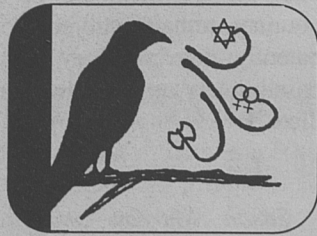


## feature

CROW'S CAWS  
by crow cohen

I have an ambivalent relationship with my Jewish heritage. Sometimes it's harder for me to come out as a Jew than as a lesbian. That's partly due to my own rejection of patriarchal aspects of Judaism, but often my lesbian feminism is rejected by the straight Jewish community.

Because I've chosen to live in my beloved Vermont, Jewish culture and customs often go unnoticed, mostly out of ignorance and lack of curiosity. Anti-Semitism abounds not only on the Right, but on the Left, within the women's movement (my closest political allies), and within me, which is the hardest to detect. Yet I can't escape coming to terms with my Jewish identity. It's written all over my face, leaps out of my last name and was instilled in me while I was growing up.

It often feels up to me to find peace and reconciliation within the ranks of my given Jewish community, but at Brandeis University on October 17, I was met more than halfway by two ordinarily conservative Jewish women's organizations. Jewish Women International (formerly B'nai Brith) and Hadassah sponsored "Dialogue II for Jewish lesbians, their grandmothers, mothers, sisters, daughters, partners, and friends." I can't tell you how

healing it was to my Jewish lesbian soul to attend such an event with my 88-year-old mother, a longtime member of Hadassah.

Hadassah was founded 80 years ago by pioneering American Zionist Henrietta Szold. It has over 300,000 members and is the largest women's or Zionist organization in the U.S. Focusing on health issues, it supports two hospitals, five schools, outpatient clinics, research facilities, and a community health center in Israel. It was behind the largest shipment of relief supplies sent to Bosnia by a non-governmental organization, sent a group of physicians to the international team aiding refugees in Rwanda, and helped build, staff, and maintain health care facilities in Zaire.

Jewish Women International is 100 years old and presently focuses on children's emotional health. For 50 years, they've sponsored a residential treatment center in Jerusalem for children severely scarred by family violence.

Of course, by no stretch of the imagination was this particular gathering officially endorsed by the membership at large. It was sponsored by the North Atlantic/Western New England chapters, and not

## Jewish Lesbians and Their Moms

without their fair share of flak.

But picture this. At risk of perpetuating stereotypes (and there's a gram of truth in most of them), here were typical effusive, chicken soup suburban moms "qvelling" (Yiddish meaning praising/bragging about) their children, and not for being doctors, lawyers or CPAs, but for being dykes!

Two distinct cultures I've had to keep at bay flowed into one another, and I was profoundly moved. I cried; my mother cried. With a great deal of animation, we linked hearts with others breaking down that deadly combination of homophobia and anti-Semitism that can cause intense isolation.

Most of the time, I don't notice the inner defenses I've had to develop to protect myself from often subtle and invisible disdain the world has for Jews. (For example, we're too clannish, our services are conducted in an unnecessarily complicated and exclusive foreign language, we're too loud, too rich, too cheap, too pushy... you get the picture.)

It's been a struggle not to internalize these messages, especially when they come from beloved friends, Jews and non-Jews alike. And when I go to family gatherings, I don't particularly expect my relatives to draw me out. ("Nu, Carol? So what's the latest lesbian book you've read?" Never happens.) Consequently, I either volunteer information or

draw out family members, since I'm more conversant in their culture than they in mine.

Yet here were earnest middle-aged and older women, many with those comforting New York accents, really wanting to learn more about Jewish lesbianism. They honored our literature, filmmaking, political analyses. They asked us how they could make us feel included. They told us about brave acts of confronting their husbands, congregations, Hadassah chapters as they struggled with accepting their daughters' choices to be true to themselves.

For the first time, my mother was able to tell her favorite story in front of a large group of like-minded crones: several years ago, she was in a restaurant in her hometown and met an old friend she hadn't seen in years. "So how's Carol?" the woman asked. (Naturally. Jewish mothers always ask after the kids.) "Oh, she's great," my mother responds. "Very happy. She's a lesbian."

I have a feeling my mother was as surprised by the look on the woman's face back then as she was by the explosion of laughter in the room when she retold the story. On some level, Rosie doesn't get what the fuss is about. I was always puzzled by her rather neutral reaction to my coming out back in the '70s, but I think I figured it out. Lesbianism was so invisible to her generation that she didn't

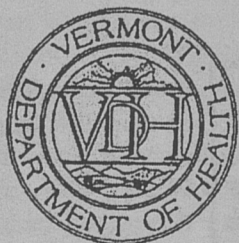
grow up with negative stereotypes. It's almost as if she had to figure out what "lesbian" meant when I told her.

Lesbians at the conference were asked, "How can we help you integrate into the Jewish community?" My particular suggestion: go after the rabbis. Challenge them. Urge them to come out in public and support queer issues from the pulpit and in the media. They have a lot of power; hold them accountable. I am delighted to say that Rabbi Joshua Chasen at Ohavi Zedek Synagogue in Burlington does just that, not without uncomfortable consequences. He has recognized and warmly welcomed that unique, vibrant lesbian energy into his synagogue; let me tell you, we're infiltrating the place.

One big problem with the gathering. How dare this nurturing group of committed Jews serve only cold, hard raisin and blueberry bagels for breakfast — with vegetable cream cheese, no less? Phooey!

By the way, since this article will appear in the middle of Chanukah, I have a question for you. How many of you know the story of Christmas? Raise your hands. Now how many of you know the story of Chanukah? No further questions. ▼

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