

# The Profession

## The Invisible Mehīzah

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This is a story about how Jewish Studies still has a gender problem because it still has a religion problem.

Telling this story is my protest.

Jewish Studies programs are entangled with Jewish communities, foundations, and institutions. Happily, today many Jewish Studies scholars are not Jewish. This is as it should be: no one should have to belong to a community to engage in its study. Likewise, in the AJS 2018 membership survey<sup>1</sup>, over 50 percent of the respondents were women, and close to 2 percent of respondents identified as nonbinary or genderqueer.

But when the AJS was founded in 1968, most members were Jewish men. Residues of that history linger. So there are spaces where the line between the synagogue and the seminar room is porous. This story happened there, in that in-between.

I'm not trying to hurt the people in the story. I'm telling it to highlight social structures and how they affect female-identified scholars. This tale, occasioned by a minor error, provides a perfect storm, a collision between

academic and ritual spaces. The problem lies in our field, and how its legacies of gendered exclusion linger, not in individuals. I'm telling it here because we, as a guild, need to reckon with the vulnerability these overlaps still engender. We need to have some uncomfortable conversations. Otherwise, such moments go unremarked by the scholars whose bodies are privileged in both spaces—the academy and synagogue.

This story, of course, has a *mehīzah*

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A few years ago, I participated in a weeklong Jewish Studies seminar cosponsored, for the first time, by my own Jewish Studies center. A preponderance of the scholars were Jewish, though some were not. Hebrew terms of endearment bounced around the room all week. The more senior men in the group were sometimes even dubbed with the honorific "*hakham*:" a sage. Overall, though, it was a typical academic gathering.

Then Shabbat happened.

**I broke personally. That moment of exclusion shredded my Jewish sense of self.**

For the weekend, our group moved to a location near a synagogue. There would be optional services and group study on Saturday afternoon, before work continued Sunday. We weren't *required* to go to the synagogue, but our meals were served there, and members of the group were leading the group study in ways that built upon their academic expertise.

With light trepidation given my liberal Jewish upbringing, I expected the synagogue to be traditional. *It will be fine*, I told myself. *You've been to Orthodox services before! We're all just guests there.*

So there will be a mechitzah dividing the men and the women, I told myself. You've seen them, if rarely. *Pretend it's ethnography!*

I considered not attending services—but I am Jewish. I do observe Shabbat. I decided to go and stick with the group. It's not like we were leading the service, I thought.

*We were all just guests.*

Until we weren't.

I got through Friday night behind the blessedly low, waist-high *meḥīzah*, battling through my wistful memories of leading Friday night services as a teenager. I sat next to a non-Jewish woman from our seminar, playing prayer book tour guide; the other Jewish women from our group were more traditionally observant and seemed comfortable. I was sad, but ... *fine*, I told myself. I drank a bit extra at dinner. I was ... fine?

But then, on Shabbat morning, I felt much more alone in the women's section. The other women from the seminar had slept in. The men I had talked with all week, tried to connect with intellectually and befriend, seemed so far away.

The Torah scroll was far away, too. Then they called up a member of our seminar for an *aliyah*, the ritual honor of saying the blessing before a section of the Torah reading. An immense honor. Wait, I thought. The group is *participating*? Maybe it's just him.



21 ART CONTRIBUTOR: OR-NAH RAN

This artwork was part of the Jewish Agency's invitation to a delegation of artists for an art project on the theme "Home." The mosaic was inspired by a demonstration of five pregnant women in search of a better place to raise their unborn children. The protest was designed by Maya Ben David during the COVID-19 pandemic. *She Deserves It*, 2020. Mosaic with natural stones and ceramic on cement board. 35.4 x 59.1 in. © 2020 Or-Nah Ran. Courtesy of the artist.

But then, another male scholar from our group was called up for an *aliyah*. And another. And another. Nearly all of the Jewish men in our group. All standing before the scroll, touching its handles. All intoning the familiar chant.

And I broke.

I broke personally. That moment of exclusion shredded my Jewish sense of self. All those teenage years in my Reform synagogue, *leyning* Torah, of *munaḥ 'etnaḥtas* and *munaḥ segols*, the *yad* my grandmother had given me heavy in my hand. Decades of taking the privilege of my inclusion in three different denominations for granted. I felt exposed, stripped of my Jewish personhood.

I broke professionally. I had wanted to impress these male colleagues on equal footing. When they ascended the *bema* while I couldn't, it was clear that I was not, in fact, their equal. I had never felt more vulnerable.

But most of all: I broke because I felt *ashamed*.

"How will I face them in the seminar room tomorrow?" I thought. "How can any of them respect me after this? How can any of them see me as their colleague *in the same way* they see the men beside them?"

That's how internalized shame works. Before I was furious with anyone else, *I was angry at myself*. Being able to give a Torah blessing does not have any bearing on one's scholarship. But it broke the sense of scholarly camaraderie I had been fighting for all week. *You're not really*

## The Profession

*one of them, I thought. If only you were a man, this would not have happened.*

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That *meḥizah* is why Jewish Studies has a gender problem.

How can Jewish Studies ever be a truly equitable field when male-only homosocial spaces have played, *and continue to play*, such an enormous part in our guild's networks?

You could say, Shabbat services shouldn't be part of an academic seminar—and I would agree with you. (They are no longer a part of that program.)

But this wasn't the first time Jewish Studies and Jewish observance have been blended, and it won't be the last. In fact, our field's push towards greater public engagement makes it *more likely* that this will happen again. Jewish Studies scholars frequently serve as scholars-in-residence at synagogues. When a Jewish institution chooses to host a scholar in residence—perhaps, sometimes, through the AJS Distinguished Lectureship Program—which scholars' bodies will signify expertise to them, and why?

Ironically, this whole episode occurred because of a mistake. Months earlier, my colleague had been promised those members who preferred a more liberal service would find a second minyan elsewhere in the building. But it was an "off" week. There was no other service.

The mistake revealed the privilege of the men behind the proverbial curtain, the comparative ease of their ability to ascend in literal and figurative ways.

Some of those men are my dear friends now and have seen me through tough times. I have collaborated with others professionally. I am happy when I see them at conferences. All of them. I did not write this to shame them. I doubt many of them even remember this incident.

I didn't write this essay because I want anyone else to change the way they worship.

**The mistake revealed the privilege of the men behind the proverbial curtain, the comparative ease of their ability to ascend in literal and figurative ways.**

I wrote this essay because when I tell this story to other women in Jewish Studies, they nod in recognition. They tell me their own *meḥizah* stories from other professional settings. Some are from long ago. Some are recent. Why are we still telling these stories?

Internalized shame is real, and it is painful. *If only I were the right kind of woman in Jewish Studies*, I thought that day. *The kind who was "more" observant and wasn't upset by a meḥizah. Then I would belong.*

*If only I had simply been born a Jewish man*, I thought.

No one should still feel that way in our field.

And so, we need to keep talking about the gender problems in Jewish Studies and their link to the Jewish problems in Jewish Studies. This protest doesn't happen on the streets. It happens when we are blazingly, painfully honest with one another. The risk is not facing tear gas or police batons. It is, simply, tears.

In this story, a misunderstanding and a real *meḥizah* made an invisible *meḥizah* visible.

Jewish Studies won't be a truly inclusive place until we tear the invisible one down.

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i <http://bit.ly/AJS2018survey>