

# the art of dis/appearing

JEWISH WOMEN ON MENTAL HEALTH



COMPILED & EDITED BY LEAH THORN

# the art of dis/appearing

J E W I S H   W O M E N   O N   M E N T A L   H E A L T H

## CONTENTS

<b>Introduction by Leah Thorn</b>	4
Suzanne Levy	8
Shoshi Rosehill	10
Martha Blend	12
Judy Ironside	14
Berta Freistadt	16
Isha McKenzie-Mavinga	18
Hana Schlesinger	20
Sara Eva Tabet	22
Valerie Witonska	24
Melissa	26
Jo Silver-Hannah	28
Leeala	30
Val Stein	32
Rebecca Wolman	34
Joanne Limburg	36
Leah Thorn	38
<b>GLOSSARY</b>	40
<b>Appreciations</b>	41

## introduction

**J**ewish women are resilient, intelligent, diversely beautiful, and know a thing or two about struggle and survival. And yet, I and many other Jewish women spend an inordinate amount of time and energy trying to figure out what's wrong with us, and trying to fix whatever we think of as unacceptable.

I often wonder what my life would be like if I didn't expend so much energy as an English Jewish woman reigning myself in — trying not to be too Jewish (whatever that means), restraining my exuberance and passion, concealing the terror that I feel a lot of the time. And leaving parts of me 'outside the door', constantly calculating all the combinations — 'here I can be Jewish', 'here I can be working-class and Jewish', 'here I can be a Jewish woman and a survivor of the mental health system'.

It's an interesting challenge to fuse all the parts together, to inhabit them fully at any one time.

### 'the art of dis/appearing'

**I** was born shortly after the Holocaust, to a mother who was a German Jewish survivor. I was to provide hope and joy, and make up for the tragic family loss. I learned very early on to look and act cheerful. At those rare times when I was distraught or desperate, I was told that I was 'meshugge' (Yiddish for 'crazy'), and so I hid my fear deep away.

When I was fifteen, I was very bright and I was encouraged to take an 'O' Level exam early. As the day of the exam neared, I found myself shaking uncontrollably. I know now that this is a natural, healthy response but back then my fear scared me and it terrified my parents. Meaning well, they took me to the GP, who prescribed me

tranquillisers. Although the drug interfered with my thinking, I loved the sensation of relaxation and the absence of constant vigilance. The only time I had previously felt that relaxed was at weddings and Bar Mitzvahs, where everyone passionately celebrated being alive.

The shaking was suppressed. The healing of the terror was curtailed. And a part of me disappeared.

**2** I am in a fashionable Soho club. I am here to interview one of the poets. The venue is packed with black-clad media people, vying to look good, to impress. The atmosphere is vibrant, frenzied even, and no-one seemingly pays attention as I switch on the tape recorder and lean across to ask,

"So, tell me, how do **you** identify as a Jewish woman?"

Looking all around her, the poet answers,

"The first thing I'd say is, keep your voice down! I can't decide if we're an exotic curiosity, or if we're going to be thrown out of here at any minute!"

We laugh comfortably, and somewhat self-deprecatingly, at the essence of the phenomenon.

**3** This publication is itself an act of 'appearing' and during the process of compiling it, my confidence falters on several occasions. Poems and interviews unfold material that is potent and disclosing, and I and many of the women balk at the thought of our struggles and our vulnerability being shown and publicly known, perhaps pathologised. As Jews, we have been systematically taught, through words and actions, to hide our difficulties, our 'imperfections', from a hostile world.

This time, Jewish women decide to reveal themselves, rather than give in to taboo and silence.

## the booklet

Issues of mental health are mostly denied or stigmatised in the Jewish communities, whilst anti-semitism is often invisible or unacknowledged in wider society. **'the art of dis/appearing'** was conceived out of a commitment to raise the profile of mental health issues for Jewish women, and to challenge existing stereotypes and misinformation about us. It explores issues such as the art, and the cost, of 'passing'; survival mechanisms that challenge the pressure to acculturate; the nature of anti-semitism and its internalisation; and the transmission of Holocaust trauma.

**'the art of dis/appearing'** contains poems by sixteen Jewish women, who live in England and Scotland. Material for the publication was generated through workshops for Jewish women and for Jewish mental health organisations, and through an informal network of Jewish women artists. Each poem is contextualised by a statement taken from an interview with the poet. A glossary of non-English words appears at the end.

