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05.14.08

The Rise and Fall—and Rise—of “Jewess”

Why are twenty-first-century women reclaiming a derogatory term?

BY DANIEL KRIEGER

In 1980, Rabbi Jacob Rader Marcus, an octogenarian scholar of Jewish history, decided to title his new book about Jewish women in America “The American Jewess.” His publisher, Ktav, told him that was out of the question because the term “Jewess” was, well, offensive. Marcus, more concerned with historical truth than political correctness, didn’t really care. He compromised on the title, calling his study *The American Jewish Woman: 1654–1980*, but refused to remove the term from his text. “Many Jews today deem it a ‘dirty word’ and avoid it,” he writes in the preface. “I believe it is a neutral descriptive noun and I use it constantly. If for some it has become a term of contempt, it is because Judeophobic Gentiles have made it so. I refuse to bow to their prejudice.”

If Marcus had made it to the twenty-first century, he would’ve appreciated the latest chapter in the long and winding history of the word. In recent years, as demeaning “-ess” feminine nouns like “stewardess” and “actress” have continued to fade from use, their sister-term “Jewess” has been making a comeback. It started in 1998, when Ophira Edut created [The Jewess is Loose!](#)¹, a Web site on which she playfully reported the thoughts and adventures of Ophi, “a chunky, funky, quarter-finding, bagel-eating Jew” who finds herself negotiating the foreign world of Duluth, Minnesota. The following year, a heavily tattooed performance artist, the “[Jewess Tattooes](#)”², made her debut on the stages of London with a dark, taboo-breaking solo show that incorporated aspects of Yiddish theater and sideshows. Since then, a handful of blogs have popped up with names like *Jewesses with Attitude*, *Barefoot Jewess*, *Cute Jewess Tells All*, and most recently, plain old [Jewess](#)³—all created by women who embrace their Jewish identities and use the term proudly.



Though some still find the term derogatory and best left in the linguistic dustbin, until the early twentieth century, “Jewess” had no negative connotation. Its 1388 print debut in John Wyclif’s Bible translation inaugurates the mundane, descriptive way it would be used for centuries to come (with a touch of Middle English orthography): “Timothe, the sone of a Jewesse cristen.” In 1526, William Tyndale’s Bible gives us another humdrum example: “Felix and his wyfe Drusilla which was a iewes.” It shows up again in 1613 when the English travel writer Samuel Purchas uses it in his *Pilgrimage* series: “For the Virgin Mary, say they, wore the Ring on her middle finger, and therefore all Iewesses refuse that, and use the forefinger.”

Things took a turn in 1812, with the publication of *Ivanhoe*, Sir Walter Scott’s immensely popular novel, which featured the sizzling, raven-haired “Rebecca the Jewess” (played by

Elizabeth Taylor in the 1952 movie). Scott used the term “Jewess” seventy-six times, preceding it often with “lovely,” “fair,” and “beautiful.” But Rebecca was ultimately branded a “sorceress” and condemned to burn for “witchery.” Scott also—intentionally or not—evoked then-prevailing stereotypes about Jewish women’s bewitching and exotic sensuality. “The exoticism was part of the way in which Americans in the early nineteenth-century thought about Jews, and it especially applied to Jewish women,” says Karla Goldman, historian in residence at the [Jewish Women’s Archive](#)⁴, a nonprofit that explores and records the history of Jewish women in America. Goldman’s 2000 book, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism*, describes the changing roles of Jewish-American women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when American Jews began inviting Gentiles to synagogues to give them a taste of Jewish customs. Those interested in the ways of the curious people who hailed from the homeland of Jesus could stop in and check them out, as did Walt Whitman in 1842. Looking up at the gallery of a Manhattan synagogue, he observed that it “was filled with women, dark-eyed Jewesses...We found ourselves casting our glances thither quite frequently.”

But if the nineteenth century was perhaps not the worst of times for Jews in America—in spite of being seen as exotic outsiders—it was also a fruitful one for the sisterhood of words ending in “-ess.” In 1865, Sarah Josepha Hale, the “editress” of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*⁵—a popular women’s monthly which ran from 1830-1878—argued for employing “-ess” terms whenever possible. “Language is rendered more direct and definite,” she wrote, and recommended fifty-eight words that would benefit from feminine endings, like “doctress,” “Americanness,” and, of course, “Jewess.” Hale’s words did not go unheeded. In the decades that followed, the term reached peak usage.

A search of nineteenth-century journals, such as *Vanity Fair*, *Appleton’s*, and *Catholic World*, shows it was the preferred term for Jewish women, showing up hundreds of times—while the term “Jewish woman” barely appears—a pattern also found in *The New York Times* in the same period.

