

## Women: a separate chapter?

Women. Half the human race. Half of the population of Canada, of Quebec, of Montreal, of the Montreal Jewish community. As it was in the beginning, throughout its history, as it is today.

In the biblical beginnings of the Jewish people, Sarah left her parents' home to travel with her husband Abraham to a new land where they established a covenant with the Jewish God. A necessary partner in this relationship, Sarah was nonetheless relegated to an indoor role: she listened from inside her tent while Abraham met with and spoke directly with God's messengers.

This indoor/outdoor dichotomy became a paradigm for Jewish interactions: men were active in the outdoor public realm, while women's active domain was in the indoor private spaces. Obviously, Jewish communities were not the only ones to follow this model, and it is impossible to determine whether the biblical model was prescriptive, i.e. a map of how people ought to behave, or descriptive, a portrayal of the social norms of the time.

But what there is no doubt about is that women were active in their domain: participating self-aware self-conscious agents of their own destiny. In fact, the ideal Jewish woman came to be represented as an efficient merchant, chef, urban planner, farmer, weightlifter, spinner, philanthropist, economist, tailor, orator, housekeeper, mother, and wife, all at the same time. The biblical verses extolling the "Woman of Valour" described by these activities (Proverbs 31) became so entrenched in Jewish tradition that they were recited to women weekly by their families, in recognition of the many activities in which they were continually engaged. In more recent times, the "woman of valour" became controversial, not because she was so busy, but because the model she presented was ambiguous: did she represent a "superwoman" who did all the work for the home and family? was this an acknowledgement that women were, and should be, active in every sphere, interior and exterior? or was this a directive for women to be limited to private spaces?

In fact, the private/public dichotomy has come under increasing attack from many sides. Not only the Jewish community, but the surrounding Western world has had its gender norms challenged. As a consequence, we have seen a major increase in the public roles of women, especially since the feminist movement of the 1960s.

This volume presents chapters on various aspects of the Montreal Jewish community, as viewed in 2009. Why, then, a separate chapter on women? Are they not included in the other categories? Do women not participate in the culture and religion? Were they not present throughout the history? Do we still need to examine women as a separate category?

I wish the answer were no. I wish we had progressed to the point where women were recognized as fully 50% of the human, in this case Jewish, world with all the rights, obligations, and opportunities that follow from that recognition. I wish we could assume that, regardless of the specific topic, any examination of “Jews” included both genders. But that is not the case. Many current studies still follow the older model: they examine the public realm, the men, and assume that the women’s activities are either non-existent or of no interest. Until very recently, studies tended to focus on those in positions of power and privilege and, in the Jewish Montreal world, as in the Montreal world in general, as in the Jewish world in general, women are still underrepresented in those positions and overrepresented among the underpaid, the victims of violence, and the ‘helpmates’. In these studies, the most noticeable thing about women is their absence. As Sondra Henry and Emily Taitz noted in 1983, when they produced one of the first books to address this absence: “The casual reader of Jewish history will find the Jewish woman to be invisible – virtually ‘written out’.”<sup>1</sup>

And so this chapter is necessary, to balance those other studies, to focus first and foremost on women, to provide a gendered gaze, to look at women as ‘women’ before seeing them in any other capacity. But where shall we direct that gaze? Into the private spaces where women have been and continue to be active? That is unfeasible for several reasons. First, there is no access to most of those spaces. And second, there is no end to it. We would have to discuss the private spaces of the roughly 45,000 women who are members of the Montreal Jewish community.

What about women active in more public realms? This category is more manageable, but still much too large. Should I include all women professionals, activists, journalists, and artists? Again, it is just not possible. So, instead, I have chosen to discuss only Jewish women who have been active in a gendered way in public realms: i.e. Jewish women whose public role is focused on gendered issues or whose very existence in certain positions has shattered a “glass ceiling”. I have not made any attempt to be exhaustive: my goal is not to list all the women who are active but, rather, to open a door and provide a

---

<sup>1</sup> *Written Out of History: Our Jewish Foremothers*. 2nd edition. Fresh Meadows, NY: Biblio Press, 1983: xiii.

glimpse of what lies on the other side. Perhaps in this way we can begin to gain insights into the range and diversity that exists within the category itself. So I have provided some details about some individuals from which, hopefully, we can begin to form a bigger picture. No doubt, there are women whom I should have mentioned but did not – to them I apologize.

The Montreal Jewish community, one of the more traditional Jewish communities in the world,<sup>2</sup> is situated in a dynamic multi-cultural city in a province and country that are relatively progressive. The tension between these opposing tendencies has resulted in seemingly contradictory expressions: a congregation (Shaar Hashomayim) so committed to keeping a separation between men and women that it ended up disaffiliating from the Conservative movement;<sup>3</sup> the only Jewish women's shelter in Canada; a grass roots movement to help women unable to obtain a Jewish divorce that led to changes in Canadian law. What these have in common is defining women's place. Where they differ sharply is in their perception of precisely where that place is. The choices have expanded and continue to expand almost day by day.

When the first Jewish woman (as far as we know) set foot on Quebec soil in 1738, she could only do so doubly disguised: as a man and as a Catholic. When Esther Brandeau was discovered, the gender problem was dealt with immediately: she was sent to a convent. The Jewish issue was the one that proved unresolvable: as only Catholics were permitted in the French colony at the time, her consistent refusal to convert ultimately resulted in Brandeau being sent back to France. Brandeau did not even make it as far as Montreal.

After the British conquest in 1760, Jews were legally permitted into Montreal and began to trickle in, men for the most part, traders and merchants, some of whom brought their wives and daughters with them. But these women had few public roles.

---

<sup>2</sup> Montreal seems to have a greater tendency to adhere to the older, more traditional practices of Judaism than the rest of North America. It is also more traditional than the rest of Canada, which is more traditional than the United States. For instance, while other communities have increasingly moved towards more progressive congregations, Montreal has a high percentage of Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox congregations; Montreal is the only city in North America where a Jewish Community Council was able to become and remain established (it has been in existence since 1922); Montreal Jews are much more likely to marry within their religion (the 1991 Census figures show 93% for Montreal vs. 75% for Vancouver). The figures for the United States are even lower: according to the National Jewish Population Survey, Jews who have married since 1996 have an intermarriage rate of 47%, i.e. only 53% are likely to marry other Jews.

