



Reciprocal Inscription: The Jewish Body in Story and History

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Most readers of the Bible will tell you that it was the first woman who fatally led the first man to eat tempting, forbidden fruit, awakening a sudden acute consciousness of their naked bodies. Of course, first an erect — talking, walking — snake tempted Eve, a snake that loses its erection as a punishment for making her false promises, ever after vulnerable to the regretful woman's heel. Had woman not made him think with his snake, that classically disowned and disembodied part, Adam might have enjoyed Eden longer, in serene fellowship with his God. Gender trouble begins in Paradise.

The body and its parts come to life in stories where meanings and judgments attached to the body and sexuality are ever re-invented. Some ideas that are familiar in academic forums seem counterintuitive in popular contexts, and one such idea is that everything has a history, including our material bodies. The body in which you live is formed as much — if not more so — by culture as by nature. Biblical foundation stories — not so much what they say, but how we have apprehended them over time — have been formative of the Jewish self-image, even as the refashioning of the Jewish body throughout history governs how we interpret Bible stories.

When Jacob puts on animal skins to pretend to be his hairy twin Esau, and further pretends that the stew his mama cooked up from a domesticated kid is the wild game that the outdoorsman Esau was actually hunting, Jacob — obedient to his ambitious mother — inherits the patriarchy by passing as a man. Just as Jacob passes as a man, Joseph, Moses, and Esther also “pass” as foreign nobility, initiating a long tradition of anxiety and confusion about Jewish passing.

The Bible also suggests rather paradoxical constructions of women's bodies, including barren women with children and seductresses without desire. The matriarchs, the prophet Samuel's mother, Hannah, and Samson's mother are barren. Each miraculously conceives a son whose privileged destiny entails personal sacrifice from her. Although “barren mother” may be a contradiction in terms, longing and loss are part of this Jewish maternal profile.

Other biblical women achieve political aims by seduction. Tamar fools Judah into impregnating her; Yael lures the enemy general Sisera into her tent, gives him a skin of milk when he asks for water (you can imagine what the Midrash does with that detail), and then instead of being penetrated by him, she penetrates him, driving a tent pin through his temple. Esther touches the royal scepter and saves her people (no wonder some Israeli journalists dubbed Monica Lewinsky “Queen Esther”), and Samson, who can tear a lion with his bare hands and single-handedly defeat an army, becomes metaphorically impotent (losing his eyesight, hair, and strength) when Delilah whines.

These lusty women actually seek power, each proving the rule that the bedroom is the battlefield where men always lose.

The intellectual boy with body and virility issues (Woody Allen), the controlling, self-sacrificing Jewish mother, and the acquisitive, sensuous but selfish “Jewish American Princess,” all descend from patterns of representation in Jewish sacred stories. Or, perhaps, we find these stereotypes embedded in our sacred stories because we have become so identified with these prejudices. Much in the intervening years helped codify Jewish physical and sexual distinction, where in a world of enforced binaries, Jews often occupied an intermediate place sexually and racially.

In 17th-century Spain, physicians documented that Jewish men menstruated. In 19th-century Germany, the sickly Jew became a familiar type, despite all statistical evidence that Jews were extraordinarily healthy as a group. Sociology and sexology identified adaptability (passing) as a Jewish trait that accounted for Jewish men being sexually feminine and susceptible to white collar crimes (cheats, like Jacob). The Nazis taught Jewish physiognomy, and in America, Jews had not always been precisely racially white, a shift that correlated with their changed class profile. In the yishuv and at the birth of the State of Israel, the muscular Maccabean Jew was deliberately and aggressively substituted for the frail, studious, and victimized shtetl Jew. The Israeli body and the Jewish soul persist in a dynamic of shape shifting.

Though the Jewish body is a much studied concept, of course we know that there is no such thing as a Jewish body. In my own extended family, we are big and small; ebony and blond; dark and blue-eyed; loud and meek, of diverse ethnicities and nationalities. Yet, we refer to Jewish body parts: famously, a Jewish nose, and *Lilith Magazine* once devoted a good part of an issue to how Jewish women feel about their “Jewish hair.” It may sound nostalgic to refer to “a Jewish soul” but “a Yiddishe neshama,” nevertheless calls forth a soul fed on the chicken soup of mitzvot; “a Yiddishe kopf,” a “Jewish head,” once imputed a special kind of Jewish business sense: quick, clever, and a little devious.

We may know better, but we buy into Jewish physical and sexual distinctiveness. I sometimes ask an audience to think of what the word “masculinity” conjures up for them. What are our cultural associations with “femininity”? I then ask what happens when we qualify these words with the adjective “Jewish”: “Jewish masculinity”? “Jewish femininity”? For many people, the adjective “Jewish” upends the meanings of masculinity or femininity.

Persistent and often contradictory constructions of the Jewish body have evolved from patterns in our earliest stories. Although these perceptions are illusions, they are situated at the borders of reality and invade with powerful, imperialist armies. The consequences are felt by Jewish bodies in every generation.

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