In 1895, Rosa Sonneschein, a protofeminist writer, launched *The American Jewess*⁶, the first magazine geared toward the interests of Jewish American women. It promoted women’s religious and social equality, in the assimilating German-Jewish American community. With a circulation of 31,000 at its height in 1897, prominent activists, rabbis and intellectuals (both male and female) wrote stories about “Jewesses” finding their places within American society and Judaism. “The early contributors had the sense that they were describing a new identity,” says Goldman, “one that they wouldn’t have been able to capture saying ‘American Jewish woman.’”

In 1899, Sonneschein’s failing health forced her to sell *The American Jewess*, and the new management ran the magazine into the ground. But it might not have made it much further, even in better hands. By the late 1930s, the term “Jewess” had fallen out of vogue, shifting to what Robert Burchfield, lexicographer and editor of *Fowler’s Modern English Usage*, in the 1996 edition called “the new state of the word,” which was clearly derogatory. This was pointed out in 1937 in *The Pittsburgh Courier* by George S. Schuyler, an African-American journalist who criticized African-Americans for spurning the word “Negress,” and added, “I understand Jews are similarly unreasonable about the term Jewess.” In *The New York Times*, use of “Jewess” sharply dropped off in 1936, followed by a steeper decline in the 1940s (as “Negress” was on the same course); use of the term would continue to decline for the rest of the century. In 1945, H.L. Mencken wrote in *The American Language* that “Jewess” was “vastly disliked by Jews,” having joined the club of full-fledged ethnic slurs.

In the 1960s, with the first wave of modern feminism, “-ess” words, imported from French in the fourteenth century, fell even further out of favor. Dictionaries officially tagged “Jewess” as offensive, a move echoed in John Updike’s 1970 novel, *Bech: A Book*. In Romania, his protagonist meets a man named Petrecu who tells him, “with a purr,” that the woman Bech

has his eye on is “a typical little Jewess.” Bech explains, “In my country, ‘Jewess’ is a kind of fighting word.” Petreco dismisses Bech’s complaint. “Here, it is merely descriptive.” For Bech and many Americans, it wasn’t mere description. With the sexist connotation of the 1960s added to the ethnic one of the 1930s, its status as a dual layered offense, a verbal one-two punch, was clinched.

So why are twenty-first-century Jewish women taking it back?

In late January of 1998, Monica Lewinsky became the most well-known and talked about Jewish woman on the planet. Though her Jewishness didn’t get nearly as much media play as her dress and other bizarre particulars of her relationship with Bill Clinton, it certainly made its way into the narrative, which grew to biblical proportions. “Monica helped spark the reclamation of the idea of the ‘Jewess,’ both why it’s appealing and shameful,” says Ruthie Ellenson, editor of *The Modern Jewish Girl’s Guide to Guilt*. “It’s a no-brainer that it was Monica who gave us this word back,” agrees novelist Lauren Grodstein, author of “The Monica Metaphor,” an essay published in Ellenson’s anthology in which she describes how she was called both “Monica” and “Jewess” in France in the late 1990s. “The idea that a Jewish sexpot can bring down the presidency!”

That same year Ophira Edut launched *The Jewess is Loose!* “It was a place to make sense of that part of my identity,” says Edut, who was riffing on O.J. Simpson’s sometime catchphrase “the Juice is loose” rather than commenting on the Monica affair. “I thought it was a funny word. So over the top. It cracked me up whenever I heard it, so I thought it would be fun to reclaim it.” Clearly, she was not alone.

A year and a half ago, Goldman and her colleagues at the Jewish Women’s Archive launched the blog [Jewesses with Attitude](#)⁷. The name was chosen as a play on *The American Jewess*, which the organization had recently archived. As anticipated, response was mixed: “I am a Jewess, hear me roar!” wrote one commenter on the site, shortly after the blog’s launch. “This is a word we have to roll around in our mouths to get used to,” wrote another. Some friends and colleagues were more wary, telling Goldman and colleagues it sounded “weird” and “Jappy” (one word that won’t be up for reclamation anytime soon). One woman couldn’t fathom why they would use it. “The word ‘Jewess,’ in her opinion, connoted something very degrading,” says Judith Rosenbaum, a feminist historian and director of education at the Archive. “The word reminded her of the Holocaust, and she thought it was dangerous to reclaim it when it had been derogatory for so long.”

