# Behind the Rhetoric Of "My Yiddishe Mama"

## *The Status Of Older Jewish Women*

*by Sheva Medjuk*

*Cet article se penche sur le vieillissement dans un contexte juif et féministe. Les liens complexes qui existent entre féminisme, vieillissement et judaïsme affectent la vie des femmes juives qui vieillissent et qui sont victimes de sexisme et d'antisémitisme à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de la communauté juive.*

*Older Jewish women are subject to all the permutations and combinations of ageism and sexism experienced by all women. Their experiences of ageism and sexism (inside and outside the Jewish community) are compounded by anti-Semitism.*

For many Jews, reflections about their own Jewish mothers conjure up comforting imagery—the veritable "Yiddishe Mama." The strong emotive bond that we may have with our mothers, often romanticized by the passing of time, reflects only our own individualistic relationships. From the perspective of the larger social structure, however, the position of older Jewish women differs dramatically from this warm nostalgia. Older Jewish women experience many of the same problems shared by all older women. Unfortunately, feminist analysis has been slow to recognize the factors that affect the position of older women in our society. It has typically ignored the older woman and has done little to deal with the ageism of our society. In addition, the negative valuation of older women has, for the most part, been reinforced by the Jewish community. The Jewish community fails to recognize the damage caused by the negative stereotypes of Jewish women. Older Jewish women are subject to all the permutations and combinations of ageism and sexism experienced by all women. For Jewish women their experiences of ageism and sexism (from both inside and outside the Jewish community) are compounded by anti-Semitism.

### The social context of aging

In North American society there has been a major shift in stereotypes of the elderly. Until the late '70s, older people generally were regarded with compassion, and stereotyped as poor, needy, and frail. As such, it was the duty of the state to care for them. The 1980s and 1990s have seen a reversal of this stereotype (Binstock). The portrayal of the elderly now is "selfish, politically powerful, and potentially dangerous" (Cole 24). The media reflect these changing attitudes. In February 1988, the cover of *Time* magazine featured an older couple on their way to the tennis courts with the following caption: "And now for the fun years! Americans are living longer and enjoying it more—but who will foot the bill?" (Gibbs). Similarly, the cover of *The New Republic* referred to older people as "greedy Geezers" (Farlie).

Both caricatures of elderly people reflect society's ageism which conceptualizes the elderly as a social problem. In the earlier stereotype, the elderly are portrayed as in need of care by the state. In the more recent construction, elderly people are regarded as a burden on the economy because of their use of pensions and health and welfare services (Arber and Ginn).

The changing stereotype of the elderly in our society reflects larger political and ideological shifts. The treatment of the elderly as a group, either as poor and dependent, or as rich and selfish, fails to recognize that elderly persons are not homogeneous. Rather they represent a myriad of groups and their experiences vary dependent on their position in society.

The experiences of older women and older men are also substantially different. In Canada, in 1990, over 80 per cent of women, but less than 60 per cent of men, 65 years of age and over have incomes of less than $20,000 per year and about one per cent have no income whatsoever (Statistics Canada 1993). At the other end of the income scale, less than three per cent of Canadian women, but almost eight per cent of men, 65 years of age and older have incomes of $50,000 or more. Social programs may have guaranteed some income for older individuals, nevertheless, as these data indicate, the majority of older women have very modest incomes. Although feminist analysis has provided a context for understanding the position of women in society, it largely fails to address the situation of older women.

### Feminism and aging

While feminist analysis has done much to advance our understanding of women's position in the home and in the labour market, it has tended to ignore these women once they are no longer engaged in child care or participating in the labour force. Feminists have generally not challenged ageist constructions of the nature of women beyond midlife (Rosenthal). As women from the feminist movement of the 1960s age, and are confronted with ageist stereotypes themselves, they may increasingly turn their attention to this issue. Authors like Germaine Greer or Betty Friedan, for example, have recognized that their earlier works at best have ignored

older women, at worst have reinforced the general societal adoration of youth and fear of age. Increasingly, there is a recognition that the disparaging way in which aging is portrayed in our society (ranging from descriptions of older people in their declining years as lonely, ugly, sick, senile, dependent) is not accurate. These feminists, as they celebrate their fiftieth and sixtieth and seventieth birthdays, do not recognize themselves in these images. Friedan, for example, argues that we must examine the "strong face of age" (69), while Steinem describes aging as entering an "adventurous new country" (248).

The media have done much to reinforce the pursuit of the fountain of youth. There are few images of older women in popular magazines (Friedan). The aging of popular media personalities has introduced an ironic twist. Where Jane Fonda or Joan Collins might attest to the fact that it is alright for women to grow old, closer examination of the image these women portray suggests that growing old must be avoided at all costs. It is acceptable to grow old only if one does not look old. Grey hair and wrinkles, signs of normal, healthy aging, are to be hidden by whatever means possible. The stereotype of the older woman is that she is not the equal of the younger woman, "neither in power, nor in beauty, nor in any of the other feminine attributes" (Lesnoff-Caravaglia 15).