<sup>3</sup> “The last Conservative-affiliated congregation with separate seating for men and women has left the movement... While Conservative institutions have spent the past two decades pushing toward full egalitarianism, Shaar Hashomayim stood as a rearguard symbol ... on gender issues” (Eden, Ami. “Montreal Shul Bids Conservative Movement Adieu”. *Forward*. June 29, 2001.

The first Montreal Jewish congregation was founded in 1768 (Shearith Israel). A century and a half later, in 1918, the women decided they needed their own organization and established the first Sisterhood group in the city. The other existing congregations followed suit soon after and today many of the more than 50 Montreal congregations have Sisterhoods; some now also have Brotherhood groups, and one, the Reform congregation, in an attempt to create gender egalitarianism, has a combined Sisterhood-Brotherhood group. Sisterhood groups are, by definition, gendered. They occupy an interesting position in the public/private sphere: they have always provided a realm in which women can be active and powerful, and can even effect changes in the greater society, but they have generally been ignored in discussions not limited to women. They are usually noted in separate sections of newspapers, magazines, newsletters, often titled “women’s sections” and considered of interest to women only.

Women’s volunteer organizations are similar to Sisterhoods, but more independent, often existing as separate associations rather than being attached to congregations. However, like the Sisterhoods, their focus has also been, from the beginning, on women and those activities considered part of a woman’s domain. The first Jewish women’s volunteer organization in Canada, the Ladies’ Hebrew Benevolent Society, was established in Montreal in 1877. In 1923, the Hebrew Ladies’ Sewing Society of Montreal initiated a weekly “Sewing Day”, when the “Hebrew ladies” came together and created “garments for the needy”.<sup>4</sup> The beneficiaries were not limited to women: besides a maternity hospital, they also included an orphanage and seniors’ residence. But caring for children and the elderly, even when they are not members of a woman’s immediate family, have often been included in the category of women’s activities. Because so much of women’s time and effort has traditionally been taken up with these activities, it was considered an extension rather than an innovation.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time as they provided necessary relief for needy individuals, volunteer activities also provided a creative outlet for the volunteers themselves. Fannie Zabitsky Hershovich and Nettie Mendelsohn were involved in a campaign in the 1930s to provide daily milk for children whose parents were unable to afford this. For their campaign, they turned an actual milk bottle into a donation box.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Hart, Arthur Daniel. *The Jew in Canada: A Complete Record of the Canadian Jewry from the Days of the French Regime to the Present Time*. Toronto and Montreal: Jewish Publications Ltd: 1926: 269.

<sup>5</sup> This phenomenon is not limited to Jewish communities, but can also be seen in the wider society.

<sup>6</sup> This bottle is in the CJC Archives collection, together with supporting documentation. CJC Collection Artifacts, File 6: Aber, Ita.

And this was an issue that did not go away: in 1949, the School Children's Milk Fund board was still meeting and collecting money towards this goal.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the actions in which volunteers engaged seem relatively trivial, especially when considered in terms of society as a whole. But this triviality is often deceptive, as in the case of Toba Kaplan. Already well-known in her community as a charity-worker in the 1910s when the Montreal Clinical Society started talking about building a Jewish hospital, Kaplan spent years going from door to door to door raising funds. The amounts she received at each door were very small: pennies, nickels and dimes, seemingly trivial donations. But she kept on going, and eventually accumulated a significant amount: she donated approximately ten thousand dollars for the hospital, out of the total \$1,270,139 raised by donations.<sup>8</sup> It took until 1934 for the Jewish General Hospital to finally be inaugurated. Women helped get the hospital built, but they did not run the institution. In 1978 the hospital elected its first woman president: Sheila Zittler (1978-1980). However, after her two-year term, Zittler was replaced by a man and, to this date, no other woman has filled the position.<sup>9</sup>

The other large Jewish institutions in Montreal are not much more inclusive in terms of women leaders. Canadian Jewish Congress is a lobbying organization that had its headquarters in Montreal until 1999, when it moved to Ottawa. It was founded in 1919 as "a body which would represent the interests of all Canadian Jews".<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, it was the male Jews who dominated, at least as leaders: of the 19 presidents, only two have been women: Dorothy Reitman (1986-1989) and Goldie Hershon (1995-1998).

The situation is even more pronounced in Federation CJA, the "central funding, planning and coordinating body" for Montreal Jewish community services.<sup>11</sup> This umbrella organization has consistently, from its inception in 1917, overseen many agencies focused on women and children. Yet, from the first male president in 1917 to the male president today, the leadership has been

---

<sup>7</sup> "Montreal Meetings." *Canadian Jewish Review*, March 4, 1949.

<[http://multiculturalcanada.ca/cdm\\_item/mcc\\_cjr/38878/100/11](http://multiculturalcanada.ca/cdm_item/mcc_cjr/38878/100/11)>

<sup>8</sup> History of the Montreal Clinical Society. CJC documentation collection series ZC, Montreal Clinical Society file. Another \$300,000 was given by the provincial government.

<sup>9</sup> Sheila Zittler was so active a volunteer that she was named Woman of the Year in 1988 by the Montreal Council of Women, "a non-partisan, non-confessional federation that brings together 60 voluntary organizations" in Montreal ("About The Montreal Council Of Women". *Montreal Council of Women*. Accessed June 2008 <<http://www.mcw-cfm.ca/index.html>>)

<sup>10</sup> Canadian Jewish Congress homepage. Accessed June 2008.

<<http://www.cjc.ca/template.php?action=history&Language=EN>>

<sup>11</sup> Federation CJA homepage. Accessed June 2008. <<http://www.federationcja.org/splash.php>>

overwhelmingly male: only three out of 37 have been women, an unimpressive 8%. We can only hope that the male leaders sought the opinions and advice of the many women active at the lower levels as the situation improves somewhat when we look at smaller institutions: many of the agencies and organizations that operate within the framework of Federation CJA have been led by women at various times although, at the current time, only two of the 11 fully-funded agencies of Federation CJA have women presidents.<sup>12</sup> There is also, within Federation CJA itself, a division directed at and led by women: the Women's Campaign and Women's Federation has existed since 1931 to direct fundraising activities towards women.

