

**II**  
**THE INTELLECTUAL**  
**ENVIRONMENT**



# Fighting Antisemitism in the Feminist Community

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on my efforts over the past 20 years to fight antisemitism in the feminist community. Like my Jewish feminist sisters, I have been deeply disappointed and disheartened by this phenomenon. However, I have found various ways to remain inside the feminist movement and from there to fight the antisemitism from within. At times these efforts have worked to good effect.

In this paper, I will share some of the strategies I have used. Of course, what I will describe here is not intended as any kind of exhaustive list. However, by reviewing some of these strategies, perhaps it is possible to articulate some of our best practices and how we can be most effective at fighting antisemitism around the world.

Before discussing the specific strategies I have employed, I will offer a few general comments.

During the years that I have been doing this work, there has been a sea change in the nature of antisemitism, and at present the delegitimization of Israel has become so widespread on the left that it is virtually normative. There are, therefore, some implications to this for how we approach fighting antisemitism.

The first implication is that, while acknowledging the excellent efforts of Jewish communities around the world in the fight against antisemitism, we need to try new and different strategies. In my view, we need interventions that are innovative, creative, and smart, because, unfortunately, our enemies are innovative, creative, and smart, and because fighting a norm is different from fighting a group of neo-Nazi skinheads. For example, you cannot arrest a norm.

The second implication, or even premise, for this kind of activism is that, in order to be effective, you must be an insider in the group whose norms you are challenging or trying to change. Again, this is different from our traditional approaches to fighting antisemitism. You did not need to belong to the Aryan Brotherhood to fight them. Here, however, you need to share the language and the unique sub-culture, including the particular signs, symbols, and at least some of the norms, of this group, if you are to have any effect.

If all my years of working to fight antisemitism have taught me one thing, it is this: the only people who can influence the anti-Israel left are the pro-Israel left. Because,

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despite the differences between these two groups on the issue of Israel, they have a common language. Similarly, within the feminist community, the only people who can affect anti-Israel feminists are pro-Israel feminists. In other words, women who strongly identify as feminists, and at the same time love Israel and the Jewish people passionately enough to go to the mat for them. It is like with a family. It does not matter how nice or smart you are; if you are from outside the family, no-one is going to let you change something within the family. So, in this kind of work, one must work from within.

The third and final premise underlying this sort of activism is that, given how large and potentially daunting the problem of antisemitism is, one should only target for change those whom it is possible to influence. It is a waste of our limited time and energy to target hard-core antisemites. We should be directing our energy solely toward what I think of as the “well-meaning but ignorant.” Which is how I view many non-Jews—and many Jews, as well.

This is also how I view a lot of the feminists I know. For the most part, feminists are not a bad or malevolent bunch. They are even idealistic. They have just never thought much about the issue of antisemitism before, and no-one has challenged them to. The Israel Project has published some interesting research showing that non-Jews who talk to a Jew about Israel even once will, in a significant number of cases, come to see Israel more positively as a result. However, this research also shows that most Jews rarely have these conversations with non-Jews. So the people I target in my efforts are those who are open to influence and whose minds can be changed.

## II. STRATEGIES FOR FIGHTING ANTISEMITISM IN THE FEMINIST COMMUNITY

I will now turn to the strategies that I have used. Of course, much of what I say here about fighting antisemitism among feminists can also be generalized to the broader left.

In approaching my particular corner of the shadow of antisemitism (i.e., the feminist community), I have divided my target group into feminists inside academe and those outside of it. This is not a perfect distinction, because virtually all feminist scholars (i.e., those working in women’s studies programs or in some form of association with them) also perceive themselves as part of the larger feminist movement. However, this distinction is still useful for our purposes, because this academic sub-group was able to be influenced by one particular strategy that is nowhere near as useful with feminists outside academe.

### 1. *Feminist academics as a target group*

With this group, I had one powerful tool—I would even say weapon—to work with, and this was my research. More specifically, I refer to my two most recent studies, which are both feminist in conceptual framework and approach. Both these studies were funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), which lent them prestige within the academic context. One was a national study of Canadian Jewish women and their experiences of antisemitism and sexism, and the other was a Toronto study of how Jewish girls aged 10-14 experience and understand antisemitism.

