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## Familiar Strangers

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# FAMILIAR STRANGERS

Lisa Grunberger and  
Simone Yehuda

SIMONE: It is extraordinary that out of all the poets Clare suggested, I chose you. We have uncovered so many commonalities as Jewish women writers as well as striking differences, particularly in our views relating to the role of patriarchy in Judaism. This is from *Beshert*, a sonnet I wrote for you after the first time we talked:

two strangers, two women, two Jews, two lives  
have traveled. Both alternately blessed and cursed,  
we chose to be like the swimmer who dives,  
will keep on diving until our lungs burst  
  
with awe, with wisdom, with the precious air  
that will renew our limbs, the aims we share.

LISA: When I first saw the description of your play, *Rasa*, I couldn't believe it as I feel like I've been living a futuristic life during the past year in my own efforts to have a baby, investigating IVF, IUI, and other acronyms. I thought it all very ancient and very biblical—trying to negotiate the desire for a child, with biological imperatives, adoption options, donor egg options and frozen blastocyst options. Sitting in a doctor's waiting room with other women waiting to get blood taken can be a cold, unsettling process—a woman can feel like her body is failing her, that she's not a woman because she cannot give birth, she can feel unfeminine as she is bloated with fertility drugs, and not sexual as she's been synchronizing sex with her ovulation cycle.

Where is my soul in all this? Why am I putting my body through this? What does it mean to have a child?

So I read about Rasa's plight with great interest—for it is a human story at heart that is full of humor, pathos and drama. Here is an excerpt from a prose poem I wrote during this time period:

*From "Listening to Isabel Allende While Driving"*

I am driving home from the fertility clinic where I've given blood and been entered a thousand times, the nurses my lovers now—I haven't shaved my legs in months since the injections started, four in the morning to be repeated at night at the same time each day, in the abdomen below the belly or in the thigh, someplace fleshy, Charlotte, my favorite nurse told me ...the doctor looks at the screen which shows the lining of my uterus, *good it's exactly where it should be at 8 mm—a good soft cushion for us to implant the embryo*—the doctor says for mature eggs I am doing so well—mature means old . . . Dr. Something hugs me, without panties or mascara, me, 40 and scared, me who misses her mother . . .

Allende says in accented English, *for language is bloody* and I nod yes yes. . . I'm trying to remember everything about this, the shape of the bruise on my belly, the last time I made love and took pleasure in it. . . why the impulse to hold a child, to be a mother—how do you lose a child—how do you survive the morning, regret—how do you sit on a bench, any surface, without leaving it full of blood?

SIMONE: I loved your book, *Yiddish Yoga*. Ruthie's "voice" as a recently widowed Jewish grandmother is open, honest, loving, "hip," and funny. Were you trying to break the stereotype of the kvetching older Jewish woman?

LISA: The voice of Ruthie (originally named after my mother, Rachel, but my publisher was concerned that readers in Iowa wouldn't be able to pronounce the hard "ch" sound) came to me once after a long week. I had a freshly minted doctorate from the University of Chicago Divinity School but couldn't make ends meet as an adjunct professor, so I was teaching yoga classes. I was standing on my head and heard my mother, who had died years before, say, "For this you got a Ph.D., to stand on your head!" So my feisty fearless Ruthie was born.

Ruthie is inspired by own mother Rachel's pragmatic sensibility. My mother was born in British mandate Palestine in 1925 in Tel Aviv. She got married at 18 to my father, a refugee from Berlin, who arrived on one of the illegal ships. They were both members of the Haganah, and they were both immigrants to the United States, settling in Washington Heights in the 1950s. So my mother had to learn how to adapt to new circumstances throughout her life in order to survive. Ruthie's *chutzpah* and *joie de vivre* you mention come from my mother's influence on me.

One reviewer's remarks convey how it weaves the experimental and historical, as does all old and new world Yiddish literature: "To whom is Ruthie speaking? If it's not a diary and she's not speaking to someone else, then she's writing for posterity. She's writing for someone who



isn't alive yet; she's writing to her grand-daughter's daughter to come."

