Introduction

> *"I meet a guy in a bar that's cute...He asks 'You're Jewish? Wow. You don't look Jewish. You don't act Jewish.' And he says it in this tone that sounds like he's complimenting me. And I say...nothing. I say nothing, which combined with a flirty smile translates to 'thank you.'"*[1]
>
> –Vanessa Hidary

PRETTY CLOSE TO MY OWN STORY. Only I *did* say "Thank you." To the kids in school, neighbors on the block. Me, the pudgy, curly-headed, super-sensitive girl growing up in (brand-new) white, Christian, middle-class suburbs in northern Virginia, in the 1950s-'60s.

All of my friends' fathers were majors and colonels in the army, working at the Pentagon, just down the highway. We were trained to live in fear of the Russians bombing us at any minute, so we wore ID bracelets; mine said "Hebrew," and I hated it.[2] I craved one that said "Protestant," like all my friends had. To look like them, I later ironed my rambunctious hair in a futile attempt to restrain it into a smooth pageboy.

"Thank you" is what I thought I was *supposed* to say when told I didn't "look Jewish." It never occurred to me to say anything else. At least not until my early thirties, when I strolled into Oakland's women's bookstore one sunny afternoon, and *Nice Jewish Girls: A lesbian anthology*, edited by feminist activist Evelyn Torton Beck, leapt out at me. And my life changed.

It took many more years to grasp what the "thank you" signified: the dominant U.S. culture's mindset inside me. This was my first clue about internalized anti-Semitism—the way so many of us, as Jewish girls, got the (ridiculous, toxic) message that *something was wrong with us*. That we just

didn't fit the white Protestant mold this country valorized. That our bodies weren't svelte enough; that we were too outspoken or needy or intense. Maybe our anxiety showed a little too much. That we were just a tad repugnant: not okay.

I had to write this book to stop that inner monologue in its tracks, to turn it around. It's a devastating rant; and it is changeable. These internalized critiques, along with fear and grief, outrage and powerlessness, passed down through Jewish families for generations, are not personal pathologies; they are a communal response to anti-Jewish prejudice, persecution, genocide.[3] Just like Second Wave feminism taught us, the personal *is* political.

One of this book's key assumptions is that delving into our Jewish stories, ideally in community with other Jewish women—while absorbing historical and psychological information about how and why we have been hurt—can give us potent insights, fueling our drive to repair the damage. Grasping the connection between our histories and our present struggles, we can learn to recognize and confront anti-Jewishness, and how we internalize it. We can believe again in our innate lovability and value, renew our vibrance, treasure ourselves: countering past trauma and current bias.

Simply put, when we transform self-hatred, we accept and like who we are, and we treat others better, too. We stoke our natural empathy. As our activism is less weighed down by inner demons, we become more effective in changing systems that are short-sighted, immoral, unfair. We become savvier and stauncher allies. Anchored in Jewish ethical tradition, we bolster our capacity to create a just world: for Jews, for all the disenfranchised and abused on U.S. shores, as well as in the Congo, in Haiti, in Palestine.

This book is *about* Jewish women in the U.S., but it is *for* everyone who cares about Jewish women, about Jews, about women. As feminist scholar Carol Gilligan wrote, "Bringing the experiences of women...to full light, although in one sense perfectly straightforward, becomes a radical endeavor."[4]

I was born four years to the day after the last death march left Auschwitz. My family? We wanted to Blend In and Belong, as white, especially as "American." Christmas was an American holiday for us; our menorah also shone in the front window.

I later discovered that my mother consulted the local activist minister about raising my brother and me Unitarian. “No way,” he insisted. “You have a precious heritage, don’t deprive them of that.” Ally Number One. So I reluctantly schlepped to (Reform) Temple Beth El Sunday School until I was confirmed at sixteen, where to me the other kids were not cool. I remember thinking, “Get me out of here!”

In our sprawling housing development we had three other white Jewish families and two Japanese gentile families. As far as I knew, four of us were Jews in my high school graduating class of 450. At a recent reunion, one of them ambled over in the bar at 2:00 a.m. “How did we ever survive being Jewish in such a Christian white-bread-and-mayonnaise community?” L. laughed. Later, she forwarded an e-mail from a former neighborhood playmate who remembered me as her “first exposure to a Jewish family!” Unbeknownst to me, we had been a phenomenon.

Working with the National Council of Jewish Women,[5] the League of Democratic Voters, and the PTA, my mother was constantly knocking on doors: to elect Adlai Stevenson as president, to support local liberals, to collect for the March of Dimes. Our home was the unofficial community center/crisis clinic; my mother listened and dispensed advice, putting visitors to work folding laundry or weeding the garden. I learned that you “help people”—that’s what you do.