The context in which I conducted both these studies was the Centre for Women’s Studies in Education (CSWE) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, known as OISE/UT. In Canadian Jewish academic circles, OISE itself is reputed to be one of the most problematic institutions of higher education in

Canada in terms of its radical left-wing orientation and its anti-Israelism and anti-semitism. This reputation is not without basis. A few years ago, I conducted a research study on 80 Canadian Jewish professors from four different Canadian universities, and from that research I know that certain parts of OISE are particularly challenging places, as are many of the women's studies programs in Canada and internationally. However, the Women's Centre at OISE/UT, where I have been located for the past decade, is a good place where I feel quite comfortable. An important part of this has to do with the woman who for many years was the Director there—a non-Jewish Judeophile who would never tolerate any form of antisemitism (or racism) at her center.

I will now discuss these two research studies. The genesis of this research was an encounter I had one day with one of my feminist colleagues, who was organizing that year's panel on "Women and Diversity" in honor of International Women's Day. I passed her in the hallway, and asked her if she was planning to include anything on Jewish women, and she said that that would not be appropriate, as Jewish women could understand oppression because we are white. I told her that this was not correct, and to make a long story short, initiated this research on Jewish women so that women like her, coming from a left-wing, anti-oppression perspective, could begin to understand the parallels between the "dual oppression" of women of color (sexism + racism) and that of Jewish women (sexism + antisemitism). In that way I could build some bridges between Jewish feminists and other feminists.

Conceptually, my Jewish women's study is rooted in Jewish feminist scholarship, which is concerned with delineating the specific experience of being Jewish and female, and the contributions to this of both antisemitism and sexism (e.g., Beck 1995; *Bridges* 1989-2010; Cantor 1995; Gold 2004, 1998, 1997a, 1997b, 1993; Henry & Taitz 1996; Hyman 2002; Jewish Women's Archive 2006; Kaye/Kantrowitz & Klepfisz 1986; Medjuck 1993; *Nashim* 2003-2010; Plaskow 1990; Pogrebin 1991; Siegel 1995, 1986; Weidman Schneider 1984; and *Women in Judaism* 1997-2010). My Jewish women's study involved a random sample of 365 Jewish women from across Canada and clearly showed the extent of the antisemitism and sexism that Canadian Jewish women encounter in their everyday lives (Gold 2004, 1998, 1997a, 1997b). It also showed the different mental health implications of these two kinds of oppression. The women in the study who reported having had many antisemitic experiences in the past also had significantly higher scores on the Beck Depression Inventory than the other women in the sample, but no such result was found regarding sexism (Gold 2004).

Another important finding from this research project was that when these women were asked where their encounters with antisemitism had taken place, the second most frequent response was "at school." This led me to wonder about the experiences of contemporary Canadian Jewish girls, which ultimately resulted in my longitudinal study on Toronto Jewish girls (aged 10-14) and their experiences of antisemitism. I followed these girls for four years, filming them throughout. This study, like the one on Jewish women, revealed disturbingly and unequivocally the reality of antisemitism in the lives of the participants and its impact on them. One can glean a small flavor of this from the short film (13 minutes long) that I made about the research on these girls, called "Jewish Girl Power."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This film can be viewed on my website at: <<http://www.noragold.com>>.

The Jewish women's study was the first national study anywhere on women's experiences of antisemitism and the first to find, within any population, a statistically significant relationship between antisemitism and depression. The Jewish girls' study was the first social science research study to examine over time the emotional and psychological impact of antisemitism on Jewish girls (or, actually, Jewish children altogether). But perhaps the most important contribution of these two studies was the opportunity they gave me to lay out before my feminist colleagues, in an irrefutable way, the ugly reality of antisemitism. I have presented dozens of times on each of these studies to audiences comprised of both Jews and non-Jews (and quite a few of these presentations were to feminists), and in each instance I used this talk as an entrée to teaching them about anti-Israelism as a form of antisemitism.

Occasionally I have met with comments that were stupid or hostile, such as, "You mean there are some good Jews—I mean Israelis?" However, generally speaking, the response from both Jewish and non-Jewish feminists has been positive. I have often been told, "I didn't know about this. I just never thought about any of it before. This is very interesting. And important."