Ruthie translates the foreign terms of yoga like "*ahimsa*"—do no harm—into her familiar Yiddish sensibility—"oh that's a *mitzvah*." I was not interested in collapsing the distinctions between the cultures, but in a playful exploration, through story—of their confluences. We are always already embedded in a process of translating ourselves; perhaps the task for women involves an even more complex act, as we are negotiating multiple identities which are often in tension with each other.

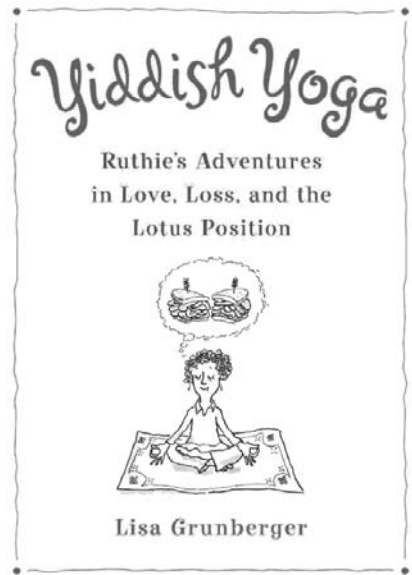
Ruthie, like my Mother, is a doer, who persists in the face of life's obstacles. She's not a complainer, but a problem-solver. She does call for a kvetching club at one point, as she is sick of people telling her "Ruthie if it doesn't kill you, it will make you stronger. For me, a little kvetching is the aerobics for the heart's longing."

Ruthie complains through the use of her wit and *sechel*. She uses Jewish humor to understand suffering and grief—and to choose life. I am very fortunate that my own mother lives so deeply inside me that I have these memories.

Our first conversation got me thinking about how my own relationship with my parents—such a warm, positive one—has shaped my sense of myself as a woman, a Jew, and a writer. How have your formative experiences shaped your sensibilities and worldview?

SIMONE: I was not as fortunate as you to have had a warm, positive relationship with my parents. First, like Adrienne Rich, I was "split at the root," as my father was a German Jewish refugee from Berlin and my mother a French Catholic daughter of a leader of the Resistance during WWII. Although she was converted to Judaism by an Orthodox rabbi in Israel so that her children could be raised as Jews, it was always clear that this was difficult for her and was sometimes a bone of contention between her and my father. Although my father was raised a Reform Jew, his grandfathers had been Orthodox, and thus, not only did he interject the prevailing Nazism of his childhood, but many of the—what I have come to consider perversely—misogynistic aspects of Judaism.

On a fundamental level, women were never in any real way on his radar screen. This caused a great deal of heartache, and nurtured in me a profound mistrust of both men and Judaism. It was not until I was writing my dissertation, and preparing myself for an adult Bat Mitzvah, that I consciously accessed the rage and disbelief that, even today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women in many ways are considered second class citizens who can be discounted, demeaned, even mutilated at will. I have come to agree with the Zohar's definition of evil as "the result of the cataclysm that separated the male from the female in the godhead." Adonai and Shekhinah, man and woman are partners, have different strengths and contributions perhaps, but are fundamentally equal in importance, value and relevance.



Both my parents were exiles, were separated because of terrible circumstances from their homes and countries of origin. They were always guests, visitors, not at home. I, as a result, inherited some of the feelings of alienation and sadness that pervaded their lives.

LISA: Elaborate on how you went from distrusting Judaism to embracing the Kabbalistic understanding of evil. That's quite a leap. Was there a turning point, a text, a teacher, that provided a 'spark'?

SIMONE: It is quite a leap, and there were many turning points. My father's escape from Nazi Germany—as well as some people's reactions to “Juda,” my maiden name— had burned a hole in my psyche about the unspeakable consequences of virulent anti-Semitism. Awareness of my upbringing's misogyny, however, was quite buried. I had been fully indoctrinated in the male gaze, having had no women teachers/professors until my doctoral program. Having very rarely read work by women, I bought the whole patriarchal deal hook, line, and sinker. My intellect and imagination more or less functioned as though I were male. I was aware that I felt quite alienated in fundamental ways, but I had no idea why. I did very well in school, behaved in more or less “appropriate” ways, married, had children, and became a professor.

