

BOOK REVIEWS

JEWISH AND FEMALE. By Susan Weidman Schneider. Simon and Schuster, 1984. 640 pp. \$19.95.

In this enormous volume, Susan Weidman Schneider, one of the founding mothers of the wonderful Jewish feminist magazine, *Lilith*, takes on the questions: What does it mean to be Jewish and female? How do the two sides of this equation conflict? How can the uniqueness of this identity be forged? What shapes could it take?

Dividing this subject into three parts, Schneider first discusses the religious aspect of Judaism, proposing that women move beyond "the patriarchal premise." She defines the law and leadership within it, suggests methods for seeking equal access, then discusses women as authorities in the Jewish law as rabbis, as cantors, as leaders.

In one of the book's most interesting sections, she defines ways women might celebrate holidays as women, suggesting rituals for the landmarks of our lives, such as conception, giving birth, honoring the birth of a daughter, weaning, puberty and menstruation, bat mitzvah, midlife and death.

In Section Two, *Defining and Transforming Our Relationships*, Schneider defines, from a female perspective, marriage, divorce and childbearing, as well as how the Jewish woman relates (and doesn't) to the nuclear family and beyond.

Section Three, *Power and Participation in the Jewish Community*, details community resources, describing what can be expected from a community and where we as women belong within it. Here, too, she talks about work, touching on many of the problems of multi-functioning today from a Jewish woman's perspective. A very thought-provoking chapter discusses the issue of volunteerism versus paid work.

Included in this invaluable volume is a networking directory — 80 pages of names, addresses and telephone numbers for everything from Affirmative Action to Yiddish. The book has an extensive reading list, as well as an index. It's an admirable collection of crucial data for every Jewish woman.

An interesting companion to *Jewish and Female* would be Robin Morgan's massive, new book, *Sisterhood is Global* (Doubleday, \$24.95, 815 pp.). Morgan has gathered 70 first-person accounts by women from Afghanistan to Zambia, who describe what it's like

to be a woman in their part of the world. Each essay is preceded by statistical information, and altogether, the collection presents an enormous overview.

— Esther Cohen

DEBORAH. By Esther Singer Kreitman. Translated by Maurice Carr. St. Martin's Press, 1984. 366 pp. \$13.95.

Almost all of Pinchos Mendel's family were writers. He himself was the author of religious books; his *Megadim Hadoshim* was published in 1910. His wife, Bathsheba, wrote an autobiography which she then destroyed, deeming it impious. Both stemmed from distinguished rabbinical families and considered all secular writers to be heretics. Yet three of their children went on to become just that.

Israel Joshua Singer was the world famous author of *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, *Yoshe Kalb* and numerous other works. Isaac Bashevis Singer won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978. But it was Hinde Esther, the oldest of the children, who first began writing secular fiction. Her unpublished early stories have not survived. But after a hiatus of many years — she was now the mother of a child and the victim of a horrendously unhappy "fixed" marriage — she recalled her previous literary efforts and again set to work.

Esther Singer Kreitman managed to publish only three books in Yiddish before her death in 1954 at the age of 63. They were *Brilliantin* (Diamonds), a novel (1944), *Yichus* (Pedigree), a collection of short stories (1949), and *Shedem Tanz* (Pandemonium), an autobiographical novel first published in Warsaw in 1936 and translated by her son into English a decade later as *Deborah*.

Deborah tells the story of the Singer family and their life in pre-World War I Poland. Their names have been changed, but these are the same good folk whose activities so regaled us in the memoirs of Joshua and Isaac Singer. The appearance of this volume also fills an important historical gap, as Clive Sinclair, who wrote the first-rate introduction to *Deborah* pointed out in his critical study *The Brothers Singer*. "By reading all the autobiographical works in sequence it is possible (for the first time) to reconstruct the history of

the Singer family from the late 1890s to the 1930s."

But *Deborah* is also Hinde Esther's story, and as such, spotlights the disheartening fate of many Jewish women born near the turn of this century. Her father well knew the role of a pious woman: "The bringing of happiness into the home by ministering to her husband and bearing him children." Education, which might lead a girl astray, was out of the question. And an arranged marriage, the norm. When Deborah asks her father what she will be when she grows up, he replies, "You? Why nothing of course." So a young, talented, highly sensitive girl was stymied at every turn, her life ultimately blighted and her vast creative potential left unrealized. This is the real story of *Deborah*. And the contrast between the achievement of Esther Singer Kreitman and her two brothers merely underlines the moral. Hinde Esther lost out in life because she was a woman.

So much for the overall view. The specific details of Kreitman's life were equally cheerless. From the age of 12 onward she suffered from nervous and emotional disorders. Her mother seems not to have liked her very much. Her two brothers were hard pressed to put up with her. The man she married was a born loser (their son refers to him as a *schlemeil*). And her mental condition grew worse over the years.

Much, but not all of this appears in the novel. The picture of poverty-stricken *shetl* life we are given is invaluable, and one of the high points of the book — as is the depiction of the tawdry hasidic court where, for a time, the family dwelt. Isaac does not appear in *Deborah*, but the portrait of the young Joshua as a compulsive and irrepressible jokester is startling. The somber figure he would later become is not foreshadowed here. As a rule, the autobiographical portions of *Deborah* are fascinating and rendered with real power, the straight fictional sections less so.

The translation from the Yiddish presents some difficulties for the American reader. The Kreitmans lived in London and the translation teems with British slang: "I've to work like a 'orse to earn me miserable living, I do. I've to be out in every lousy weather, I do! No wonder I look like a brute. 'Ave to work to earn me blooming living." Shades of Charles Dickens.

But all in all, *Deborah* is an

intriguing oddity, a vanished book which deserves its current resurrection.

— Isidore Haiblum



Sid Kelsen

New York Council holds gala Ms. Israel Independence Day Luncheon, honoring clubs who raised the most money above their quotas. From left, seated: Anna Axelrod, Lucy V. Perry, Rose Miller, Helen Heinreich, Sadie Lowy, Sophie Mahler, Sally Lazarowitz. Standing: Toby Epstein, co-chairwoman of event; Elsie Wattenberg, national financial secretary; Ida Goldstein, council president; Pearl Ginsberg, Anne Sameth, Mollie Sokol, Fanny Schlatner, Isa Pevsner, Dorothy Kaufman, Alice Woll, Sandra Schliefer, co-chairwoman.



Boston members discuss women's rights and child care, issues of deep concern to Pioneer Women/Na'amat since its earliest years. From left, front: Muriel Morris, Avis Jacobson and Margie Epstein. Back row: Judy Spivack, guest speaker Lillian Elkin, national vice president; Ann Elbling, Mildred Oven, Marlene Reshall, Gail Smith.



In honor of her 85 years as a Zionist, Fannie Drazen, center, is presented with a Spiritual Adoption by Alvin and Elaine Mintzes. Mrs. Drazen began her Zionist activity at the age of ten in Russia, and in 1926, helped to organize the Baltimore branch of Pioneer Women. Her daughter, Dorothy Margolis, national secretary of PW/Na'amat, carries on the Labor Zionist tradition.



1955 . . . Mrs. Moskowitz, center, accepts charter on behalf of Chapter 5 in St. Louis from Ann Mellman, then regional chairwoman.



1985 . . . Chapter 5 celebrates 30th anniversary. From left: Pearl Mitchell, now living in Canada, co-founder; Shirley Asner, national board member; Ann Mellman at podium, co-founder; Mildred Dale, Shirley Rozen, Eleanore Klearman and Donna Rubin.