of my life, and making sure that my scholarship stands as devoid of my politics as possible. So even though, when I have taught her books, I have taken her to task with my students for the highly political nature of the discussion, it is entirely possible that my classes in Jewish women's history would never have come into being without her willingness to do what I would not, could not, and indeed will not do. ■

Hasia Diner is the Paul and Sylvia Steinberg Professor of American Jewish History at New York University. She is the author, with Beryl Benderly, of Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in America from Colonial Times to the Present, as well as numerous other books.

From the introduction to

Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History

by Paula Hyman

The beginning of my graduate studies in Jewish history coincided with my introduction to feminism as an intellectual movement. That encounter shaped my self-definition as a Jewish woman and opened my eyes to the absence of women from all that I was studying. As a graduate student I became an activist in the nascent Jewish women's movement and joined with two friends in writing a popular history of Jewish women, *The Jewish Woman in America*, published in 1976. The book, however, was not directly connected to my academic program, and I viewed it as a digression from my "serious work." As a scholar I focused on my chosen area of specialization, the history of modern French Jewry. The field of general women's history was just achieving recognition. Within Judaic studies the first stirrings of interest in recovering the history of Jewish women manifested themselves in the early 1980s and had little impact in the field beyond a small coterie of primarily female scholars and students.

When given the option to prepare papers for academic conferences, however, I increasingly chose subjects related to women's history. The publication of these papers, in particular my anthologized article on the 1902 female-led New York kosher meat boycott, brought the specific experience of Jewish women to the attention of scholars of general

women's history and raised questions about the implications of women's history for Jewish historians. As feminist theory has exploded and historical studies of women have proliferated, I have become all the more eager to apply the exciting perspectives that have emerged in general women's history to the field of Jewish history...

Although the inclusion of women and gender in the writing of history is important in itself, it is not, in historian Gerda Lerner's terms, simply a matter of "add women and stir." Feminist scholarship has aspired to, and achieved, more than "filling the gaps" of information about half of humanity. In historical scholarship it has challenged such basic paradigms of the field as periodization and the determination of what is deemed historically significant... In Jewish historiography of the modern period research on women and gender has already expanded our conceptualization of Jewish religious life to include the subjects of domestic religion and personal spirituality. With this book, which draws upon studies by many of my colleagues as well as upon my own new research, I hope to demonstrate that to be valid, an examination of the processes of Jewish assimilation in the modern and contemporary periods must include women and gender in its design. ■

David Ellenson

In 1974 I was a second year rabbinical student at HUC-JIR, as well as a doctoral student in the Columbia Department of Religion. Paula had just completed her doctorate at Columbia and was already serving as a faculty member

those who, like herself, combined their academic work with a strong sense of social justice. When she served as judge on the Doctoral Scholarship Awards Committee of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, an aspiring feminist scholar writing a work on feminist theological concerns had applied for scholarship support. A man on the commit-

mention that John was gay and how his homosexuality had defined such a large part of who John was. Paula felt that such a one-dimensional portrait was ultimately distorting, for it failed to capture the man and his significance. John consciously demonstrated that a gay man could be “out of the closet” and lead a life of both uncompromising academic integrity and personal dignity. John served as a public role model to everyone at Yale—especially its gay and lesbian students—that one need not divorce who one was as a person from who one was as a scholar. Paula especially applauded John because he refused to compartmentalize his life into professional and personal components

Paula was a great scholar who unceasingly and tirelessly labored to create a world where there was greater opportunity and justice for both women and men. ■

Rabbi David Ellenson, Ph.D. is President of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. He co-authored with Rabbi Daniel Gordis the 2012 book Pledges of Jewish Allegiance: Conversion, Law, and Policymaking in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Orthodox Responsa.

She said “What I can’t stand about my colleagues is that they don’t understand how important my children are to me.” I thought about that. And I realized that I had rarely had a teacher who revealed even the slightest part of his personal life to me. And all of my teachers had been HEs! She changed the way I teach and she changed the way I see my colleagues.

Robert Goldenberg

at Columbia. I remember her entering the Upper West Side apartment where the New York Havurah gathered for its weekly Thursday meeting. Everyone crowded around her, and wished her congratulations on her doctorate. Paula beamed, and I saw her golden hair and her broad smile as they lit up the room. We started speaking that evening, and for 37 years our conversations never ceased.

In 1978, I sat with Paula at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital when she had her first mastectomy. And in 1986, when Paula was appointed to the faculty at Yale, a number of her friends, including me, expressed grave concern over what a move from Teaneck to New Haven might mean for her family should she die. I, and other friends, felt that the “safest” thing to do might be for her to stay in New York. Paula wrestled with this decision for several weeks. In the end, she said to me, “David, if I were well, I absolutely would accept the appointment to Yale. If I say no, it’s as if I’m saying that I’m going to die—and I will not accept that fate.”

Throughout her years as a scholar, Paula fought relentlessly on behalf of

tee wanted to deny her application; he claimed that the woman’s project was not worthy of support. Paula had only admiration for this student and the significance of her proposed work. She also knew how important this support was—both for the student personally and for the cause of Jewish feminist scholarship. Paula was infuriated by the attempt to deny this student the award; she defended the project and the student, and threatened to resign from the committee if this woman were not awarded a fellowship. Needless to say, the award was granted.

Paula often expressed anger and indignation when she felt an injustice had been done. This is how she felt at the funeral of her Yale colleague John Boswell, who had been chair of the history department and whose books on the evolving attitudes of the Christian Church towards homosexuality were magisterial and path breaking. When John died at 47 of AIDS, Paula was outraged by the eulogy an extremely prominent Yale professor delivered. The Yale professor spoke only of John’s intellectual brilliance, and his scholarly and professional achievements. He did not

Pamela S. Nadell

We all have turning points in our lives. Long before I ever met Paula Hyman, she played a role in mine.

It was 1976. I was finishing an M.A. in Jewish history and bound for law school. I told one of my professors that, while I really wanted a doctorate in Jewish history, it seemed futile to get one. All the professors I admired were trained both as rabbis and historians. The former had only just become a possibility for women. Then I said: “Anyway, there are no women in the field.” He replied: “There’s Paula.” ■

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