Consistent with this, a few years ago, I received an extremely gratifying response from a feminist colleague I have never met, who at the time was the editor-in-chief of *Women's Studies International Forum*, a prominent feminist journal based in England. Given that the paper I submitted there about my research, entitled "Sexism and Antisemitism as Experienced by Canadian Jewish Women: Results of a National Study," was something of a "J'accuse," I was pleasantly surprised and heartened not only when it was accepted unusually quickly and without revisions for publication in this journal, but also when the journal's non-Jewish editor-in-chief wrote me a personal note to say that this article was so eye-opening for her, and in her opinion so important for all feminists to read, that she was going to jump the queue for it and put it into the very next issue. Which she did.

This incident, and the overall positive reception enjoyed by both of these research projects, as well as the film, have helped restore and maintain my faith in at least some of my feminist "sisters."

Both of these research studies have also been useful weapons in a high profile panel discussion I engaged in that included one of the most vociferous anti-Israel feminist scholars in Canada. Even though this woman had packed the room with her students and acolytes, I won, at least partly because of the power of research, what quickly became a debate. My opponent had no research underpinning her comments; she just ranted. She was also foolish enough to violate a core aspect of feminist values, culture, and etiquette by refusing eye contact with me, and coldly rejecting my friendly, sisterly overtures that we work together to build bridges as feminists. Thus she exposed herself for what she really was (i.e., full of hate, and therefore not a true "sister" or feminist). This helped her to lose this debate. But the solidity of research was definitely a factor.

Afterwards, this professor's students (at least half of whom were women of color or Muslim) came up to me to thank me and talk to me, and take copies of my paper. These young feminists were the perfect example of the "ignorant but well-meaning" people who are capable of being influenced that I alluded to earlier.

So this illustrates how research and scholarship were, and can be, used as weapons with which to challenge, confront, and educate a local, or international, community of feminist scholars. This is, of course, equally applicable to any other scholarly community one wishes to challenge, confront, and/or educate.

## 2. *Targeting feminists outside academe*

Obviously, when trying to influence people, different strategies and weapons are required for different target groups. The women I am thinking of in the larger feminist community are involved with feminist bookstores, feminist film festivals, feminist poetry readings, feminist journals, and/or in the feminist art world. They also work—for pay or as unpaid activists—in the field of violence against women (e.g., in rape crisis centers), as well as in the peace movement, or as part of the struggle for women's rights, lesbian rights, reproductive rights, and other general human or civil rights. The most influential non-academic feminists I know tend to fall into these two groups (i.e., the arts and activism). I therefore designed interventions that target these groups as the main tools in my efforts to counteract antisemitism within this population.

### A. The arts

In addition to my academic career, I am engaged in literary work. I am a fiction writer and also the founding editor of a new online literary journal, *Jewish Fiction.net*. This part of my life gives me another route into the feminist world, and another way of influencing it.

Regarding *Jewish Fiction.net*,<sup>2</sup> I had several motives for starting this journal, but one of them was to counteract the boycott of many Israeli fiction writers. For example, when I was recently in Israel, I learned that a prize-winning Israeli author I know was supposed to have her book come out in French, in France, but that it was cancelled at the last minute, because the French publisher decided they could not “indirectly support the occupation.” I would like, through *Jewish Fiction.net*, to create a space for Israeli writers to showcase their work, where it can receive the international exposure it deserves. I have decided to publish at least two Israeli writers per issue. This journal will be widely distributed online, including throughout the feminist community. So this is how a literary journal can be a weapon.

In terms of my own fiction writing, my novel, *Exile*, is in itself a form of activism, a tool, and a weapon. *Exile* is a novel about the anti-Israelism in academe, and what happens to a young feminist who comes from Israel to spend a year studying in Canada. This novel is as yet unpublished. However, there have already been numerous public readings of it at literary conferences, and in public and academic venues (including feminist contexts), and very often this novel elicits a strong response from listeners. It makes people think. I hope it will have this effect on even more people when excerpts of *Exile* appear on *Jewish Fiction.net*.

So these are just a couple of ways that one can harness the deep and latent power of literature to help fight antisemitism. Of course, all of the other arts—music, dance, the visual arts, theatre, and so forth—can be used in this way as well. The arts speak to everyone, and speak to human experience at a concrete and intimate level. So, perhaps even more than academic research, which appeals primarily to the intellect, the arts can be an effective tool.

I have seen this, for example, with my short film, “Jewish Girl Power.” Its reach extends much farther than my research articles. Since it is available online and for free, it

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<sup>2</sup> See: <<http://www.jewishfiction.net>>.

has been viewed by over 1,000 people, many of them feminists. But it also reaches further because it reaches into the heart, not just the mind.

