



BookMarks

Women's League for Conservative Judaism
Summer/Fall 2015

MEMOIRS

Introduction by Janet Coleman Kirschner, Books Chair

Welcome to the Summer/Fall 2015 edition of **BookMarks**, a semi-annual publication of Women's League. In this issue we are focusing on women's memoirs. As we delved into the topic, I was surprised to see how many Jewish women had, in fact, written memoirs.

But before we start, I would like to introduce myself to you, our thousands of dedicated readers. I am excited to serve as the Women's League Books Chair, which is something of a change of direction for me. Many of you may know me as a financial person. In my professional life I was an accountant. I have served Women's League as treasurer and finance committee chair and currently I also chair the long range financial planning team. However, books are a passion of mine... I read over 50 books a year, primarily novels with Jewish content, mysteries (especially with Jewish authors) and Holocaust narratives, including many memoirs. I have to thank Program Director Lisa Kogen and Ellen Kaner Bresnick for challenging me to take this position.

We have compiled an outstanding and very diverse list of current memoirs – some names you will recognize, others not. Additionally, we are extremely fortunate to highlight Joy Ladin's *Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders*, a story about a professor of English at Yeshiva University's Stern College who transitioned from male to female. This includes a full review of her memoir and a fascinating interview with the author.

Ladin's book will be the next selection for our popular new Women's League Reads, a moderated on-line book group. The discussion will begin on October 7, 2015 and culminate with a live author chat on the evening of October 19, 2015. If you are not already a member of Women's League Reads you can join by emailing lsilverman@wlcj.org. Include the name/city of your sisterhood, or if you are an Individual Member.

In this issue:

- Why Memoirs, by Program Activity Team Chair Ellen Kaner Bresnick
- Review of *Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders*
- Interview with Joy Ladin
- Suggested reading list of memoirs by Jewish women, with a brief synopsis of each
- Memoir in Poetry
- Glückel: The First Female Jewish Memoirist

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of BookMarks. I look forward to hearing from you with your comments, suggestions and questions. I can be reached at jkirschner@wlcj.org.

Interview with Joy Ladin

Author of *Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders* (2012)

Joy Ladin, the David & Ruth Gottesman Professor of English at Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University, is the first openly transgender employee of an Orthodox Jewish institution. Her memoir is an intimate and sincere account of her heart-wrenchingly painful journey as she transitioned from male to female

WLCJ: *The topic of your memoir is both timely and unfamiliar to most readers. Did you have a particular readership in mind?*

JL: When I started to write, I did so for purely personal reasons. My therapist and a close friend urged me to write about my transition. When my therapist suggested an autobiography, I laughed; I would need a self and a life, and I never had either.

But commuting with a friend provided the best insight. Her car, where I would transform myself, was the only safe place for me to be myself. When I began the process of writing she said “You’re writing like a man ...write as yourself.” That was the best advice I received because I was hiding my vulnerabilities, my identity and feelings, keeping my life and self at a distance. She inspired me to find a new voice, to tell my story as mine and not an act I was playing out. She was my first audience.

I was my second audience. I wasn't writing to tell my story; I was writing to create and discover myself. The voice in the book was not someone in the life-and-death throes of gender transition but one who had survived, and could look back with perspective.

But I was also writing for a reader like my friend: someone interested in and puzzled by transgender identity, someone who needed language to make the trans experience intelligible. I did not want the reader to see it as alien and incomprehensible. Rather I hoped they might see my experience like their own.

WLCJ: *Do you think that people are able to identify with you?*

JL: I hoped that readers would be able to identify, not so much with me as an individual, but with the feelings and experiences. I am struck by so many who do identify with my story. Women with mastectomies understand my early experience of putting on and taking off breast forms, and people going through divorce have told me that my traumas resonate with theirs. LGBT people discuss the pain of concealing their true selves, and the fear and sometimes terrible consequences of coming out.

I was particularly anxious about whether transgender people would identify with my experience, not

necessarily a portrayal of all transsexuals or transgender people. But that has not happened.