The poems and statements that follow are a testimony to our resilience and power as Jewish women, and a celebration of our ability to retain our humanness, our intelligence and our humour in the face of misrepresentation, invisibility, invalidation and occasional pedestalisation.

## the poets

We are a diverse group of Jewish women. We are Ashkenazi and Sephardi; a school student, young adults, middle-aged and elders; Black and white; lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual; disabled and able-bodied; working-class and middle-class and upwardly mobile and

poor. A few of us are currently religiously observant; many of us have abandoned or redefined the religious practice of our families; and some of us are raised secular or non-identified or mixed-heritage. Many of us claim a cultural and/or political Jewish identity.

We are a mixture of published poets, performance poets, a playwright, a song writer and women writing for their well-being. Some appear in this publication under a pseudonym, to protect their privacy and that of their families.

Most of us identify as survivors of the mental health system — we have taken mood-altering drugs on prescription, we have been institutionalised, or we have received counselling or therapy which for some was abusive or unhelpful. Others are 'near-misses', some feared 'going mad', some are relatives of survivors, and some are mental health workers. Regardless of the nature of our experiences, we have all been effected to varying degrees by the existence of mental health oppression, anti-semitism and sexism.

## the 'meshuggas' (craziness)

Jewish women have many strengths. We are often articulate and confident. We have been taught to function, regardless of how we feel, and we 'look good'. And because of the religious and cultural values of tikkun olam (repairing the world) many of us are strong advocates for justice.

*However.* We may constantly monitor and check ourselves, constantly search out what is 'wrong' with us. We may feel like we're never enough, that what we do is never enough. Consequently, we can't stop and rest, or we feel so bad that we can't get started. And sometimes we

veer wildly between the two extremes. It is no coincidence that 'manic-depression' is the psychiatric label most frequently attributed to Jews.

There's often a discrepancy between how we act on the outside and how we are in private — we may look impressive and other people might look to us for inspiration and leadership, but in private we may collapse and not be able to function. Looking vulnerable has a particular resonance for Jews post-Holocaust, as not long ago our survival was dependent on appearing strong. Our vulnerability can frighten us. And others around us.

We may be destructively critical of ourselves and of other Jewish women and we set punishingly high standards for ourselves and each other. We may live with a panic and urgency that is out of proportion to our current life circumstances. We may be surprised and grateful that people like us, and gratitude often keeps us in unhealthy or abusive situations and relationships. Alternatively, we may distance ourselves from intimate relationships, for fear of being 'found out'. And many Jewish women, of course, never measure up to the ideal of articulacy and functioning, and are stigmatised or ostracised for their struggles.

Many of us have lived with 'problems' that we thought were our own 'meshuggas' ('craziness'), only to discover, with exquisite recognition, that they evolve from shared experiences of anti-semitism and sexism. One of the factors of anti-semitism in Britain is that it is amorphous, most of the time you can't quite put your finger on it. In my day-to-day life it is much less evident to me than sexism and because of that it's harder to challenge. During the interviews for this booklet, many of the women reported

that they frequently sense something negative occurring in situations and interactions, but are unable to identify it. Many 'resolve' the affair by assuming the problem lays with them, because they really are 'too much'.

Mental health oppression holds this self-doubt firmly in place. It defines what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, setting up a hierarchy of 'who's OK', 'who's normal', 'who's functioning well'. The norms are invariably white/English/Gentile/male/able-bodied/heterosexual and owning-class.

As Jewish women in Britain, we have inevitably internalised messages aimed at us by a majority Gentile society. For example, messages from Gentiles may state, or more likely subtly intimate:

*'You're too heavy, too intense'*

*'Why do you worry all the time?'*

*'OK, it happened, but there's no anti-semitism now'*

*'It didn't happen'*

*'All Jews are rich and influential'.*

And messages come, of course, from other Jews. During interviews for this publication, it became clear that many of our stories reflect early and sustained incidents of mental health mistreatment at the hands of our families, notably our parents, and predominantly our mothers. Rather than apportion blame to them, I prefer to recognise that they, too, are steeped in the results of present-day and historical acts of injustice and hatred against Jews. Out of their urgency to 'protect' us from real or imagined danger, or out of their unresolved pain in the face of unbearable terror, they may have inadvertently or unwillingly threatened our sense of self, our sense of safety in the world, and our belief in our self-determination.



