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Marla Brettschneider

Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues, Number 6,
Fall 5764/2003, pp. 56-59 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nsh.2004.0034>



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Symposium

WOMEN, WAR, AND PEACE IN JEWISH AND MIDDLE EAST
CONTEXTS

Marla Brettschneider, University of New Hampshire

I was delighted to be invited to participate in *Nashim*'s virtual symposium for its special issue on "Women, War, and Peace in Jewish and Middle East Contexts." After much thought, I dutifully sat down to write a short piece in which I offered a particular frame for understanding the Israel-Palestine conflict. My subject was primarily Israel, relying on a feminist approach that was large, philosophical. Using broad brush strokes, I painted a portrait of a complicated and shifting ontological clash between the United States, Israel, and Palestine. As is common in patriarchal forms of international relations that eschew difference, if the U.S. is to work publicly with another nation and claim it as a long-term and secure ally, it must portray that country as similar to the dominant understanding of itself: a western-style, at least somewhat free-market democracy of interest to Christians. Yet Israel is not simply "like" the U.S. I described some differences between the political cultures of Israel and the U.S. that may help explain the strains between the two during these tough times of war and failed negotiations. Adding to the limitations of a U.S.-designed strategy to end the fighting are the similarities between Israel and Palestine, together in their difference from U.S. assumptions. But for all the many similarities between Israel and Palestine, I looked through a feminist lens at how their needs and modes of analysis begin to part ways, so that the tensions between them have only been exacerbated.

I speak in the past tense, because that essay is not the one you are about to read. I still think that these macro-international issues require feminist analysis. However, in the months since I drafted that first attempt, I have felt increasingly concerned about the insanity in the U.S. as well, as the governing administration rushes into a new war in the Middle East. I feel compelled to explore the dynamics over here and to expose some of the micro aspects of the larger topic.

Building on efforts underway within the elite for many years, the U.S. government has turned the tragedy(ies) of September 11th, 2001, into an opportunity for pushing a fundamental shift toward a Republican agenda crafted by the party's right wing. The nation has entered a historical cycle of dangerous either/or patriotism and xenophobic violence. Using the specter of terrorism

to knock ordinary folk into a narrow realm of interpretation and response, the federal government is recasting domestic and international policy without regard for basic principles of either decency or debate. Basic civil liberties, due process, separation of powers, and checks and balances—cornerstones of a U.S.-fashioned notion of democracy—are consistently and publicly disregarded. The federal government is undertaking the most significant reorganization in this nation's history with the aim to centralize surveillance, the information gathered therefrom, and its directed response.

Stepping up anti-immigrant laws passed in the mid-1990s but hitherto only sporadically enforced, these policies, such as the forced registrations, arrests, and detention of immigrants, target the very vulnerable populations of Moslems, Arabs, Middle Easterners, and South Asians in the U.S. While this new effort appears to be directed at men from these communities, it is also designed to disempower already rather disenfranchised groups of women. Snatching away the men fitting these profiles is tearing apart families and communities—economically, socially, religiously, and otherwise. Not merely relegating women from these communities to the sidelines, the situation has left them with the multiple hardships of supporting the men in or under threat of detention while somehow holding families and communal structures together. All this, in a historical context for which there has been little preparation and a national climate in which these same women face verbal and physical harassment and abuse every day, at every level.

Anti-welfare and anti-drug laws enacted since 1996 have also mostly targeted young people of color, while bringing women into the prison-industrial complex at faster rates than before. Splitting up families and communities through the surveillance and incarceration of women threatens to bring to fruition the self-fulfilling fantasy of some whites that women of color are producing generations of humans unfit for an “American way of life” and are thus a threat to the nation's well being.