A number of Jewish communities, as well as the Israeli government, are now coming to recognize that one of the best ways to fight stereotypes about Israel (and hence anti-Israelism) is through the dissemination of Jewish and Israeli culture and the arts. So the arts have great potential as a resource for us in our struggle, and the work I am describing here, it turns out, is part of a larger trend.

## B. Activism

In terms of influencing the other influential group of non-academic feminists, the feminist activist community, the obvious tool to use is activism. I therefore recently started a new pro-Israel group in Toronto, comprised of Jews who want to fight antisemitism and also have ties to a variety of progressive causes and organizations, enabling them to infiltrate and influence these places. We have several feminists in our group. We have a union member who works for one of Canada's most anti-Israel unions. We have someone formerly employed by the Ontario Human Rights Commission. And so on. So far, our group has had two good meetings, and this fall we plan to double in size.

So these are, in a nutshell, a few strategies that demonstrate some success in the fight against antisemitism in the feminist community (and beyond).

This work is difficult, but what makes it possible is the support I feel from non-Jewish feminists who are my allies and from other Jewish feminists, whom I experience as standing with me as I do this work. This includes some older Jewish feminists who have inspired me over the years, like Rachel Josefowitz Siegel, Evelyn Torton Beck, and Aviva Cantor.

I also am able to do this work because I am not naive. I do not expect that sisterhood, even at the best of times (and we are not in the best of times) will be simple. Just as I do not think family relations of any kind are simple. But whatever the tensions and difficulties, there is a deep connection to build on with one's sisters. To use perhaps the most obvious example of sisterhood, consider the case of Rachel and Leah in the Bible. In 2010, I published an essay entitled, "Rachel and Leah: A Jewish Model of Sisterhood" in *Kerem*.<sup>3</sup> In this piece, I challenge the common misperception of these two women as being, above all, competitors for a man. Instead, what my research uncovers is the immensely profound and passionate love that Rachel and Leah had for each other, and that this love outweighed all the tensions between them. Moreover, according to the *midrash* on Lamentations (Lamentations Rabbah, P'tikhta, 7:49), it was Rachel's profound and passionate love for Leah that led God to deliver us (*b'nei Israel*) from exile.

For this reason, among others, I believe profoundly in the capacity of some women to truly listen to each other, care for each other, and change.

## III. CONCLUSION

One persistent, even insistent, question that implicitly haunts any contemporary discussion of antisemitism is the question why the mainstream Jewish community, which has

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<sup>3</sup> Gold, Nora (2010). "Rachel and Leah: A Jewish Model of Sisterhood." *Kerem* 12: 96-105. This essay is also available on my website at: <<http://www.noragold.com>>.



often been successful in dealing with traditional antisemitism coming primarily from the right, has until now had limited effectiveness at national and international level in dealing with “the new antisemitism” coming from the left.

I think this is related to the fact that the Jewish community, for the most part, has not tended to embrace the left. It does not understand the left, and it cannot really relate to it. As a result, it does not have anyone from the left on its team, and so it has no-one who can do this work. This, in our current situation, is now a major liability. Particularly since, as I have explained, the cleaning-up of the left can only be accomplished by those belonging to it.

However, those who are not feminists and/or on the left still have a crucial role to play in this. They can search out, and actively support, those of us on the left (the pro-Israel left, obviously) who are doing this challenging work. It makes an incalculable difference to those of us, for instance in this new group in Toronto, that in certain quarters of the mainstream Jewish community, we are perceived, and supported, as part of the international fight against antisemitism. This is far more helpful than the response that groups like ours often get: “Oh, you have ties and loyalties to certain causes on the left. Feh.”

As we all know, we are now facing some very difficult times, and it looks like they are going to get worse before they get better. We, as an international community of scholars, Jewish communal leaders, and activists, simply do not have the luxury of playing at internal Jewish politics with each other. In fact, the reality that we here span the entire political spectrum is one of our greatest resources, and a source of power. It means that we can get to more places where we can fight antisemitism.

In conclusion, it is my fervent hope that the love that we all feel for Israel and the Jewish people (*am Yisrael*) can—like the love between Rachel and Leah—overpower and outweigh the disrespect and divisiveness that sometimes occurs within our community. So that we, along with our non-Jewish friends and allies (and we do have non-Jewish friends and allies) can work together to defeat our enemies.

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