Messages from Jews may include:

*'People may be nice to your face, but you wait, they'll turn against you'*

*'The world is unsafe for Jews. Stick to the family, they're the only ones you can trust'*

*'Be perfect. Keep your head down. Don't give anyone a reason to have a go at you'*

*'We're chosen. Special'*

*'You've got strange ideas. What's wrong with you?'*

However the above messages reach us, they leave us vulnerable to feelings of self-hatred, lack of safety, self-criticism, exclusion and isolation. Over time we awarely or unawarely come to believe these untruths and act on them as if they were reality. And then we punish ourselves and each other. And, of course, we may be punished by others, who never acknowledge, or maybe even notice, the context for our actions. No wonder we disappear, hide ourselves from view — whether in confusion, in shame, in terror, in sorrow, in rage.

This set-up is a 'velcro syndrome', where two pieces of material are needed to maintain a bond. If you're not sure

you're OK and someone insists you're not OK, you have a good match. As well as taking a firm stand in naming and challenging anti-semitism and sexism 'out there', we have a piece of work to do as Jewish women to rid ourselves of our bit of the velcro. If we insist we're fine, the negative velcro of others has no way of attaching.

I have found it useful to take time to notice what we're doing well and to share our successes actively. It is very important to me to have other Jewish women hold out a picture for me of how well I'm doing, because I frequently lose sight of the reality. We can provide this contradiction for each other. And however we feel, it's important that we remember that we're OK as Jewish women, and that our struggles are not inherent, but come from somewhere. When we are listened to respectfully and attentively, the explanations or causation for 'irrational' thoughts and behaviour are inevitably exposed.

I end by thanking the women in this publication, because they trusted me with their words; they dared to be seen; and they dared me on.

LEAH THORN

## Martha Blend

I came to England from Austria on the Kindertransporte in 1939. I was nine. I get fed-up with people telling me how lucky I was, how lucky I am. All those comparisons. 'She suffered more'. 'She suffered less.' I find that extremely tedious, and untrue really. Superficially, yes, I was fairly lucky. I was saved, I was looked after by well-meaning people. But there's a whole lot more to it than that. All the upheaval, all the trauma, all the misfit between my personality, my values and theirs. And also the impossibility of really forgetting, or putting right something which was so wrong. So I suppose

It made it difficult to talk about my genuine experiences, difficult not to feel that I had to pretend. I felt I had to swim along with the tide, whatever that was, instead of being true to my own self and my own experiences.

I could talk to my foster family, but their emotions were much more on the surface than mine and I was rather a reserved child. And at that young age, deeply traumatic experiences are not easily translated into words, particularly in another language. I kept fairly quiet about what had happened to me.

**Like some white people pretend they are 'colour-blind' with Black people, so they pretended I was English. And they almost persuaded me.**

my poem is my comeback at people who say "You've had a good education, you've been brought up in this country, you were spared a good deal of suffering that others had." True, yes, but there are degrees of suffering, why compare one with another?

I started off in an Austrian-Jewish family and at a very young age I was catapulted into a completely different environment. It was a bit of a mixture, shall we say. I've spent quite a lot of my life trying to make sense of it.

I didn't have a standard English upbringing with mum and dad and Christmas trees. Because I didn't look different from anybody else, people made assumptions that I was the same, and I wasn't. This rather did violence to my real person. They wanted to make me 'normal', a 'normal' little English girl, as far as they were concerned.

I've had to do a lot of my grieving and mourning rather late in life because earlier on I wasn't able to or wasn't allowed to. So it has darkened this part of my life, when I'm less busy and there's less to look forward to. But in some ways I suppose it makes me a more real person. I don't feel I have to pretend any more that I'm rank English or that I'm part of a history that's not mine.

It's important to be ourselves and to acknowledge all the bits of our personalities. I've got over that feeling that I had to be in disguise. I had some psychotherapy, and that's been helpful. My own feeling is that I needed to come to terms with my past, in order to be a real person.

You're so lucky, they said  
Look how we've tended you  
Fed you, protected you  
We had a harder time  
Scavenging for nourishment  
Others said  
You're one of us  
An English rose  
Not an outlandish garlic-plant  
Come into our country garden  
So they snipped away  
At the base of me  
Nurturing a plant  
With shiny leaves  
And fever-bright blooms,  
Paid no heed to the canker within.