WLCJ: *Your memoir reflects a life of relentless tension between polarities: being and becoming; living and dying; male and female, interior and exterior. How were these tensions manifested, and how did you work through them?*

JL: For me, these four binary tensions are all connected. Because I couldn't live my gender identity, my exterior was completely disconnected from my interior. Often I felt dissociated from my body and my persona was a mask, an act, a lie. The manifestation of my self was associated with my exterior, false male life. No matter how that exterior changed, those changes never felt like becoming, because my male exterior was designed to forestall living my female gender identity. This meant that my exterior was like death to me. By the same token, I imagined becoming myself as the annihilation of my false male life and everything with it. Death and life, being and becoming, male and female, interior and exterior – before transition, my existence was split along these intertwined binary axes.

WLCJ: *In addition to your internal struggle, you had a myriad of personal relationships -- including with God. How did your transition impact those relationships?*

JL: I would say that my relationship to God was the least affected, because in that relationship I always knew who I truly was. My relationships with my parents were quite distant. My father had stopped talking to me when I was 21 and I rarely spoke with my mother. Since I've come out to her, to my surprise, we've become much closer, not in a gendered way – not as mother and son – but as mother and child.

Like most heterosexual marriages, mine didn't survive my transition. That was terrible and tragic, but not surprising. When I came out to my ex in college she said that she didn't mind that I felt female, but she couldn't be with anyone who didn't look and act like a man. The choice was mine, and for most of my adult life, I chose being with her over being myself. When I couldn't make that choice any longer our marriage and the deep friendship that went with it were over.

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Through the Door of Life

A Jewish Journey Between Genders

by Joy Ladin

Reviewed by Lisa Kogen

What does it mean “to know” something? Those of us who went to college in the second half of the 20th century acquired knowledge that was often on the cutting edge of research in the social and physical sciences. We thought we were finally coming to understand how the body and the brain function; we thought we were finally beginning to comprehend such complex issues as race and ethnicity and sexuality and gender. However, we’ve come to know that the goal posts of knowledge are actually moving targets.

A stellar examination of these shifting boundaries is the recent work by Joy Ladin, *Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders*. Ladin, previously Jay Ladin, who transitioned from male to female in her early 40s is, a professor of English at (remarkably) Stern College of Yeshiva University. This beautifully written, painful and fragile memoir is not about Ladin’s fight to remain on the faculty of America’s premier Orthodox university, but rather about her personal, anguished battle to become herself, after a lifetime of being not herself.

Ladin is a professor of creative writing. She is a poet, with a poet’s pen and a poet’s heart. As she tells her story it is – even to the reader for whom the subject can be both mystifying and disconcerting – told with grace and intensity. Her personal narrative unfolds in a drumbeat of mounting urgency, first as an isolated and confused young man, then a committed but deeply conflicted young husband, and then a loving, nurturing father who – in an act of familial corporate immolation – leaves to become something that none of them wanted or understood. This singular painful motif runs throughout the memoir: the cost of Ladin’s re-creation is the dissolution of her family and probably her livelihood. It is her death or theirs, a choice that no one would ever want to make.

Ladin’s work is more than memoir – she also instructs. The unknowing reader is introduced to the soul deadening syndrome of gender dysphoria, an individual’s disconnect from biologically assigned



gender. Those with gender dysphoria suffer horribly and are in a state of relentless anguish, alienation and when the situation seems hopeless, suicidal impulse. This is probably new terrain for many, but Ladin’s presentation of her battle with gender dysphoria is vivid, insightful and aching.

When Ladin concludes that it would be best to end her personal torment with suicide, her Jewish soul summons her from the abyss. A friend brings her a gift from Israel, a stone inscribed with Moses’ command: *Uvacharta ba-chayim*. Therefore choose life. And so she does, and begins the slow process of becoming.

There are many descriptions of the less humanly complicated aspects of transitioning: estrogen therapy, creating breasts (early on) from panty hose stuffed with birdseed, learning to dress and walk and talk like a female, changing from male to female and back to male inside bathrooms and darkened corners, navigating the complex codes of male/female conversation. Her stories about pillaging thrift shop bins for the perfect ensemble make her seem like any of us, thrilled to find a deal.