Where is the Jewish community in all of this? Its role has been mapped out quite clearly. Notwithstanding the rise in anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish hate crimes in the U.S., the Jewish community has not generally been the target of these recent legislative developments and efforts at “law” enforcement. Long defenders of immigrants' rights and proponents of civil equality, major Jewish organizations in the U.S. have recently retreated from these commitments. Not willing to risk their anxious status as honorary members of the elite, many large Jewish institutions are generally putting out the message

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that they are patriotic supporters of the government's sweeping re-orientation. We are seeing a trend wherein many Jews in these organizations are publicly "pledging allegiance" to the Administration and also securing their alliances with right-wing Christian groups. Internally, Jews with power have clamped down on dissent on issues ranging from Israel and the conflict there to other U.S. interventions around the globe, and to the anti-democratic policies here. Average Jewish individuals tend to toe the communal party line, whether or not they recognize that line as part of a concerted Jewish effort at public opinion-making.

Jewish women, following a long tradition of speaking out in a pro-peace voice, are finding their jobs and status yet again threatened. Despite the squeeze on dissent in the Jewish community, and Jewish women's still precarious position in Jewish life and among our leadership, many Jewish feminists have mustered the strength and courage to stay active. Many smaller, more domestically-focused groups with feminists in leadership positions—such as Jews for Racial and Economic Justice here in New York City and the range of organizations across the nation linked through the Jewish Social Justice Network—have continued to work for immigrant rights and other justice issues, risking attack in the press, threats of violence from other Jewish organizations, and de-funding.

As a domestic-international crossover example, Jewish Women Watching, a national Jewish version of the Guerilla Girls, has targeted the increasingly bolstered alliances between parts of the mainstream, organized Jewish community and the radical Christian right. Their most recent campaign involves distributing condoms with a wrapping that reads "practice safe politics." An attached postcard urging "abstinence from strange bedfellows" offers facts about these alliances and their potential impact on civil liberties issues and women's, gay, and reproductive rights. It also reminds us that the Zionist Organization of America awarded "The State of Israel Friendship Award" this year to the Christian right's Pat Robertson.

Other groups have also formed in response to the call for peace and sanity at this historic moment. The organization Brit Tzedek v'Shalom: Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace has emerged as the foundation of a new center-left peace effort declaring its concern for Israel at the core of its mission. Feminists have been central in this group's design and development in ways rarely found in U.S. Jewish organizational life. Feminists have also been central to the reinvigoration of an array of as-yet small further-left Jewish

groups working on Israel and Middle East peace. Some examples are the coalition of groups involved in the now defunct JUNITY (Jews United for a Just Peace, which formed at the start of the current Intifada in order to help spur organizing and coalitions around the U.S.), the web of Women in Black solidarity groups, Jewish Voice for Peace, JATO (Jews Against the Occupation), and the Refuser Solidarity Network. Radically inclined Jewish groups, particularly when it comes to Israeli politics and peace, have historically faced marginalization in the community. That there are many active feminists in these groups seems to make it easier for the largely male-run U.S. Jewish establishment to alternately threaten and ignore them.

The costs of macro modes of maintaining global U.S. dominance, and of the domestic components of U.S. foreign policy, are Jewish, feminist, and decidedly Jewish feminist issues. Feminists have long argued that an inability to address the complex of cultural difference within and among nations will ensure that efforts at peace are ineffective. We are also seeing up close how demonizing difference is essential to the strategy of using peacemaking as a guise for war-making. Globally, it is weaker nations that suffer most in these circumstances; domestically, it is those comprising the imbricating groups of women, the poor, and already disempowered minorities.

The combination of intense state activity and propaganda aimed at joining xenophobia, patriotism, and the creation of “evil others” is clearly dangerous. Historically a primary target in such campaigns, Jews know the importance of rejecting either/or politics and propagandistic messages of hate. Jewish contributions to a politics of decency and equality have historically yielded significant benefits for Jews and for many.

I’ve been asked what my own Jewish feminist agenda is for now. As a Jewish feminist, I feel called upon to remain steadfast and public in my commitment to diversity and peace work, linking macro developments on the international level to the most micro effects manifest among women, the poor, and the variety of minority communities that may be directly affected at any given moment. New historical moments require new analyses and strategies of engagement. This moment also reveals ever more deeply the wisdom of hard-learned Jewish feminist insights into the need for open, steady, and sustainable justice work.