MARTHA BLEND



## Berta Freistadt

**T**he way I identify with the mental health system is the extreme measures to which I have gone to keep out of it. When I was about twenty-five I was at college near the Tavistock Clinic. I was so distressed, I had a 'nervous breakdown' and I used to say to myself 'I ought to go and turn myself in', that's how I thought of it, 'turning myself in.'

At that time I had a friend who had a psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital and people looked at her very strangely. This was the mid-60's and the attitude to mental health was ridiculous, people would almost turn away when she went by. I didn't have the courage to go to the Tavistock

patrilineal Jew and I wasn't brought up Jewish. Every now and again, some Jew will say to me "Oh yes, you do that because you're a Jew", or "Oh yes, you do that because you're the daughter of a refugee. Yes, we all do that." There are almost daily revelations about mental health that come to me through the agency of other people.

I've always thought of myself as someone who 'has depression'. My mother used to say to me "You've got to be careful, you're a bit like your father". He used to sit around being very depressed — I mean he had a perfectly good reason, he was a refugee. It was the history of the

**There are certain words that other people don't react to, like 'suitcase' or 'lampshade'.  
Non-Jews would go, 'Pardon me, what's wrong with lampshade?'**

and I didn't know where else to go. I knew there was something wrong. I was deeply unhappy and I had the sensation of living behind glass and I had no words for it. It was just something terrible to live with.

I've never talked to anyone about what's been going on unless there's a reason. I've always had this sense that I didn't want 'being depressed' or 'being a lesbian' on my medical records. I think it's dangerous, you don't know what's coming along the road, and I think that comes out of my Jewish history. I mean the stories I always heard, the people who were born, grew up, were proud to be German, and suddenly they realise they're Jewish and it's too late — they're in Auschwitz. One day something becomes a stigma and your life is in danger.

I've always thought of myself as a Jew, though I'm a

time, 'Pull your socks up and get on with it.' Maybe my mother was right and I had an inherited tendency to gloom and despondency. Inherited trauma. Once I left home at 19, I didn't have to smile all the time.

About ten years ago, I went into therapy, and I've done three lots of therapy.

The last therapy I've been doing has been at a lesbian and gay organisation and that feels good because I don't have to wonder if the therapist is going to have problems with lesbian identity. A non-Jew doesn't have the knowledge or the references but then it would be difficult to find someone who had the right references in every register.

After I finished the second lot of therapy, I felt better. The shift is that if I get depressed, I now know it will go and I never knew that before.

## CUPBOARDS

I am full of fear that  
you will come for me.  
Full of fear that  
you will come for me  
when I am too young  
when I am too old  
I am waiting  
have waited for love  
less surely.

I open cupboards with care  
and peer into them  
I know you are hiding  
waiting for me somewhere.  
In my cupboards are  
many things of vanity  
I do not need them now  
I will not need them then.  
In my cupboards are  
books I cannot read  
photos of the dead  
boxes that are too full  
bottles and jars and envelopes  
that hold my life.  
I must learn to re-pack.

One suitcase.  
A coat.  
A pair of running shoes  
make them suitable for jews  
red ones blue ones much too bright  
paint them stealthy for the night  
no long lace to trip me up  
strong toe caps for kicking back.

My cupboards are  
too full too full of regret.  
Wait awhile until I  
unburden myself  
take me with empty hands  
take me with my hands free  
but not just yet.  
Not today.

BERTA FREISTADT

## Isha McKenzie-Mavinga

I was born to a Jewish mother and a Black African Trinidadian father. My father was a political activist in the time of Marcus Garvey and the Pan-African Movement. He was considered to be middle-class, he was a teacher, and he married my mother, a white Jewish woman, who grew up in poverty and seemed to have very little status.

I grew up in a Children's Home with Jewish children, who were evacuated on the Kindertransporte. They'd been rescued by missionaries — the Barbican Mission to the Jews — and they were brought up as Christians. To protect them from

alone, I pulled my hair out. They said it was because I was being cared for by too many people. To 'stabilise' me, the doctor recommended that I go on a long respite with one member of staff. Hair pulling has not re-occurred, but as a result of losing my family and because of the mistreatment in the Home, I have several carefully concealed nervous habits.