But the hardest read – the relentlessly painful, heart wrenching part of the story – is the family she leaves behind. Ladin’s wife and three children are heartbroken. Her wife, her college sweetheart and true soul mate, remains uncomprehending and unable to accept the reality about her partner. Her three children – bright, inquisitive, precocious – are lost and confused and angry.

The moment she dreaded most was coming out to her mother. Would she reject her? Would she judge? Would she accept? In one of the most celebratory sections of the book, Ladin’s carefully choreographed encounter with her mother underscores a near universal theme: that in many cases, if not most, the bonds between mother and child can endure tremendous strain.

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WHY MEMOIRS

By Ellen Kaner Bresnick

If you decided to write a memoir – about what would you write? Would you focus on one significant time in your life taking residence in your head and informing your every reaction? Or would it be about something else, perhaps a lighter treatment of an issue that you faced and somehow maneuvered through?

Whatever a memoir is, it is not the recounting of an entire life, that is, it is not an autobiography. A memoir is usually a fully shaped story, often powerful or inspirational, of a single moment in time. It could be just a few days or it could be a few years. At its core is a universal truth about human nature and behavior. Sometimes described as a representation of the age of reality in which we live (think reality television, blogging and even Facebook), the memoir may be written to impart to the reader an insight or lesson that can change them in some way.

And no matter its length, a memoir has a clear narrative arc and a resolved conflict, and it should portray fully developed characters in a fleshed-out setting, no matter the length of time involved.

Memoirs are an immensely popular genre today, but they have been around for a long time. For many novice authors, a memoir is one way to enter the writing world in a less challenging way since there are few requirements. And memoirists often write multiple memoirs because they have numerous personal stories to tell.

But why is it that we read these memoirs? Certainly we have an innate desire to read about people, both the famous and ordinary. Memoirs allow us the chance to meet famous people or, at least, to imagine what their lives are like. As we read about other people's lives and experiences, we might find ourselves identifying with the others with similar life experiences. And if

they can live through their experiences, no matter how dire, then maybe we can, as well.

It's very fashionable these days for people to find their own voices and tell their stories. Some of these stories are traumatic and some are family narratives that have been handed down. Memoirs validate our stories, whether we are writer or reader. Also, a good memoir is simply a good read. We can be inspired by these stories and may even better understand our own world and its issues. On the other hand, we also encounter new situations or experiences in other people's memoirs that can help us heal when we encounter the traumatic experiences and therapeutic processes of others.

And finally, as Jews, we now have access to, quite literally, *thousands* of Holocaust memoirs, whose stipulated message is that we must never forget. Holocaust memoirs are read extensively by non-Jews.

So now that we have focused this issue of **Book-Marks** on memoirs, perhaps you might think about writing one of your own. Don't be daunted by the process. Concentrate on a transformational time in your life or even on a single memory, anything that affects you strongly or forces you to question yourself. And when you begin to write, tell the truth even if it's painful. Search for the deepest lessons you can find about human nature. Don't be afraid to write and write and write, draft after draft, if necessary. And remember: this is your truth and your memoir is your chance to give that truth!

If the process is indeed too intimidating, read the stories of others. Memoirs have an infinite capacity to engage, entertain, enrich, teach, and inspire.

Happy reading (or writing) or both!



WOMEN'S LEAGUE READS ONLINE BOOK GROUP The newest initiative from Women's League! A world-wide conversation about books of interest to today's Jewish women. Special bonus: a conversation with the author. To enroll, send lsilverman@wlcj.org your name, email, and sisterhood, or let us know that you are an Individual Member of Women's League (not through a sisterhood).

THE BOOKCORNER Look at the Women's League website (www.wlcj.org) for a growing list of new titles for your reading pleasure.

MEMOIRS BY JEWISH WOMEN

Stories That Engage and Educate and Inspire

Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey between Genders, Joy Ladin, 2012 National Jewish Book Award Finalist (see review)

The Jewish Daughter Diaries: True Stories of Being Loved Too Much By Our Moms, Rachel Ament. This collection of 28 essays, including one by Mayim Bialik, is a heartfelt, hilarious tribute to mom and daughterhood, exploring the often complex, colorful and at times claustrophobic relationship.