The conflation of “needy” and women is a result of women being over-represented among those who need help, in every ethnic and religious group, and the Montreal Jewish world is no exception. Some of the statistics that are available were derived from the census of 2001: 27% of elderly Jewish Montreal women (65 and over) live below the poverty line, vs. only 13% of elderly men. In single parent families, when the parent is a woman, 32% live in poverty, vs. 23% when it is a man. For the over 75-year-olds, 47% of the widows are poor, vs. 34% of widowers.<sup>13</sup> Besides being the ones giving the help, women are also most likely to be the ones receiving it.

And it is not only financial help that they need. Women are also much more likely to be the victims of violence, either out in the public domain or in the privacy of their own homes. Auberge Shalom...pour femmes is a centre for women victims of conjugal violence and their children. Created in 1989 by the Montreal section of the National Council of Jewish Women, the centre's first project was a shelter, which was, and still is, unique in being the only women's shelter in Canada to define itself as Jewish. This is not a limitation on the women welcomed into the centre but, rather, a way of ensuring that all Jewish women feel comfortable in the environment, regardless of their level of religious observance. This means that the centre adheres to Jewish law for dietary, Sabbath, and holiday requirements. In fact, the percentage of residents who are Jewish has, from the beginning, been a minority. The shelter opened its doors in 1989 and approximately 1700 women have been housed since that time. The first year, 25% of the residents were Jewish; in 2007, Jews accounted for only 7%. Jewish women are often reluctant to take advantage of the shelter and the reluctance is often denominationally-based. According to Diane Sasson, director of the shelter since 1995:

---

<sup>12</sup> The agencies are the Cummings Jewish Centre for Seniors (Freda Rashkovan) and the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre (Julia Reitman).

<sup>13</sup> Shahar, Charles & Susan Karpman. *The Jewish Community of Montreal*. 2001 Census Analysis Series. Montreal: Federation CJA, 2004.

Shelter is a last option in general and even more so for Jewish women. In the Haredi [“ultra-Conservative”] world, in most cases, it is a non-option. The Counselling and Resource Office was opened to better serve the Jewish Community.<sup>14</sup>

This external office offers various programs and services for women who are not willing to leave their homes, but still wish to improve their domestic situations. This seems to be a more acceptable option for many Jewish women, and the percentage of Jewish, and especially of *haredi*, women using those services is much higher than the percentage of residents at the shelter.

Domestic violence is not the only oppressive situation for Jewish women. Because Jews are married by both civil and religious law, they must also be divorced in both realms. But Jewish divorce law discriminates against women in that the divorce (the *get*) must be initiated by the husband; the wife’s role is limited to receiving it. For Orthodox observant women, this is a serious predicament: without a *get*, they are left in a “chained” state where they cannot Jewishly marry again (they are referred to as *agunot*: “chained women”).<sup>15</sup> The inequity has resulted in a problem that is increasing: husbands either refusing altogether to give Jewish divorces or blackmailing their wives. Montreal activist Norma Joseph was one of the principal figures in a grassroots movement that looked outside the community for a solution to this situation: they convinced the Canadian Federal Government to pass a law that allows the religious element to be taken into consideration when a civil divorce is being sought (Divorce Act, ch.18, 21.1, enacted in 1990). Worldwide, this Canadian law remains the only federal or national civil statute to provide this help for Jewish women in difficult divorce situations.<sup>16</sup>

Political activism for social justice has a long and respectable history among Jewish communities, especially in the twentieth century. Léa Roback (1903-2000) inherited this legacy and used it to focus on the plight of women; in recognition of her lifetime’s work, she was made an honorary member of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women in 1985. Her activities were not focused on the Jewish realm; in fact, she is better known in non-Jewish circles, which may be partly a result of the linguistic realities of Montreal, as her work was primarily conducted in French-speaking milieus. But Roback never left her Jewishness behind and always credited her Jewish upbringing for

---

<sup>14</sup> Sasson, Diane. Personal communication. 2008. *Haredi* Jews are the most strictly observant group within Judaism; they are also sometimes referred to as “Ultra-Orthodox”.

<sup>15</sup> If they choose to bypass the Jewish arena and remarry only in the civil realm, there are serious consequences, especially for any future children they have, who will not be allowed (by Jewish law) to marry other Jews. There is a gender inequality in this part as well, in that the same consequence does not arise for a husband who is not Jewishly divorced.

<sup>16</sup> This law does not actually solve the problem. It states that when there is a religious barrier to remarriage, the judge *may* take this fact into account when making the civil divorce decree. See Norma Joseph’s “Jewish Divorce and Canadian Law,” *Ecumenism* 115 (Fall 1994): 18-22 for more details.

the principles and goals that inspired her. In the 1991 film by Sophie Bissonnette, *A vision in the darkness*, she recalls her father's words whenever he perceived any injustice, expressed in his mother tongue, Yiddish: "Mir darfn epes ton – we have to do something". This thought kept her campaigning for social change for over 75 years:

I've always been active on the feminist front to improve life for women, either unionizing workers in factories, claiming women's right to vote or helping pregnant prostitutes. I used to go door to door trying to raise women's awareness about their rights. Surely, I've had many disappointments, but I have never given up the fight. After all, isn't life an eternal beginning?<sup>17</sup>

Several years later, Sheila Finestone (1927-2009) followed a path similar to that of Roback. After her earlier involvement within the Jewish community, Finestone then became an activist for women's rights in non-Jewish realms. But she chose a more official domain: during her political career, she was president of the Quebec feminist coalition (Fédération des femmes du Québec); a federal Member of Parliament; and a Senator. In her role as the Secretary of State (Status of Women), Finestone affirmed her commitment to women's rights at the World Conference on Women in Beijing:

We must respect women's rights as human rights. It's the very foundation of this Platform. We must reaffirm the principle that the human rights of women and girls are a universal, inalienable, integral and indivisible part of human rights, as adopted at the 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights. Human rights are not a boutique to which you can go to pick and choose.<sup>18</sup>

For Finestone, as for Roback, women's rights are centre-stage. This is also true for many other Montreal Jewish women. For Lillian Robinson (1941 - 2006), who was Principal of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute from 2000-2006,<sup>19</sup> this included speaking out, specifically as a Jewish critic, against Zionism and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Greta Hofmann Nemiroff, President/CEO of the Sisterhood Is Global Institute from 1999-2004,<sup>20</sup> credits her early experiences helping her mother at the clothing room for Jewish refugees run by JIAS (Jewish Immigrant Aid Services of Canada) as her "first real consciousness of injustice".<sup>21</sup> Abby Lippman resigned from the Quebec government's Conseil du statut de la femme in 2007 because of her discomfort with its recommendation to the

---

<sup>17</sup> As quoted on "So far and yet ... so near. Memories of a century". *Centre d'histoire de Montréal*. May 17, 2000. <[http://www2.ville.montreal.qc.ca/chm/expo\\_temp/leaa.htm](http://www2.ville.montreal.qc.ca/chm/expo_temp/leaa.htm)>.

<sup>18</sup> Statement by the Secretary of State (Status of Women and Multiculturalism) of Canada, The Honourable Sheila Finestone. At the fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, Beijing, September 6, 1995. <<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/govstatements.html>>

<sup>19</sup> The Simone de Beauvoir Institute is a "college of Concordia University, dedicated to studying the conditions of women's lives." ("About Us". *Simone de Beauvoir Institute Homepage*. 2009. <<http://artsandscience.concordia.ca/wsdb/aboutus/>>)

<sup>20</sup> The Sisterhood is Global Institute is an international non-profit organization that was founded in 1984 to support and promote women's rights on a global scale through education, skills training and technology.

<sup>21</sup> Nemiroff, Greta Hofmann. Email. March 16, 2009.



Bouchard-Taylor Commission on reasonable accommodation;<sup>22</sup> a policy to exclude women from working in the public sector if they were wearing “ostentatious religious symbols” did not fit with Lippman’s views, inspired by her Jewish heritage, on social and political justice and gender equity.<sup>23</sup> For all these women, whether they identified publicly with the Jewish community or not, whether their activism was focused within the Jewish community or not, their Jewish heritage paved the way for their dedication and commitment to social justice.

So, as we can see, the political world is one in which Montreal Jewish women have made some progress. What about the religious realm? Judaism is, after all, at least historically, a religion, although nowadays it is also classified as an ethnicity or cultural community, and many committed Jews are secular. But religious activity is still one of the most significant aspects of the community. As mentioned above, Montreal is a particularly traditional or “conservative” community: of the more than 50 congregations in the city, only one is Reform, one is Reconstructionist, three are Conservative, and the rest are Orthodox – ranging from Modern Orthodox to *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox).<sup>24</sup> This presents a major obstacle for women who want public roles: they can, and do, become rabbis and cantors within the more liberal denominations (i.e. Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and Conservative) but there are, as yet, no female rabbis or cantors within the Orthodox world. In Montreal, with its limited liberal congregations, it is therefore no surprise to find very few women in these roles. \*\*\* note: I changed the French re Rabbi Bykova – the English has to be changed as well \*\*\*In fact, there is one woman in each, both at Temple Emanu-El Beth Sholom, the Reform congregation. When I asked Elena Bykova, the Assistant Rabbi there, what it was like being the only female rabbi in town, she replied: “Very very lonely”!<sup>25</sup> Her only female company, minimal as it is, comes from the only female cantor in the city, Rachelle Mingail Shubert, also at Temple Emanu-el Beth Sholom.<sup>26</sup> Temple Emanu-El is also the only Montreal congregation to have ever had female ritual leaders: Barbara Borts was Assistant Rabbi in 1995 – 1996, and there have been a number of female cantors (Sharon Azrieli, Phyllis Cole, Tracy Shuster, and Hélène Engel) have held the position of Cantor or Cantorial Soloist in previous years.

---

<sup>22</sup> note: this needs to be translated into English: La Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d’accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles, présidée par Gérard Bouchard et Charles Taylor, a remis son rapport en 2008. Voir : <http://www.accommodements.qc.ca/documentation/rapports/rapport-final-integral-fr.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Lippman, Abby. Personal communication. March, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> The only Montreal Jewish Renewal group, Har Kodesh, is not included in this discussion as it is too small and informally organized to be properly called a congregation.

<sup>25</sup> Bykova, Elena. Email. April 13, 2008. At the time of this writing (June 2010), Rabbi Bykova is no longer associated with the Temple Emanu-El, although she is still living in Montreal and available to perform religious rituals as a freelance rabbi.

<sup>26</sup> Shubert’s actual title at the Temple is Director of Music and Cantorial Soloist. The difference between the two titles depends on whether the person has been granted the title from a recognized cantorial school, or has learned the material on their own. There is no difference in terms of the actual position.

But, to date, even in this much more progressive organization, relative to the others in Montreal, no woman has held the position of main rabbi and this absence is echoed in the executive, where the number of women presidents since the beginning is only four out of 35 (11%).<sup>27</sup>

It is not only as leaders, but also as participants, that women's place in Jewish religious ritual is limited. Because of the public/private paradigm, women were exempted, and often excluded, from many of the religious rituals that took place in the synagogue, as that was considered the public realm. For the most part, they were not visible participants in the weekly or holiday rituals, they did not read from the Torah scrolls, and they sat in secondary locations with limited access to the main ritual space.

To counter this limited participation, Jewish feminists in the 1970s resurrected an ancient tradition that associated the beginning of the month (Rosh Hodesh) with a holiday for women. They began to hold monthly women-only or at least women-focused gatherings to celebrate the New Moon. This idea began in the Orthodox world, where the celebrations often included women praying with and reading from Torah scrolls, activities that did not contravene any Jewish law because there was no quorum of men present. In Montreal, the Montreal Women's Tefillah [prayer] Group was founded in 1982 and is still going strong. They were lucky in having a "women's-prayer-group-friendly" rabbi who helped, rather than hindered, them; groups elsewhere ran into hostility from male rabbis who opposed their activities. The idea of Rosh Hodesh groups caught on rapidly among women in all denominations and by 1996 there were more than 100 Rosh Hodesh groups worldwide.<sup>28</sup> At this point in time, there are at least four separate denominationally-distinct Rosh Hodesh groups in Montreal.