For me, it's very significant to be Black and Jewish. Some African rituals are very similar to Jewish ones. At Kwanzaa, for instance, you light candles for seven days and the candleholder is called a kinara. At Chanukah, we

### I experience people's eyes on me, questioning eyes, curious eyes, loving eyes

extermination. These children were my Jewish family, but we were taught Christianity.

The story of my family is fragmented. I only know bits. My maternal grandmother fled from the pogroms in Lithuania, with her children and her husband, Aron Hartz. They landed at Liverpool in transit to the States. My grandmother and some of her children ended up in Birmingham, and others in the family went to Florida. My mother suffered as a Jewish woman married to a Black man, with Black children. There was some tension in her family, some rejection of my father. I'm not surprised she got ill and died early. She suffered loneliness and poverty.

I don't know how I ended up in the Home. I don't know if it was because of marriage difficulties, or if my mother was ill, or if she had mental health problems. Clearly something wasn't right, as my brothers and my sister were in a Children's Home before I was born. When I was four months old, my father died and my mother took me from Birmingham to the Home in London. And never brought me back home.

I had a 'breakdown' at the age of two. Every time I was left

light candles and have a menorah. At both, there's feasting and gifts for the children. Jewish people are my people and African people are my people. We all go back to one point, it's just that we got separated somewhere along the line.

In this country, people don't think I'm Jewish, so they'll talk about Jews around me and then they are totally shocked when I say, "Hey, I'm one of those!". And there's a struggle between being Jewish 'enough' and being Black 'enough'. Getting a balance. Celebrating both parts of my heritage.

It's very moving being in shul now. I'm beginning to feel less of a stranger. I feel more powerful, that I have a right to be there. I still stand out as a Black woman in shul. There's usually a silent welcome and I wish people would speak to me. I guess I never really stay long enough to have conversations with people because it gets a bit scary.

I felt at home in Israel. I felt that my soul was connected. Though it's an unsafe place, I felt safe there. I bought a tallis and a Magen David, powerful symbols and part of my heritage. And just like the symbols that I carried back from Africa, those symbols hold the spirit.

## SHALOM SHALOM

Shalom Shalom  
you want to know  
my connection with Judaism  
you want a declaration

Shalom Shalom  
you want to know  
if I've been to Jerusalem  
if I'm Ethiopian

Shalom Shalom  
you want to know  
if I'm reborn  
or born this way

Shalom Shalom  
you want to know  
if mother was Jewish  
cos I'm like this

Shalom Shalom  
you want to know  
if I've been bat mitvah'd  
you want to know  
if I've eaten matzos  
celebrated Chanukah  
seen a haggadah  
have a mezuzah  
broken challah  
wear a Magen David  
eat bagels and gefilte fish  
have Rosh Hashana  
you want to know  
if you can call me Falasha

You want to know  
if I light candles on Friday  
if I am Sephardi or Ashkenazi  
if I am schmaltzy or schmoozy  
Shalom Shalom  
you want to know if I belong  
Shalom Shalom

ISHA MCKENZIE-MAVINGA

## Melissa

This poem came out of nowhere and I thought, 'Oh my God, that's exactly what I'm feeling.' It's a release more than anything. What I'm looking for is some connection, some place where I fit in, feel safe. Where I can hide, without being lost.

I was out of school for three months, just before my GCSE's. Before I went into hospital, it was a time of waiting,

were fantastic. They gave you a different outlook, they made you realise you're not alone, that you're still an individual. As soon as you're labelled, that's it, you're just another statistic. I realised that you may have similar 'symptoms', but you're all individuals. I made one of my best friends there. It's good because at least there's one person who knows who I am.

### **You're expected to be bubbly, you're expected to be happy. And Jewish Essex girls are expected to have bad taste in clothes and a bad accent**

knowing it was inevitable really. I thought 'Nothing's going to be the same.' I think the tactic was to scare me a bit. I didn't really have a choice. I was sixteen, and I didn't know what was going on, I didn't know anything about the system.

I went in on Yom Kippur, so that was a nightmare. Although I'm not a religious person, Yom Kippur is very important to me because I've lost so many people, and that's my day to remember them.