It was in my fifties as a Ph.D. candidate that I first read a Talmud text in which “Rabbi Samuel ben Unya extrapolated from Isaiah 54:5 Sanhedrin 22B that ‘A woman [before marriage or childbirth] is a golem.’” A bell went off and wouldn't stop ringing. I began to think of my father's and family's treatment of me in a larger—Jewish—context. My introduction to a whole new way of looking at the world was fortified by one of my professors, Minnie Bruce Pratt. She was the spark. And she indicated genuine interest and excitement about my dissertation topic: “The Golem as Metaphor for Jewish Women Writers.”

I began reading such works as Rachel Adler's *Engendering Judaism*, Blu Greenberg's *On Women and Judaism: A View From the Tradition*. I was reading *Torah, Talmud, Sefer Yetzirah, midrash*, etc. By the time I came to the *Zohar*, I was starving for anything that might give me hope; when I came across its definition of evil, it was like manna from heaven. At last I had found something—albeit in mystical, not mainstream, Judaism—that stated how wrong it was to separate and thus de-equalize male and female, even in the Godhead. If God should be both male and female in equal measure, it would appear that it was a violation for mere mortals to value one sex over the other.

LISA: When I was in Divinity School, my mother called me one day and asked if I was going to be a rabbi. If I had been intending to study Judaism, the University of Chicago in the early 1990s was not the place for it, as the majority of its faculty were male professors, many ordained ministers in addition to being academics. I wrote a cultural biography on an eccentric middle-brow character named Bernarr Macfadden, the self-proclaimed Father of Physical Culture in the U.S. Macfadden was the Jack Lalanne of his time, although his rhetoric still retained a nineteenth century religious character. He praised the “perfect physical specimen of womanhood”—as a figure of purity and grace, as evidenced by her body beautiful. The masthead of his journal, *Physical Culture* said it all: “Sickness is a sin and weakness is a crime.”

This captured an ideology that continues to tyrannize many Americans (especially women). I read it as a pre-cursor to contemporary self-help therapeutics from botox to colon-

ics; talk-shows obsessed with self-improvement couched in terms of spiritual development. No, Mom, I'm not going to be a rabbi. I'm studying the tribe called WASPS.

I am interested in how women's bodies have absorbed these splits in culture, these fault-lines where things are being re-described and re-defined. During Macfadden's era, from about 1905-1935, American women were responsible not only for bearing the nation's sons and daughters, but also bearing the schizophrenic contradictions, the tensions within the social body in their physical bodies. Any body that defied the cultural norm was considered weak, sinful and a threat to the social order and even to nation-building.

We study what and who we are. I am a woman in the United States who has experienced what writer Kim Chernin calls the "tyranny of slenderness." As a yoga teacher, I see first-hand women struggling with body image, women and men hungry for intimacy, connection and an interior life. The commercialization of everything through the vehicle of the body is something I've been thinking about for some time. Suffice it to say, I've been in the locker room with some of the Omega Institute and Kripalu gurus and it would make the Buddha blush, and Dale Carnegie proud.

The following is one of many poems where I write about appetite, and the body's messy longings and desires:

*from "After the Rain"*

... I listen to Coltrane and Neil Young, Elvis Costello and Janis Joplin and I  
break open the red when sufficient time has passed between the fall of the  
sun and the rise of the moon  
after the rain I want the carnival to come to town  
to set up a tent between the church and the abortion clinic  
and I want all the kids with A.D.D to throw away their drugs  
and all the tired mothers to get drunk and I want to sway  
my hips until the birds start singing their song and  
I want to know a man who understands the Saturnian rings I make  
the circular twists and turns of my body's often sloppy penmanship  
I want him to know how I dot my i's and cross my t's...  
O Lord after the rain I'm so wet I don't know what to do  
with the only body I've been given and given and given.

LISA: Since literature doesn't usually provide neat answers to complicated historical questions, how does addressing the patriarchal tradition in Judaism change when you write about it in different genres?