Montreal is also the venue for another public women's ritual, one that crosses denominational boundaries, even drawing in and appealing to secular Jews. Women's Seders were also first created by Jewish feminists in the 1970s desiring an increased participation in public rituals. They found their inspiration in the Passover seder (the ritual feast that marks the beginning of the Jewish holiday of Passover.) and started creating versions with a conscious and intentional focus on contemporary women and the issues they face. The seders were then and continue to be enacted in many venues, large and small, private and public. Many private invitation-only women's seders have been held in

---

<sup>27</sup> Har Kodesh, the Jewish Renewal Group, is different from the other Montreal congregations in that the rituals are led by members and, over the course of the 20 years that it has been in existence, most of the leading members have been women. On occasion, the group brings in rabbis to lead rituals and many of the visiting rabbis have been female, one of whom is Elizabeth Bolton, an ex-Montreal Jewish woman.

<sup>28</sup> This is the number listed in the book *Celebrating the New Moon* published by Sue Berrin that year.

Montreal, as well as a number of large events open to the public. One that still takes place is hosted by Na'amat Canada, a women's volunteer organization that does not usually organize religious activities. In fact, the organizers of the first one, in 1997, were astounded at the large number (50) who showed up; subsequent years have seen waiting lists for the 200-person capacity event.

Montreal has also recently broken through a heterosexist barrier. The first lesbian civil union/Jewish ceremony was performed in 2003, at the Temple Emanu-El Beth Sholom. In 2005, the Canadian government passed a law legalizing same-sex marriages and Dorshei Emet, the Reconstructionist synagogue, saw its first lesbian wedding. One of the partners was Laura Yaros, who has hosted a feminist radio show, *Matrix*, on Radio Centre-ville since 1981, and who was honoured for her 36 years of activism with the 2009 Prix Contribution à la visibilité des lesbiennes by Gai Écoute, a Quebec gay and lesbian support organization. Yaros and her partner, Elizabeth Blackmore, were married in December 2005.

Being a religious leader is not necessarily a full-time job. Besides being the cantor at the Temple Emanu-El, Rachelle Shubert is also Director of Music for the congregation. As a musician, her femaleness is not as unusual as it is for her cantorial role. Music has more often been an acceptable venue for public females although, in that area as well, we don't often see them as leaders. One exception is another Jewish Montreal woman, Ethel Stark, who founded the Montreal Women's Symphony Orchestra, the first Canadian orchestra composed exclusively of women, in 1950. The orchestra was not a Jewish one, but Stark was honoured for this along with her many other achievements by the Jewish community with an award by the 1976 Concert Society of the Jewish People's Schools and Peretz Schools. She was also recognized by the larger Canadian community, becoming a member of both the Order of Canada (1979) and the Order of Quebec (2003).

We still find many Jewish women publicly active in the musical world today. Some play recognizably Jewish music; some relate their music to gender issues; many others participate as religiously and ethnically and even gender neutral. One Montreal-based group that is both female and Jewish-focused is the Klezmer band *The Yiddenes*, (Yiddish term for "Jewish women" that has a friendly and folkloric connotation) whose lead singer, Fiona Stuart, explained her personal reason for this focus: "When I sing in Yiddish I feel like it comes from my heart. It really expresses how I feel more than when I sing

in English. I feel connected to my culture, my heritage, myself, and my family.”<sup>29</sup> The kind of music played by *The Yiddenes*, Klezmer, is derived from the culture of the Eastern European Ashkenazi tradition, the group to which the majority of Jewish immigrants to Montreal belonged until recently. Beginning in the 1950s, the Ashkenazi Jews were joined by many Sephardi Jews from North African countries.<sup>30</sup> The Sephardi Jews spoke a different language (Judeo-Spanish) and played an entirely different kind of music. Judith R. Cohen, an ethnomusicologist originally from Montreal (now based in Toronto), has done much work in researching and publicizing music from the Sephardi world. Besides publishing her research in text form (i.e. as scholarly papers), she has also recorded Montreal Moroccan Jewish music as a member of the quartet Gerineldo. The music she has helped make known includes, but is not limited to, songs traditionally sung by women.

In other cultural realms, we also find many public Montreal Jewish women. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, many of them are active in non-gendered capacities; in addition, many are not particularly Jewish in their focus. Among those whose work is both gendered and Jewish, we find authors, performance artists, story tellers, and visual artists.

Shulamis Yelin and Malka Zipora stand out among Jewish Montreal writers for a number of reasons, one of which is that they are women. Although they are not the only women authors, women are most assuredly in the minority. Both these authors chose to write memoir-type vignettes of the Jewish community in Montreal based on their own personal lives. The communities they portray are very different. Yelin (1913-2002) grew up in a secular but strongly culturally-Jewish environment in the first half of the twentieth century. Although most of the world she encountered growing up and which she describes was Jewish, it was an outwardly-focused group and she describes some of the interactions with non-Jews. Zipora is a member of the inwardly-focused Hasidic community, a world in which religious observance is a high priority. Zipora is, in fact, unique in presenting this portrait of her community to the outside world and she obviously did so with a certain amount of ambivalence: “Malka Zipora” is a pseudonym she chose to “guard her real identity.”<sup>31</sup> Yelin and Zipora share a common language: for both of them, Yiddish is the *mama loshen* (“mother-tongue”). But they both made the decision to write their stories in English; Zipora’s has also been translated and is now

---

<sup>29</sup> As quoted in Hana Askren’s “Shepping Nakhes, Montreal Style”. Montreal magazine. Accessed Feb 2009. <<http://montrealmagazine.ca/MM/content/view/150/27/>>

<sup>30</sup> In addition to the Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, there are also smaller groups of Jews from the various Middle Eastern countries whose language was Judeo-Arabic.