The whole Jewish community knows what you're doing. Within a week, every single person knew about it. It's nice in a way because you're in a community and everyone knows you and looks out for you. But at times when you want to get away, it's impossible

Hospital terrified me, but once you've been in and come out and you're still alive, you learn just how strong you are. The staff tended to attack you. They worked on a confrontational system that I couldn't handle. It changes you. It's made me wary of people, less open. If I had a problem, I'd prefer to talk to the other 'patients'. They

Afterwards, friends didn't know what to say to me. They felt uncomfortable, 'Do I mention it?', 'Do I not mention it?'. I thought, 'I'm still the same person, *talk* to me — about anything.' I don't know if it's a Jewish thing, but a lot of Jewish people think that doctors are the best thing ever, and that if you go into hospital, you come out 'cured'.

I was so used to being in a closed environment. I had to readjust to my life, knowing everything was different. After hospital, I just focussed on school work and that got me through. That, and the poetry.

You just learn how to hide yourself. Again, it might just be a Jewish thing, but in our school everyone likes to know your business. And if you're sitting there a bit depressed and you don't want to talk, you get the whole Year coming up to you. So you learn you've just got to put a smile on your face and try and get through it.

You try and hide it from yourself, too — you deceive yourself. But you know it's true. I let jokey comments slide off my back. I've heard them all before.

A web of pain  
tangles of woe  
love me, hold me  
catch me, support me

Find me.

I'm lost  
caught in a maze  
of confusion  
silent slumbers seen  
in a restless eye  
happiness gazed at  
in a shipwrecked stare  
loneliness despair

*Find me.*

MELISSA



## Leeala

Being a 'prince and poet' were masks I assumed to help shape an identity that made me acceptable to my parents and the world. Being a 'witch' was an act of rebellion. It gave me balance, wholeness, power and freedom to fly to the moon.

Being a Jewish woman with 'weird' parents meant being an outsider in both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. I also felt like an outsider in my own family. At the age of three I began packing my bags to escape a father who frequently gave me 'something to cry for', and a mother too depressed and insecure to protect me. I wanted to belong somewhere, but didn't know how to fit in. I was told to keep my mouth shut and smile, not look so sad, not be so emotional. My older sister was cute, but I looked Jewish.

My father wanted a son, preferably a genius. My mother didn't want another child. I was conceived to help get my mother out of a depression, and I spent of my youth trying to turn my mother's life around. In the process, I changed

Emotionally, I was quite extreme as a child and there was concern that I was like my mother. I, of course, tried to dedicate myself to being the opposite. For me, this meant disavowing what I saw as the 4M's of Jewish womanhood: Marriage, Motherhood, Martyrdom and Madness. I resisted them all, including being Jewish. Ironically, my pen name, Leeala, is what my mother called me. It connects my writing to my mother and reminds me that I'm still her child, the one I learned to abandon.

Thanks to my father, I was brought up in the tradition of Talmudic debate, arguing and refuting both sides of an argument equally well, answering a question with another question and challenging God and all authority. I'm proud of that, even though it made me the target of anti-semitism and misogynist attacks. One of my cousins critically commented that I was "raised the wrong sex." When I went into therapy it was partly to correct behaviour unbecoming a female Jewish stereotype.

### Words and labels are not enough to express all that I am

myself. Eventually, I gave up trying to 'wake her up', snap her out of a depression or ground her 'madness' in reality, and began to love her unconditionally. Not easy, especially when I got the message that whatever I am or do would never be good enough.

One reason my mother did not go for help was the shame of it. When my mother was in her 'manic' state, she attacked my father. She went from the submissive Jewish wife into incredible rage. I, on the other hand, learned to deny my anger and vowed never to depend on anyone. This attitude was even more alienating and nearly cost me my life.

Now I see my mother's extreme states as having been a difficult but essential balance to my father's extreme intellectualism and emotional austerity. Her earthy heat helped ground me in the undeniable truth of the pain and rage we both felt, but she expressed directly. In retrospect, I see this as her way of surviving a difficult marriage and holding the family together. I now regard her 'madness' as one of her many virtues.

Being a 'weird' Jewish woman writer is a huge blessing and not a pathology needing a miracle cure. All that I am is enough. 'Dayenu' is my watchword.

**SIDE EFFECTS**

Someone dropped  
a sleeping pill  
into my mother's milk  
before I was born.  
She slept through  
my childhood  
while I suffered  
the side effects  
trying to be

a prince,  
walking through fire  
for a kiss;

a poet,  
chanting nonsense rhymes  
to wake the dead; and

a witch,  
flying free of mother's eyes  
and being me.