“We were experimenting with whether or not this is a term that can be reclaimed,” says Rosenbaum. Linguists call this “semantic reclamation,” a phenomenon that Robert Burchfield at *Fowler’s* considers “one of the paradoxes of the twentieth century.” As Geoffrey Nunberg, a linguist at the University of California, Berkeley, says, “It’s throwing whatever historical stereotypes were associated with it back in the face of the people who used them,” like the gay community co-opting “queer” and African-Americans using the N-word. “By reclaiming it and celebrating what’s specific about Jewish women’s experience,” says Rosenbaum, “we can explore and challenge the kinds of stereotypes that exist about Jewish women.”

These stereotypes range from exalting to condescending, from hypersexual to asexual, depending on their origin. “There are a variety of contradictory stereotypes about who and what Jewish women are,” says the feminist journalist Peggy Orenstein, who writes frequently on women and identity. “Historically, the mythology in the Gentile culture has been that Jewish women are earthier and more sexual. But that runs right up against the whole JAP stereotype that says we’re frigid.” Ruthie Ellenson feels that Jewish women are taking back more than a word. “It does something to reclaim Jewish women’s sensuality that’s been denied to them through stereotypes of Jewish-American princesses and Jewish mothers,” she says. While the image of the “sexual Jewess” may be one of the main stereotypes coming from non-Jews, its much more prevalent antithesis was popularized by the literature, TV, and

film of the 1960s and 1970s of Jewish men like Phillip Roth and Woody Allen (think *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Annie Hall*) who portrayed Jewish women as loud, overbearing, and a lot less desirable than their Wasp counterparts.

In early 2007, Rebecca Honig Friedman took a job writing for a new blog known simply as [Jewess](#)³—a part of the religion blog network Canonist—meant to address the concerns of young Jewish women, much as *The American Jewess* did a century ago. She'd thought the blog's name was novel but then she started seeing it all over the blogosphere. "It's a way of saying 'Screw you' to those who think poorly of Jewish women," she says. But Katha Pollitt, the feminist writer and longtime *Nation* columnist, questions why Jewish women would even bother deploying the term. "This isn't like other reclamation projects, because people don't go around calling Jewish women Jewesses," Pollitt says. "Who is it directed toward? Is it Jewish men? Is it toward some imaginary anti-Semite who might use this antiquated word nobody uses anymore?" To this, Friedman counters, "Anti-Semites certainly use the word 'Jewess,' but my inclination is that it's more about negative stereotypes of Jewish women, which come from a lot of people, including Jewish men and even some Jewish women. It's a way of expressing pride in being Jewish and in being a woman, and in being a Jewish woman." In other words, the antique nature of the term is part of what lends its charm.

If Friedman's readers don't necessarily agree with her, their objections are quite different from Pollitt's. The term, for many, still has clearly racist connotations. One commenter on Friedman's blog wrote, "I object to the use of the term 'Jewess.' If you check the OED, you'll see that it is a pejorative term. We do not say 'Catholicness' or 'Protestantness.' I am not a 'professoress,' but African American women were called 'Negress.'" (If blogs like *Emancipated Negress* and *Uppity Negress* and Kara Walker's book *Narratives of a Negress* are any indication, "Negress" too may be in the early stages of reclamation.) Another woman, also a commenter on *Jewess*, complained that it reminds her of the Nazis calling women "Jewesses" in Holocaust movies. Despite Pollitt's assertions, this reader has a point: a Google search for "Jewess" turns up anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi sites like Jew Watch, VNN Forum.com, and Stormfront.org, where on discussion boards it's used among other anti-Jewish lexicon favorites. One commenter on Stormfront.org wrote, "Nancy Pelosi might have been baptized a Catholic, but she shows the character of a Jewess." Another agreed, "She certainly acts like a Jew." And that's a tame post by the standards of such sites.

In spite of anti-Semites claiming it and critics condemning it, the reclamation of "Jewess" is part of a larger quest by American Jews to clarify and update their identities, which is why it's catching on. "I think I'm going to call my girlfriends 'Jewesses' from now on," says Orenstein, who hadn't gotten wind of its revival. "I'm going to be spreading it around as soon as I get off the phone." Though we probably won't be seeing university "Jewess Studies" departments cropping up anytime soon, the word seems to be making itself comfortable—provided the context and tone are right. Rabbi Jacob Rader Marcus would be pleased to hear that, after a circuitous journey, "Jewess" has at last circled back to its rightful meaning, which he felt evoked the Jewish women whose legacies continue to resonate through Jewish and non-Jewish communities alike. His final word on the subject: "They have invested the word 'Jewess' with respect and dignity."👍

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Illustration by [Samantha Hahn](#)⁸.

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Links

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2. <http://www.wildgift.org.uk/artists/carnesky.php>
3. <http://jewess.canonist.com/>
4. <http://jwa.org/>
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