<sup>31</sup> Fitterman, Lisa. “A glimpse into a hidden world.” *The Gazette* [Montreal, Que.] May 6, 2006: A3.

available in French as well. For both authors, this makes their stories accessible to a much wider audience than they would have been in Yiddish. This was a difficult decision for Yelin, who struggled with the question of language for decades.<sup>32</sup> In the end, she, too, made the decision to write in English, making her writing immediately accessible to the larger community to which she felt she belonged.

Dora Wasserman was also involved with Yiddish, but what she did with it was the reverse – she made it accessible to everyone in Montreal, regardless of their *mama loshen*, ethnic community, or religion. Wasserman founded The Yiddish Theatre in 1956, and remained there as artistic director until 1995, when she was succeeded by her daughter, Bryna Wasserman, who continues to run the theatre today. Unique in being the only permanent resident Yiddish theatre in North America, the Montreal Yiddish Theatre also introduced English and French supertitles so that the productions would be intelligible to non-Yiddish speakers, and even presented a local Quebecois play in Yiddish translation (*Les belles-soeurs* by Michel Tremblay). At a time when most theatres were founded and run by men, Wasserman was a well-known and well-respected personage in the Montreal theatre community.

Language is a central issue in Montreal, where linguistic choices help determine the audience. But for most Montrealers, the choice is not between English and Yiddish but, rather, between English and French. Cultural activities are usually presented in one or the other of these languages and the audiences are, to a large extent, distinct. As such, the decision to perform in one or the other, or both, has major consequences in terms of who will view the piece and, by extension, what issues that piece may address and how it does so. Devora Neumark is a Jewish Montreal-based performance artist whose work has often focused on gender-related issues. Neumark decided to straddle the English-French linguistic barrier and work in both languages. This was not by accident but a purposeful decision with a number of goals. One of them was the same as Yelin's, to reach a wider audience but, even more importantly, Neumark saw this as an integral aspect of her artistic practice. As she explains, the result is a reciprocal interaction in which her increased access to the wider and multi-lingual audience in turn helps her “to experience the power of language to shape perception and (in)forms much of how we understand and access the world”.<sup>33</sup> Language is a key element for performance artists: along with bodily gestures, it is the major medium by which they communicate.

---

<sup>32</sup> “Preface”. *Seeded in Sinai*. New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1975.

<sup>33</sup> Neumark, Devora. Email. Feb 2009.

Language is also essential for story tellers. Oro Anahory-Librowicz is a multi-lingual Montreal Jewish woman with stories about women and men not only in English and French, but also in Spanish and Judeo-Spanish. Anahory-Librowicz has told her award-winning stories all over the world. In addition to reciting, she also sings some of the songs from her native Morocco; in this capacity she joins Judith R. Cohen in the performing group Gerineldo (mentioned above).

The language issue is not apparent when we turn to the visual arts. Here we find a number of Jewish women who have become known both in the Jewish community and more widely. However, the question of gender focus is much hazier in this category. What criteria can we use to decide? Some are obvious – for instance, when the artist herself describes her piece as gender-focused. But what about the others? Because of this, I include here references to a number of prominent Jewish Montreal female artists even though they may not, technically, belong in the category as I have defined it. In 2000, of the ten art works selected for the new Montreal Jewish Community Campus building, eight were by women, five of whom can be considered Montrealers, either because they grew up here or because they chose Montreal to be their home. The five women (Alona Aslan, Sorel Cohen, Devora Neumark, Sylvia Safdie, and Marion Wagshal) range from those beginning their careers to those with already-extensive resumes. Jewish women in Montreal gaining public recognition for creating art is not a new phenomenon either. Esther Trépanier’s study of Jewish painters of Montreal active from 1935 to 1948 features four women out of a total of 15 artists: Fanny Wiselberg (1906-1986), Ghitta Caiserman-Roth (1923 – 2005), Sylvia Ary (b. 1923) Rita Briansky (b. 1925). A fifth woman, Regina Seiden, is included in the section on her husband, Eric Goldberg, because she herself was not an active artist during the period discussed in the study.<sup>34</sup>

Jewish women continue to publicly display their artwork as well as to write about Jewish artists. Art historian Loren Lerner curated a conference and exhibition in Montreal in 2000 on “Afterimage: Evocations of the Holocaust in Contemporary Canadian Art”. The exhibition and subsequent book she edited featured many Montreal artists, most of whom were Jewish and all of whom were women.<sup>35</sup> Her decision to include only women was not gender-biased: “I did not intentionally leave out men. As it turned out, I found the works by these women artists to be more subtle, and multi-layered, and the

---

<sup>34</sup> Trépanier, Esther, *Jewish painters of Montreal : witnesses of their time, 1930-1948*. 2nd edition. Montréal : Éditions de l'Homme, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Lerner, Loren, ed. *Afterimage: evocations of the Holocaust in contemporary Canadian arts and literature*. Montreal: Concordia University Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies, 2002.

artists willing to be much more personal in approach and intention.”<sup>36</sup> There is some overlap between the women included in this exhibition and those whose works are on permanent display in the Montreal Jewish Community Campus: Sorel Cohen, Sylvia Safdie, and Marion Wagshal are joined by Katja MacLeod Kessin (1959-2006), Mindy Yan Miller, Marie-Jeanne Musiol, Wendy Oberlander, and Yvonne Singer.<sup>37</sup>

Scholarship is relevant to our subject in three ways. One is that it is scholars who add to our knowledge of women’s activities, especially regarding the past. Many contemporary scholars in Montreal, as elsewhere, are contributing in this way, starting to rectify the absence of women noted at the beginning of this chapter, and we can see the fruits of their labours. To mention just a very few, we have Yolande Cohen’s studies on the role of women and of the Moroccan Jewish community;<sup>38</sup> Krisha Starker’s research on Women and the Holocaust;<sup>39</sup> Bella Briansky Kalter’s memoir of poet Ida Maza;<sup>40</sup> Simcha Fishbane’s account of a Montreal Bat Mitzvah;<sup>41</sup> Goldie Morgentaler’s study of author Chava Rosenfarb;<sup>42</sup> and Rebecca Margolis’ article on Jewish lesbians in Montreal.<sup>43</sup>

Scholars are also important in training the next generation. Norma Joseph directs the Women and Religion specialization in Concordia University’s Religion Department, a program which offers courses to both undergraduate and graduate students in topics ranging from Women in Jewish History through Women in the Bible to Women and Jewish Law. Doctoral dissertations under her supervision have already examined various aspects of Jewish women, some of them focused on Montreal in particular.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Lerner, Loren. Email. March 2, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Some of these artists are Jewish.