Whatever Is Contained Must Be Released: My Jewish Orthodox Girlhood, My Life as a Feminist Artist, Helene Ayalo. Ayalo, a renowned feminist artist, was raised in the Orthodox section of Brooklyn and married to a rabbi who died when she was 30 years old. The memoir covers her highly structured life as a young woman and then her years as an artist.

The Strange Ways of Providence in My Life: A Holocaust Survivor Story, Krystina Carmi. The only child survivor from all the Jewish children of Obertyn, Poland, now living in Israel, courageously reveals the tragic story of her family.

Can't we Talk about Something More Pleasant?, Roz Chast. The renowned New Yorker cartoonist uses cartoons, photos and documents to present a portrait of her aging parents and how, she, as an only child, copes with them. (2014 National Book Award Finalist)

An American Bride in Kabul: A Memoir, Phyllis Chesler. Our first Women's League Reads selection, this story draws upon the author's diaries to recount her fairy tale to horror story marriage to an Afghan man and her move with him to Kabul.

Sweet Like Life: A Jewish Girl's Journey to the African Tea Set, Stacey Clark. A wealthy Jewish girl recounts her early life, which left her alienated from the values and social expectations of her family and community. Embarking upon a different course of world travel to Africa and Central America, she discovers there are other ways of living that are meaningful and fulfilling.

Burnt Bread and Chutney: Growing Up Between Cultures: A Memoir of an Indian-Jewish Childhood, Carnit Delman. The author's memories are sometimes painful, sometimes pleasurable, often awkward. She juxtaposes adolescent moments with mythic tales of her female ancestors in the Indian-Jewish community.

Unorthodox and ***Exodus***, Deborah Feldman. In these two memoirs, Feldman writes of her decision to cut off ties to her family and its Hassidic community, and of her new life as an independent single mother who is a refugee from the religious world.

Gabby: A Story of Courage and Hope, Gabby Giffords. In this compelling story by the former Arizona Congresswoman's survival after an assassination attack, she discusses the challenges of brain injury, the responsibilities that fall to a spouse, and the healing power of love and courage.

Bloodhound: Searching for My Father, Ramona Koval. The author, an Australian, journalist, broadcaster and editor, and child of Holocaust survivors, suspects that the man who raised her was not her biological father. This is a moving story of the terrible cost of war and of family secrets.

A Life Not With Standing, Chava Willig Levy. The author chronicles her life as an iron lung alumna, and how people have the capacity to turn calamity into success and even joy.

The Diary of Bergen Belsen, 1944-1945, Hanna Levy-Hass. The author stands alone as the only resistance fighter to report on her experience inside the camps, discussing the political and social divisions inside Bergen-Belsen.

Between Gods, A Memoir, Alison Pick. As a teenager, this Man Booker nominated novelist discovered that her paternal grandparents were Jewish and that most of their family died in the concentration camps. Pick recounts her struggle with the meaning of faith, her journey to Judaism, and her battle with depression.

Wonder: How a Jewish Girl Went Wondering to, Judy Reamer. A story of escape from the heavy hand of cults and the strong arm of the turbulent USSR, an unjust trial, and her husband's untimely death.

Maybe Not Such a Good Girl: Reflections on Rupture and Return, Susan Reimer-Torn. The author flees her Orthodox Jewish life and returns to it 20 years later.

The Book of Joan: Tales of Mirth, Mischief and Manipulation, Melissa Rivers. Funny, poignant and irreverent observations, thoughts, life lessons, and

tales about life with the author's mother, comedian Joan Rivers.

Bless the Bitter and the Sweet: A Sabra Girl's Diary from the Last Days of British Rule and the Rebirth of Israel, Naomi Harris Rosenblatt. This diary is a rare chronicle of Palestine from 1947-1952, translated from Hebrew and enriched with a wealth of rare period photos.