LEEALA

## Rebecca Wolman

Sometimes I like being 'more' — more vibrant, more pushy, more driven, more hair. 'More'. But the 'more' immediately sets you up for a failure. You can use the 'more' as a tool for self-deprecation, like the Jewish sense of humour. You get in there and put yourself down before someone else puts you down. You know they're thinking it, so you get in first. You make people laugh. But it's a destructive tool because you're having to put yourself down in order to do anything. You undercut yourself.

We're afraid of our own power. Maybe it's the power of the single woman, the single, free-spirited, creative woman. Our power is frightening for the Community, and

it's always being edited out. And if I'm used to stepping outside myself to watch myself, then I presume everyone else is watching me in that way. 'That's for the 'OK-to-show' file and that's for the 'only-you-to-see' file'. And, yes, it turns into a split.

You create a secretiveness, a closedness. Like you've got to be home on Friday night. That's the Jewish time. The family time. A time when you step out of society at large and go home to Jewish time. No-one outside the family knows what goes on. You're closing off a part of you, the most important part of you. You separate off a part of you, keep it secret.

### More is less

maybe it's frightening for us. As a young girl and as a woman, you're not given the tools to know how to be 'more'. We can't accept the fullness of 'more'. It comes with a price, which is really feeling less. The fear of being too much, too big, too loud, too full-on.

I always have this sense of being outside myself, not inhabiting myself from the inside. Censoring. A mixture of censoring and monitoring. Evaluating, 'Have I really got something to say?', 'Is this intelligent?', 'Will I be able to hold my head up if I say this?'. I'll run it by me before I open my mouth. It's like polishing the veneer before it's seen. The internal stuff gets so remote from the external if

When I first heard about this booklet, I thought the more that taboos are broken, the better. The more it can be seen how broad mental health issues are and that anyone can have them, the better. How exciting if someone were to know me or my work and read my poem and go "Oh, she has problems with that as well." But then as it sunk in more, I started to fear the label, started to fear that people would look at me a different way.

There have been many times I've considered pulling this. We're such victims of other people, that when we can, we go all out to control our destiny. Maybe that's not altogether good. Self-control can be a coffin.

**AIR**

You are air  
he said  
staring into my larynx  
waiting for it to move.  
It did.  
Stale air stuck in a sealed room  
a vacuum  
packed with inconsequential particles  
a vacuum cleaner  
clogged up with the bits of shit  
trodden into the carpet.  
Dust and dirt  
swirling around a blackened paper bag.  
Nature abhors a vacuum.  
Yes. I am air.

REBECCA WOLMAN

## Joanne Limburg

From time to time I become aware of a presence that drives me to feel depressed and inadequate. It's a kind of composite monster born out of bad memories and hectoring voices. It sits inside me and it watches me and it criticises and it tells me I'm not perfect enough. It's like someone sitting on your back and flogging you! And quite often it says contradictory things, but it's not aware of its contradictions. One of the things it says is, "You're not a good enough Jewish girl. You're not respectful enough; you're not married; you don't have children; you don't have your hand up a chicken..."

I wind up using a lot of energy either trying to appease

Jewish. I avoided other Jews and I projected bits of Jewishness that I chose not to associate with onto them. But then I became aware that I could be more relaxed around Jewish people. With non-Jews, I'd always think I was doing something wrong, 'I'm too loud, too emotional, too....TOO!' I sometimes feel like I'm leaking around these contained people.

The 'too-ness' has a positive side. In my family, Jewish women were in charge and that's stood me in good stead. I've internalised something good about the very relatives who hector me, and I'll grow up and be a scary older woman one day. And hopefully not pick on young women like they picked

### I found my voice as a writer when I found my voices as a Jewish woman

these voices or arguing with them, or both at once. This binds your energy and you can't use it to be you. You're so busy listening to these 'nnnnn' nagging little voices that it becomes difficult to hear your own.

And I've got a terrible irrational fear of running to fat, or that I'm too fleshly now. And this fuses with the stereotypical image of a Jewish woman, which is the opposite of the tall, thin Anglo-Saxon woman. There's a negative difference and there's a pressure not to look 'too Jewish'. When I went up to Cambridge, it was the first time I realised that most people weren't Jewish, and so conversely that I was. I did the Jew-among-Gentiles thing. I was very into Woody Allen and Kafka, I could be intellectually, interestingly

on me. But I do want to use that 'stroppiness'.