<sup>38</sup> One of Cohen’s works is the article co-written with Joseph Levy: “Moroccan Jews and Their Adaptation to Montreal Life” in Robinson, Ira & Mervin Butovsky, eds. *Renewing Our Days: Montreal Jews in the Twentieth Century*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1995.

<sup>39</sup> Although unpublished, this research was presented in a series of seminars, entitled “Women and the Holocaust: Between the Texture of Memory and the Texts of History”, at the Jewish Public Library in September 1997.

<sup>40</sup> Kalter, Bella Briansky. “Ida Maza: A Memoir.” *Canadian Jewish Studies* 6 (1998): 55-63.(accessed in EBSCO. Concordia University Montreal, 25 Feb. 2009) Maza’s name is more commonly written as Maze in transliteration.

<sup>41</sup> Fishbane, Simcha. “A Female Rite of Passage in a Montreal Modern Orthodox Synagogue: The Bat Mitzvah Ceremony”. In Robinson, Ira & Mervin Butovsky, eds. *Renewing Our Days: Montreal Jews in the Twentieth Century*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1995.

<sup>42</sup> Morgentaler, Goldie. “Chava Rosenfarb: The Yiddish Woman Writer In The Post-Holocaust World.” *Canadian Jewish Studies* 11 (2003): 37-51. (accessed in EBSCO. Concordia University Montreal 25 Feb) .

<sup>43</sup> Margolis, Rebecca E. “A New Generation of Lesbian Jewish Activism.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 9.1/2 (2005): 161-168.(accessed in EBSCO Concordia University, Montreal. 25 Feb. 2009) .

<sup>44</sup> These include Marlene Bonneau’s study on double-ring Montreal Jewish weddings; Susan Landau Chark’s examination of Rebbetzins (wives of rabbis) in Canada; Donna Goodman’s explorations of sisterhoods and cookbooks; Suzan Searle’s study of mikveh (ritual bath) practices in Montreal; and my own research on the Women’s Seder, a new Jewish women’s ritual.

Scholarly pursuits often provided an option for women who ventured outside the home, as teaching was considered one of the few respectable ways for women to earn a living in the public realm. So it is not surprising that this is an area in which we do find a high percentage of women leaders. In fact, a majority of Jewish schools in Montreal (secondary and elementary, Anglophone and Francophone, *haredi* and non-*haredi*) now have female principals.<sup>45</sup> But one Montreal Jewish scholar who is unique is Arna Poupko.<sup>46</sup> Poupko was named as full time scholar-in-residence for Federation CJA in 1993, the first person, female or male, to held this position. As scholar-in-residence, Poupko served in an advisory role for Federation CJA and its constituent agencies. It was in this role, for instance, that she presented opening remarks at an international symposium on visual art and Jewish identity in 1994.<sup>47</sup>

Scholar-in-residence is an eminently suitable public position for a woman: it does not overtly challenge the traditional “woman’s place”, but grants recognition and stature to a public woman who can then, if she so wishes, use her position to work for change. The current scholar-in-residence for the Communauté sépharade unifiée du Québec (CSUQ) is Sonia Sarah Lipsyc. Lipsyc, a French feminist who has been active on Jewish issues,<sup>48</sup> has now moved to Montreal, at least temporarily, for this position. Her mandate for the CSUQ is to create a multidisciplinary and pluralistic centre for contemporary Jewish studies (Aleph). Lipsyc was also hired by the CSUQ in 2008 to organize a three-day conference examining the role of women in Judaism.<sup>49</sup> This conference was a significant event for Montreal Jewish women in being the first such public feminist forum to be held in French. The last session of the conference brought together participants from non-Jewish communities, as well, for a multi-faith panel on the status of women in different religious traditions. This panel was co-sponsored by les Femmes juives francophones, a group with the dual objectives of personal empowerment for women and rapprochement to other, especially other francophone, communities.

I cannot finish this look at Montreal Jewish women without mentioning Janice Rosen, archivist for the Canadian Jewish Congress National archives. Rosen is a key figure for this category for several reasons. First, she herself is a public Montreal Jewish woman. Her position is not that surprising –

---

<sup>45</sup> As of February 2009, 15 of the 25 schools affiliated with the Bronfman Jewish Education Centre had female principals.

<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, Poupko is no longer living in Montreal at this time.

<sup>47</sup> This three-day international symposium, “Visual Art and Jewish Identity: A Contemporary Experience”, was organized by Devora Neumark and Regine Basha, curator of the Art Gallery of the Saidye Bronfman Centre, and brought together artists, art historians, and curators from around the world.

<sup>48</sup> Lipsyc’s blog can be viewed at <http://soniasarahlipsyc.canalblog.com>.

<sup>49</sup> The conference, Fémina, was held as part of the 2008 Festival sépharade de Montréal. (See <<http://www.sefarad.ca/festivalsefarad2008/eventList.asp?catID=16>>)



librarians and archivists are among the professions where women often predominate. However, any study of the category depends upon information, much of which has not yet found its way into published sources. As such, one of the only places to find this information is in archives: the archives that Rosen directs contain much as-yet-unresearched and possibly even un-looked at material. Rosen's knowledge of her domain and her ability to guide researchers is invaluable, and without her help, all of our research would be that much poorer.