For many Jewish women these attitudes find resonance, as we remember bemoaning our "Jewish" dark, curly hair as ugly, even enduring painful surgery on our "Jewish" noses so that we no longer resembled our families. In the same way that being Jewish is acceptable as long as you do not look *too* Jewish, growing older can be tolerated if one does not look *too* old.

**Feminism and Judaism**

While there is a strong Jewish feminist movement, there seems to be a fear among many Jews that feminism will divide the Jewish community (Medjuck 1993). This suspicious view of feminism manifests itself in several guises, sometimes overtly, sometimes more covertly. Feminism is often caricatured as an opponent of the family, or as anti-volunteerism, both of which are regarded as important for Jewish survival (Schneider).

Rather than recognizing the contribution that a feminist analysis can make to our understanding of Jewish survival, feminism is often erroneously perceived as a threat to that very survival, a danger to be opposed rather than an important cause to be supported:

> Reaction to this threat comes not only from religious leaders, but from the larger, secular community as well. Jewish leaders oppose feminism by popularizing the false notion that the family and particularly the self-sacrificing mother, were predominantly responsible for preserving the Jewish people throughout the centuries. (Heschel)

As such, Jewish women often feel forced to "choose" between their identities as feminists and their identities as Jews.

**The triple whammy: ageism, sexism, and anti-Semitism**

Conceptualizations of older Jewish women have changed from the poor widow who needs all the charity that the community can provide, to the wealthy widow who lives extremely well on the provisions made by her deceased husband. Again, it treats all older Jewish women as if they had the identical socio-economic status. In addition to the negative images of older women as "inactive, unhealthy, asexual, and ineffective" (Block, Davidson, and Grambs), and as self-centred, wealthy dowagers, Jewish women bear the further burden of negative evaluations as Jewish women. Perhaps the most common stereotype of the older Jewish woman is that of the "Jewish mother." The Jewish mother is portrayed as overprotective of her children, constantly nagging them, feeding them, and making them feel guilty about everything. It is ironic and in many ways tragic, that it is often Jewish men who have perpetuated this caricature. The classic example of this vilification of older Jewish women can be found in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint.* Roth creates the mother, Sophie, by amalgamating all that was negative about the Eastern European *shtetl* (town) life and all that is problematic about middle-class suburbia, the absolute worst of both worlds. In the Canadian context, Mordechai

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Richler's portrayal of the Jewish mother in *Joshua Then and Now* is also damming. While Richler creates Esther, presumably the antithesis of the Jewish mother, she is equally as vile precisely because she does not conform to the Jewish mother image.

This stereotype of the Jewish mother is found not only in novels by Jewish male authors, but also in the larger society as well. Jewish mother (and mother-in-law) jokes abound and they almost unanimously confirm the characters crafted by Roth as self-sacrificing, overbearing, stifling, and guilt-provoking, responsible for all the psycho-pathological problems of Jewish men. Why are there no Jewish father (or father-in-law) jokes?

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Blaming mothers is not, of course, exclusively Jewish. "Our society usually fails to give mothers credit for the good they do, unless they are dead or described in the abstract as in 'apple pie and motherhood'" (Caplan 71). Jewish mothers, however, are even denied the wholesome "mom and apple pie" epitaph. Rather, Jewish mothers have come to represent all that is wrong with the past. It is a way of denying one's past. As Bienstock argues, Jewish mothers' lives became equated with the sons' shameful ethnic and lower-class roots.

Younger Jewish women are not, of course, hated as Jewish mothers but as "Jewish American princesses" (JAPs), an image more vile than that of the Jewish mother. Ironically, the selfless mother has been transformed into the self-absorbed, selfish daughter. It is difficult to imagine what will happen to this stereotype of younger Jewish women as they, too, age. Will they be even more hated when they are gray and wrinkled? Will they be detested for their concern about their aging bodies? Will a new version of the Jewish mother appear, this one "Americanized" and unaccented?

Nevertheless, the enormous achievements of older Jewish women have begun to be chronicled (Kramer and Masur). For the most part however, the Jewish community has failed to recognize these women as full and equal partners in Jewish history. They have been "written out of history" (Henry and Taitz). In the contemporary context, the documented evidence of the enormous strides that Jewish women have made both in education and in the paid labour market, does little to deter Jews from telling heinous JAP or Jewish mother jokes. The facts of Jewish women's major contributions to the Jewish and non-Jewish community are powerless against these negative stereotypes.

It is difficult to understand why these images persist. It is especially disheartening that, to a large extent, it is Jewish men who create and sustain these stereotypes. Surely, given our collective history, Jews should be sensitive to the dangers of these degrading stereotypes. How is it that we are immune to the damage we inflict on Jewish women? Why do these negative stereotypes of both older and younger Jewish women prevail? It is particularly difficult to understand in the context of the Jewish community's sensitivity to anti-Semitism. Why is it that we recognize anti-Semitism aimed at Jewish men, but fail to recognize the anti-Semitism underlying our own attitudes towards Jewish women? In its most basic form, do our attitudes reflect an irrational hatred of Jewish women? It is interesting to note that the common feature shared by the Jewish mother and the Jewish princess is their assertiveness, and particularly, that this assertiveness has negative consequences for Jewish men. The portrayals of the Jewish mother and Jewish princess suggest that a man's strength is enhanced by female frailty and diminished by women's equality. Independent women are perceived as a serious threat and the stereotypes of the Jewish mother or the Jewish princess serve to discredit Jewish women's independence as well as trivialize their experiences (Medjuck 1988).