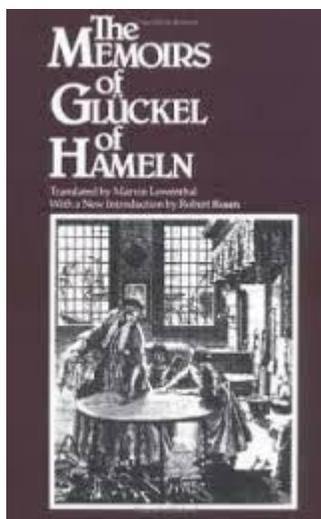
Lean In Women, Work and the Will to Lead, Sheryl Sandberg. The COO of Facebook fuses humorous personal anecdotes, singular lessons on confidence and leadership, and practical advice for women based on research, data, her own experiences, and the experiences of other women of all ages.

She's Not Herself: A Psychotherapist's Journey Into and Beyond her Mother's Mental Illness, Linda

Applebaum Shapiro. This memoir is written by a seasoned psychotherapist who grew up with a mother who suffered from severe depression.

The Woman I Wanted to Be, Diane Von Furstenberg. The famous designer reflects on her extraordinary life from her childhood in Brussels to her days as a young, jet-set princess, to creating the dress that came to symbolize independence and power for an entire generation of women.

Paper Love: Searching for the Girl My Grandfather Left Behind, Sarah Wildman. The author traces her journey to find the lost love her grandfather left behind when he fled pre-World War II Europe, and her exploration into family identity, myth, and memory.



Glückel ***The First Female Jewish Memoirist***

The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln is an astonishing work – still eminently readable – a memoir written by a German Jewish woman in the late 17th century. It is one of the earliest, if not the first, extant book-length work by a Jewish woman, and is noteworthy for its humanistic insight into family, community, religion and history. Writing in Yiddish (beginning in 1691 at the age of 46), Glückel states explicitly her motivation for writing: “*I began writing it, dear children, upon the death of your good father, in the hope of distracting my soul from the burdens laid upon it, and the bitter that we have lost our faithful shepherd.*” But the memoir also serves as a vehicle for dispensing advice and teaching to her children – nurturing them, cautioning them, admonishing them along the way.



Glückel of Hameln

Glückel and her husband, Hayyim, had 14 children, 12 of whom survived to adulthood. But at mid-life Hayyim, a very successful jewelry and gem merchant, died and left his beloved soul-mate and adviser to take control and manage their family business, run their large household, and raise their brood of children, alone. Glückel's business acumen and physical and emotional stamina are remarkable – leaving the reader inspired by this feminist icon. An important aspect of her business dealings was the arrangement of marriages for her children, finding suitable matches and negotiating dowries.

Glückel provides more than family history. The memoir abounds in descriptions of local and historical events, and personalities (both public and private) in the Jewish community of Hamburg-Altona. Included are a description of the messianic movement of Shabbetai Tsvi, the anti-Semitic murder of two local Jews, and a number of communal conflicts involving rabbis and community leaders. It is still a great read – an important source for social and women's history – offering a rich and often riveting panorama of Jewish life in the early modern period.

Memoir in Poetry: Poems by Sharon Olds

I Go Back to May 1937

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,
I see my father strolling out under the ochre sandstone
arch,

The red tiles glinting like bent plates of blood behind
his head,

I see my mother with a few light books at her hips
Standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks

With the wrought-iron gate still open behind her,
Its sword-tips black in the May air,

They are about to graduate,

They are about to get married,

They are kids,

They are dumb,

All they know is they are innocent,

They would never hurt anybody.

I want to go up to them and say

Stop, don't do it —

She's the wrong woman,

He's the wrong man,

You are going to do things you cannot imagine you
would ever do,

You are going to do bad things to children,

You are going to suffer in ways you never heard of,

You are going to want to die.

I want to go up to them there in the late May sunlight
and say it,

Her hungry pretty blank face turning to me,

Her pitiful beautiful untouched body,

His arrogant handsome blind face turning to me,

His pitiful beautiful untouched body

But I don't do it.

I want to live.

I take them up like the male and female paper dolls

And bang them together at the hips like chips of flint

As if to strike sparks from them,

I say,

Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it

- What makes this poem a memoir?
- Who is the speaker? Is it Sharon Olds or is it someone else? How do you know?
- Why has the speaker chosen to write about this particular situation?
- Does the speaker resolve the issues associated with this situation? If so, how? If not, why not?