And thus ends this brief examination. I have discussed a few women in a few capacities at a few moments in time. Many many women who did not fit within the constraints I laid out at the beginning were not included. Sara Rosenfeld was co-founder of KlezKanada, the annual Jewish music festival in the Laurentians, a strong and vibrant character. While a key figure in the Montreal Jewish cultural context, she was not active in a particularly gendered capacity and is, or at least should be, included elsewhere. The same applies to Phyllis Lambert: Lambert has played an important role in the Montreal cultural world: she is the founder of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, but hers was not, either, in a gendered capacity, and most of her activities have not been Jewish-related. Food is an area that is essential in discussions of any ethnic community, and yet I have not included any cooks: Ruth Wilensky is a well-known Montreal figure who, even at the age of 87, continues to prepare the Wilensky specials, but neither her preparation nor the appreciative audience seem to have a gendered focus.<sup>50</sup> Many Montreal Jewish academics are women – some study Judaism, others not - but if their focus does not include gender, they are not mentioned in this chapter. And the list goes on – I could spend at least as many pages enumerating whom I have left out as I used in the study itself.

And perhaps, by limiting my gaze to women active in public spaces, I have perpetuated the traditional narrow vision that has ignored and belittled women's actions. By focusing on leadership, I may have inadvertently given the impression that women were absent, irrelevant, or at the very least insignificant. That was not my intention and in no way represents my assessment: there is no doubt that women are present, active, and of equal significance in this community.

So is there anything we can say about the group "Montreal Jewish women"? As I hope will have become evident, it is a group characterized by its diversity, with many strong and dynamic individuals,

---

<sup>50</sup> Brownstein, Bill. "Yes, there's something truly special about Wilensky's." *The Gazette* [Montreal]. May 13 2007. June 10, 2010. <<http://www.canada.com/montrealgazette/columnists/story.html?id=258acefe-3252-4915-a852-ed3ec0d3b778&p=2>>.

a group about whom it is difficult to generalize. It is a group that is multicultural, multilingual, multiethnic, multi-ideological, multi-denominational, that is both self-referential and inward-looking and, at the same time, focused on the outside world. It is a group that is very progressive in some ways, with feminist conferences and women's shelters, and, at the same time, very traditional, which supports a large number of synagogues denying women access to the Torah scrolls and the honour of reading from them. It is as varied and unpredictable as the rest of the human race and, one day, hopefully in the not too distant future, there will be no need for a separate chapter on their activities.

## Bibliography:

- Berdugo-Cohen, Marie, Yolande Cohen et Joseph Lévy. *Juifs marocains à Montréal: témoignages d'une immigration moderne*. Montréal: VLB, Éditeur, 1987.
- Berrin, Susan, ed. *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996.
- Bonneau, Marlene. *Re-thinking rites of passage in contemporary double-ring ceremonies in Montreal Jewish weddings*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Concordia University: 2002.
- Cohen, Judith R. *Judeo-Spanish song in the Sephardic communities of Montreal and Toronto*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Université de Montréal: 1989.
- Fishbane, Simcha. "A Female Rite of Passage in a Montreal Modern Orthodox Synagogue: The Bat Mitzvah Ceremony". In Robinson, Ira & Mervin Butovsky, eds. *Renewing Our Days: Montreal Jews in the Twentieth Century*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1995.
- Goodman, Donna. *Montreal synagogue sisterhoods (1900-1949) : a female community, culture, and religious world*. M.A. Thesis. Concordia University: 2004.
- Hart, Arthur Daniel. *The Jew in Canada: A Complete Record of the Canadian Jewry from the Days of the French Regime to the Present Time*. Toronto and Montreal: Jewish Publications Ltd: 1926.
- Jewish Women's Archive. "Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia." <<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia>> (April 1, 2009).
- Joseph, Norma. "Jewish Women in Canada: An Evolving Role". in *From Immigration to Integration: the Canadian Jewish experience*. Ruth Klein and Frank Dimant, eds.. Toronto: Institute for International Affairs, B'nai Brith Canada, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Feminist Challenge to Judaism: Critique and Transformation". in *Gender, Genre and Religion: Feminist Reflections*. Morny Joy and Eva K. Neumaier-Dargyay, eds. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1995.
- Kalter, Bella Briansky. "Ida Maza: A Memoir." *Canadian Jewish Studies* 6 (1998): 55-63.
- Landau-Chark, Susan J. *Community, identity, and religious leadership as expressed through the role of the Rabbi's wife* PhD. Dissertation. Concordia University: 2008.
- Lerner, Loren, ed. *Afterimage: evocations of the Holocaust in contemporary Canadian arts and literature*. Montreal : Concordia University Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies, 2002.
- Margolis, Rebecca E. "A New Generation of Lesbian Jewish Activism." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 9.1/2 (2005): 161-168.
- Miller Nirenberg, Barbara. *Once Upon A Hodesh: Tales and More of the Montreal Women's Tefillah Group 1982-200*. Montreal: LithoExpress, 2008.
- Morgentaler, Goldie. "Chava Rosenfarb: The Yiddish Woman Writer In The Post-Holocaust World." *Canadian Jewish Studies* 11 (2003): 37-51.
- Searle, Suzan. *Living water, sacred space : an outsider's look at contemporary Mikveh practice*. M.A. Thesis. Concordia University: 2008.
- Shahar, Charles & Susan Karpman. *The Jewish Community of Montreal*. 2001 Census Analysis Series. Montreal: Federation CJA, 2004.

- Siegel, Rachel Josefowitz and Ellen Cole, eds. *Celebrating the Lives of Jewish Women: Patterns in a Feminist Sampler*. New York: Harrington Park, 1997.
- Trépanier, Esther. *Peintres juifs de Montréal : témoins de leur époque, 1930-1948*, Montréal : Éditions de l'Homme, 2008.
- Jewish painters of Montreal : witnesses of their time, 1930-1948*. 2nd edition. Montréal : Éditions de l'Homme, 2008.
- Yelin, Shulamis. *Seeded in Sinai*. New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1975
- Zipora, Malka. *Lekhaim! Chroniques de la vie hassidique à Montréal*. Montréal, les éditions du passage, 2006.
- Rather Laugh Than Cry: Stories from a Hassidic Household*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2007.
- Zylberberg, Sonia. *Transforming rituals : contemporary Jewish women's seders*. PhD. Dissertation. Concordia University: 2006.