**Older Jewish women and the organized Jewish community**

In most ways the organized Jewish community reflects the norms of the larger culture in its response to older women. An examination of the status of widows provides one particularly glaring example of these attitudes.

Many older Jewish women, like their non-Jewish counterparts, will most likely live as widows at some point in their lives. The proportion of widows among female seniors is very high. Almost one woman out of two is a widow in the age group over 65 years of age (Statistics Canada). For women over 85 years old, the proportion is almost four out of five women. While the consequences of losing a spouse are usually difficult for most people regardless of ethnicity or age, widowhood places unique burdens on older Jewish women.

Jewish normative structure has traditionally placed a high value on the family as a major focus of Jewish identity. In this context, the departure of children, the "empty-nest" syndrome, is compounded by the loss of a spouse. For many traditional Jewish women, the family is a very salient part of their identity. Traditional Judaism stresses the importance of women's role in maintaining the Jewish home and for preserving and transmitting Jewish values. Thus, the transition to widowhood takes on new poignancy for those who are more intensely family focused. Jewish communal organizations are often very family structured and thus many older Jewish women experience their connectedness to Jewish life through their families, particularly their husbands. An example of this problem is the report of a woman

whose synagogue took away her seats after her husband died and gave them to "a family" (Siegal).

These attitudes of the Jewish community towards Jewish widows are rooted in the cultural norms of the larger society, but are reinforced by Jewish traditional values with its emphasis on the role of women in the family as the transmitter of Judaism. However, even a cursory overview of both the diversity and richness of Jewish women's lives belie this simplistic view that their lives are meaningless after the death of their spouse. Jewish women, like their non-Jewish sisters, can and do approach this change in their lives in a variety of ways. While not wanting to disaparage in any way the importance of the family to Jewish identity, there are many meaningful ways in which Jewish identity can and is expressed. In addition, as Jewish women who have participated in the paid labour force age, their work and related professional activities will continue to be a salient part of their identity. While it is possible that for some Jewish widows their lives will seem empty and roleless, this is largely a consequence of societal expectations. For others, aging and widowhood are opportunities for change and "new adventure" as Friedan has suggested. In as much as Jewish women today reflect the changing trends in the general society in terms of rates of divorce and number of never married individuals, unless the social climate changes dramatically, these women, as they age, will have even less status within the Jewish community than their widowed sisters.

Jewish life is rich with ritual that celebrates rites of passage. The ceremonies surrounding the birth of a child include the *brit milah* and redemption of the first born for male infants and the naming for female infants. As well, there has been, in recent years, the development of more ritual around the birth of girls. Adulthood is marked by the *bar* and *bat mitzvah*. Marriage, as well, is replete with tradition and ritual. All these rituals serve as markers of the transition from one stage to another, of the closing of one phase of one's life, and the moving on to another phase. Jews share in many of the rites of passage of the larger secular society as well, for example, graduation ceremonies (ranging from kindergarten to graduate school). There are, however, few rituals in either the secular or Jewish culture to mark the transition to old age. We may have retirement parties or sixty-fifth birthday parties, but our attitudes towards them are marked with considerable ambivalence. In Jewish culture, which places such a high value on ceremony and ritual, the absence of such rituals suggests that aging is not an event to be celebrated.

Recently, feminists have attempted to develop positive ceremonies around the aging process, for example, the "croning" ceremony, or among Jewish feminists, the "*simchat hochmah*." These ceremonies suggest that this time of one's life should be regarded as a rite of passage. In this way, aging is celebrated as a new stage in one's life development with all its new potential. The development of such ceremonies within mainstream Jewish cultural traditions might begin to dispel the negative perceptions of old age by the Jewish community. Mechanisms to promote and celebrate the richness and diversity of older Jewish women's lives need to be developed.


*Sima Elizabeth Shefrin, "Anna Colombo," fabric appliqué and quilting, 37" x 43", 1995/5755. Photo: Brenda Hemsing*

## Conclusions

This discussion in no way wishes to diminish the love and affection that Jews as individuals feel for the older women in their families. Rather I have attempted to illustrate that as a community our attitudes reflect the ageism and sexism of the society in which we live. Ageism, sexism, and anti-Semitism, both externally in the larger society, and internally within the Jewish community, not only hurt

*Sima Elizabeth Shefrin is a Jewish fabric artist living in Vancouver. "Places of Hope" is a reminder of the solidarity work Palestinian and Jewish women do together. "Anna Colombo" is an 87 year old Italian-Israeli woman who participates in this work.*

older women, but diminish us all. As a culture with a long tradition of social justice, we as Jews must strive to guarantee equity for all of us.

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