Growing up, the anti-Jewish prejudice I absorbed was subtle, but potent: I felt I never looked quite right, that I was somehow different, sometimes unwanted—even though I was elected to leadership positions, won awards, had dozens of friends and dates. Adaptive and resourceful, I figured out how to please, to give, to prove my worth. I don’t remember overt anti-Jewishness until pledging a sorority at my Ohio liberal arts college, when I learned that one of my favorite “houses” couldn’t decide whether or not to pledge “a Jew” (me).

In keeping with the times, I was radicalized, boycotting college classes to support Black Demands, braving Pennsylvania Turnpike blizzards to march in Washington, D.C. anti-Vietnam War moratoriums. Later, joining a political research collective, I organized with my Jewishness barely visible. Who cared? I was busy diving into feminism, coming out as lesbian,

protesting the Chilean coup as well as D.C. police brutality, supporting farmworkers, playing my kazoo on the White House lawn when Nixon resigned, chasing the FBI from my door. Then, traipsing the country performing songs of struggle and celebration with my lover, spreading the socialist lesbian-feminist call, and later, developing nationwide cultural networks of women's liberation and empowerment.

When I finally picked up *Nice Jewish Girls*, I found a Jewishness I could relate to: lesbian stories, though from women all over the map of class, ethnicity, politics, age, religious observance (or not). For the first time, really, I began to feel Jewishly proud, engaged. My lesbian-feminism led me to Step One in claiming a rowdy, joyful, complicated visible Jew-ness—one that was antiracist, woman-positive.

Looking back, I realized that my granddaddy *Moishe* had modeled (his version of) being a Jew for me—exquisite love and warmth, generosity, self-taught education, humor, deep spirituality, care for family, and "doing the right thing." Fleeing extreme poverty in the *shtetl*[6] of Przemyslany, Galicia (then Poland, now Ukraine) after his mother died, he reached Ellis Island in 1900 at age twelve. On New York City's Lower East Side, he swept the floor of a necktie factory, sifting through ashes for precious lumps of coal, later sewing women's skirts twelve hours a day. Years later, his sister pawned her wedding ring to help him buy a dry goods store in Denmark, South Carolina, where he raised his five children, including my mom—one of two Jewish families in the town of 2,000—driving his sons several hours roundtrip to Hebrew school each weekend, teaching Bible study at the corner church.[7]

It was such sheer relief for me to finally feel pleased about being a Jew, to build Jewish feminist political community—that when I began hearing about the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, I turned away. The information didn't sit well with my newfound Jewish-positive mindset, so plugging my ears seemed like the best option. For a moment, I became Zionist, because for the first time I understood why Jews were desperate for a safe haven. I ignored the rest of it.

But the disconnect with my social justice passions loomed too large. After picking coffee in Nicaragua to support the *Sandinista* revolution, being thrown in jail more than once for civil disobedience while protesting

against nuclear power and weapons, organizing to support women with AIDS, exploring women's spirituality and healthy uses of power—and especially, leading diversity trainings around race and class, while producing/hosting radio programs about all these topics—I had to face that Jews had not only been victimized, but we could (and did) also oppress.

Seven trips to Israel-Palestine later, four of them leading women's peace delegations, I published a book of interviews with Palestinian and Israeli peace activists and toured the country with my "Women Waging Peace" multimedia presentation on the (U.S.-funded) Israeli occupation. Ever since, I've organized events to raise humanitarian aid for children in Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon. I also fundraise for Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP)—an organization supporting full human rights for Israelis *and* Palestinians, focusing on movement-building to end the occupation. I've served as founding national board member, infrastructure-builder, public speaker, and event-producer for JVP.

In my forties and wanting to dig deeper, I charged into an experiential doctoral program focused on transformational change, hoping to give my activism more impact. Bent on learning a non-Eurocentric perspective, I was generously accepted into a study group with four African American women, self-named Four Dreds and a Jew. They (rightly) found suspect my eager/earnest desire to act for racial justice, while seldom bringing my explicit Jewishness to the table: my own story, where I came from, who my people were. I could best fight racism, they said, by first loving myself as white and Jew—healing my own wounds, validating myself (rather than wanting them to heal/validate me). Coming from that solid, self-knowing, proudly-Jewish place, I could be the best ally.

Our entire student cohort grappled with racism experientially, profoundly, in separate white and African American groups and also together. Thrust into a sea of ambiguity, everything I thought I knew was up for grabs; my world split open. Over the months, my defenses and denial wore down. Exploring where I came from, I was hit in the gut with how assimilation into whiteness had robbed me of a precious sense of belonging to my people. Emptiness and self-loathing were a high price to pay for economic advantage and Americanization. For the first time, I realized how my white Jewish experience was different from that of white Christians.

Lenses shifted; from looking at my Jewishness through a white filter, I began to see my whiteness through the filter of being a Jew.

{End of Excerpt from Introduction}