SIMONE: It is precisely because there are no neat answers that the different genres tackle what's at stake from as wide a variety of angles as possible. In a book I'm writing, *The Golem and Me: An Annotated Memoir*, I'm exploring the historical and imaginative interpretations and permutations of the golem and its relationship to patriarchal Judaism. My play *Rasa* attempts to dramatize the plight of a pregnant golem (or woman) who, although created to be a mother, is not

deemed worthy of having a soul or a voice. In much of my poetry, including my narrative poem “An Alleluia of Larks,” I attempt to depict a woman’s coming into her own after tremendous grief in the final stanza:

She resists her unfolding. She cannot explain  
away the thick well of a kiss, necessary as air,  
nor the murmuring early round from which she must abstain.  
She hums it to herself, though, in full temptation,  
learns to aim the notes outward in a growing crest able to  
    maintain  
wave after tumbling wave, her soul’s refrain.

Recently, teaching a Women and Literature course, in answering my students’ questions about the different forms that women’s expression can take, they encouraged me to write a rap. Here is part of what I came up with:

from “Flip That Switch”

“Ain’t nuttin’ like women,” I heard you grunt. “What in the world they got to say?” No way, no way.  
It’s junk like that I’m gonna kick to the side...A cryin’ shame. Lamer than lame...Thinkin’ he’s hot  
while flippin’ his lid. Leavin’ others stranded out on the range just because you’re scared of a little  
change? Still thinkin’ life’s a sorry bitch? I say flip that switch, flip that switch...

LISA: For me, writing is always a revival, a retrieval, an attempt to rename, re-birth, re-tell something, something usually so familiar that you often need distance to write it. The Israeli novelist Aaron Applefeld has written over twenty novels, but he hasn’t begun to tell his story, to “leap out of murderers’ row,” to use Franz Kafka’s phrase. So many stories to tell, so many lives to live, in order to just live one life well.

I write towards and about this erasure, this history of silence by remembering my parents, their stories, with all their gaps, ruptures, and silences. The poems and stories that arise out of this longing to remember something always already forgotten arise out of a part of mind that I do not understand, that remains a mystery. I write to preserve this arising, arousing mystery.

from “To My Unborn Child”

2.  
How Jerusalem has changed  
when you have been absent for so long.  
  
The bread has been sliced  
with the silver knife you will inherit.  
...  
  
People said, you are too old–  
I am not old enough.

3.

...

Already the waves of your breath lull me awake.

...

I have translated your cries into a thousand tongues.

I push the carriage up the hill,

... Before you, I worshipped idols,

after you, the mystery of summer snow arrives.

4.

I have no grandparents to spoil you,

...

But I have music and eggs and apples and light.

Come. We will bake my mother's apple cake.

... I smell you near me—cinnamon and spice

chosen as I was and am and you inside

come out to play in this open field of grace and stuttering fog.

SIMONE: It has been such a delight to begin to know you like this. Wouldn't it be wonderful for us to meet some day and to have our children meet? Until we meet again, *bon courage*.

LISA: What a kinship we have found for which I too am grateful Om shalom!

## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

LISA GRUNBERGER has published in such journals as *The Paterson Literary Review*; *Mudfish*; *Nimrod*; *The Drunken Boat*; *Bridges*; *Poetica Magazine*; *In Our Own Words*; *Philadelphia Poets*; *Paroles des Jour*; and *Dialogi*, a Slovenian journal. She is an Assistant Professor in English at Temple University. Her illustrated humor book, *Yiddish Yoga: Ruthie's Adventures in Love, Loss and the Lotus Pose* was published in 2009.



Professor of English at Siena Heights University, SIMONE YEHUDA won a Michigan Council for the Arts Artist Apprenticeship Grant to work on her first play, *On This Night We Recline*, and a Creative Artist Award to write her second play, *Willing*, as well as serve as the Attic Theater's Playwright in Residence. *Willing* premiered at the Attic Theatre and was later produced as a New York Equity Showcase. Her play *The Sign of a Free Man* was included in one of the Jewish Ensemble Theater's New Play Festivals. In 2007, she received Ragdale and Djerassi Artist Residencies to begin work on *Rasa*.