I don't think there are individuals in Judaism. You can't remove yourself from the world the way you can in some religions like Christianity or Buddhism, whether it's for a lifetime or for a few years. I sometimes feel I have a call to walk barefoot out into the desert, but that's not on. The Judaism I learned at home, or at Hebrew classes, or at synagogue, was about the community, about the family, about the Seder table. You practiced because you practiced, this is what your family does, this is what your community does, this is the way it is. It's about connections, social glue between people living, and people dead.

## SEDER NIGHT WITH MY ANCESTORS

On this night,  
my ancestors arrive,  
uninvited but expected,  
to have their usual word.

They sit around the table  
but refuse my offer of food.

I switch the television off  
and wait,  
the air thickening  
with disapproval.

At last I ask them:  
What do you want from me?  
What have you got to do with me?  
Why do you come here every year  
on this night?

And what do they say?  
They say:  
*For this God brought us forth from Egypt?*  
*For this we starved in the desert?*  
*For this we fled the inquisition?*  
*For this we fled the pogroms?*

*Did we die*  
*refusing unclean meat*  
*for you to fill your fridge with filth?*

*Did we disguise*  
*our Hebrew prayers*  
*with Christian melodies*  
*so that you could forget them?*

*For you we did these things?*  
*Do you think the Lord*  
*would have thought you worth saving?*

I say that all I want  
is to live my life.


*Without us you would have no life.*

JOANNE LIMBURG



## a glossary

<b>Ashkenazi</b>	Jews of Central & Eastern European origin	<b>Kwanzaa</b>	non-religious, cultural holiday celebrated by people of African descent, as a celebration of their rich heritage
<b>bagels</b>	hard ring-shaped roll	<b>Magen David</b>	six-pointed star, a symbol of Judaism
<b>Bat mitzvah</b>	age at which a girl attains religious maturity (12 years and a day)	<b>matzos</b>	unleavened bread, traditionally eaten during Passover
<b>bima</b>	raised platform in the synagogue from which the Torah scroll is read, and the service is led	<b>menorah</b>	eight-branched candelabra lit at Chanukah
<b>challah</b>	plaited bread for the Sabbath	<b>mezuzah</b>	small piece of parchment in a container, inscribed with passages from Deuteronomy. Attached to doorposts of Jewish homes as a talisman against evil
<b>Chanukah</b>	Festival commemorating the victory of the Maccabees in recapturing Jerusalem from the Assyrians and purifying the Temple	<b>meshuggeh</b>	'mad', 'crazy'
<b>cheder</b>	religion school	<b>Rosh Hashana</b>	Jewish New Year
<b>chutzpah</b>	insolence/cheek	<b>schmaltzy</b>	sweet-talking, flattering (actual Yiddish meaning: fatty or greasy)
<b>dayenu</b>	'it would have been enough'	<b>schmoozy</b>	chatty, gossipy
<b>Falasha</b>	derogatory term for Ethiopian Jews, meaning 'intruders'	<b>seder</b>	ceremonial Passover meal
<b>gefilte fish</b>	boiled fish balls	<b>Shabbat</b>	Sabbath
<b>goyim</b>	derogatory term for Gentiles	<b>shul</b>	synagogue
<b>Haggadah</b>	prayer book used at the Passover meal, telling the story of the exodus	<b>Sephardi</b>	Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origins
<b>Hatikvah</b>	Israeli national anthem	<b>tallis</b>	prayer shawl
<b>kinara</b>	candelabra lit during Kwanzaa	<b>Torah</b>	the five books of Moses
<b>Kindertransporte</b>	organisation for bringing unaccompanied Jewish children out of Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia due to the Nazi threat to their lives	<b>ungluckskind</b>	'unlucky/troubled child' (German)
		<b>Yom Kippur</b>	Day of Atonement



jewish was a  
jewish was a word to whisper  
word to whisper  
flying free of mother's eyes  
flying free  
you want to know I belong  
you want to know  
I must learn to repack  
learn to repack  
touched by pink air  
touched by  
pink air

PRICE £3.00

ISBN: 0-9537950-0-4