Last Words

Three days ago, my suitcases

Were hunched there in his hospital room,

In the corner. I had to pick them up

By the scruff of their necks and leave him. I kept

Putting them down, and going back

To kiss him again although he was exhausted,

Shining like tarnished silver, and yet

I could not seem to pick up those bags

And walk out the door the last time. I kept

Going back to the mouth he would lift, his

Forehead glittering with effort, his eyes

Slewing back, shying, until

Finally he cried out 'Last kiss'!

And I kissed him and left. This morning his wife

Called to tell me he has ceased to speak,

So those are his last words to me,

The ones he is leaving me with — and it is ending with a
kiss —

A command for mercy, the offer of his cracked

Creator lips. To plead that I leave,

My father asked me for a kiss! I would not

Leave till he had done so, I will not let thee go except
thou beg for it.

- Is Olds the narrator of this poem? How do you know?
- How would you describe the narrator's relationship with her father?
- What makes this poem a memoir?
- What similarities or differences do you see between the two poems?

Interview with Joy Ladin, *continued*

My son told me early on that he would never see me as a woman and made it clear that he wanted to continue our father-son relationship: playing sports and video games, bonding around superheroes. It was a no-brainer for me: I was and am his father, no matter what.

My relationships with my daughters, who were very young when I started living as myself, have been less straightforward. My older daughter was particularly sensitive to others' feelings. For her, the problem was the catastrophic breakup of her family. It was awful for her, and we never really worked out a stable, healthy new relationship. My youngest daughter was so young that she didn't know I had transitioned for a couple of years; for her, the divorce was not a good thing, just normal. But she too has suffered from the continued rift between her parents and feels uncomfortable about my being trans.

I wish I knew more about how my transition affected my students. While it cut enrollment in half, and is still difficult for some, Orthodox Jews have strong moral imperatives not to shame or embarrass others, and so I have rarely heard anything from students who are uncomfortable with me. For the most part, we all live under an unofficial "don't ask, don't tell" policy. I gave a talk about trans and Jewish identity at Barnard College that was attended by some of my Stern College students, and one wrote a long, very positive piece about it for the student newspaper. I'm so grateful, and astonished, that she did that.

WLCJ: *On page 60 you write: "Gender does matter to my students. Gender shapes the lives of women who follow traditional Jewish law as pervasively and as profoundly as gender has shaped mine. For everyone in this classroom, gender and learning are intimately, inexorably entwined." Did your Jewish identity complicate the process or did it help you understand the nature of being?*

JL: From my childhood, I had felt that being Jewish helped with my transgender identity. It was an acceptable way of being openly different, a way of connecting to family and culture. I could identify with a deity who, like me, was without a body, who others couldn't see or understand, who was desperate to be known and loved but constantly frustrated and angry when those desires were not answered. The Torah connected me to God, and despite my isolation, I was not alone.

WLCJ: *Our essay on memoirs says: "As we read about other people's lives and experiences, we might find ourselves identifying with the others with similar life experiences. And if they can live through their experiences, no matter how dire, then maybe we can, as well." Do you think that readers are able to identify with you?*

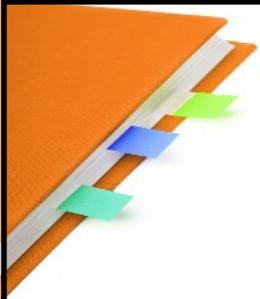
JL: Many people tell me they identify with what I say about the process of becoming themselves.

WLCJ: *For whom did you write this memoir?*

JL: At some point I realized that, at the deepest level, I wrote this memoir for our children - mine and as well as everyone else's - because children look to us, their parents, to learn how to become themselves.

Review of *Through the Door of Life*, *continued*

As we continue to encounter new categories of identity that belie prevailing fixed notions, we are on a learning curve of social understanding. In *Through the Door of Life*, Ladin provides a glimpse into a life that, for most, is unfamiliar and even mystifying. But the reader can come away with greater understanding that life, indeed, has many doors, and there is not always – and perhaps rarely – one straight path from entrance to exit.



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WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR
CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

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