

# Oy!

## A Conversation with Ruth Andrew Ellenson

*Sarah Breger*

Ruth Ellenson, the daughter of a rabbi and a Christian convert to Judaism, knows her way around guilt. Born in Jerusalem and raised in New York and Los Angeles, Ruth has written for the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *People*, and *Heeb*. For her, Jewish guilt often takes on the following form: “Jews have barely managed to survive for thousands of years, and you, you little *pisher*, are going to make one bad decision and screw it up for everybody.”

Ruth spoke to me before leading a discussion at Hillel about her book. She had spoken the night before to a Feminist collective while making the rounds on the book circuit. This energetic, brown haired Jewess has done this *shpiel* so many times her siblings have started to call her the Guilt Goddess—a nickname she

doesn't seem to mind.

**Kedma:** What prompted the idea for the book?

**Ellenson:** I grew up in a very rich and privileged Jewish environment. I always felt inadequate to the Jewish world I was born into. I felt a sense of alienation, even though I admired the Jewish world and saw how much it had to offer. There were so many things I felt disconnected to. I could see that a lot of my peers seemed to have the same dilemma. These were the kids who paid attention in Hebrew school versus the kids who beat up the kids who attended Hebrew school. Neither of those fulfilled what I wanted for myself as a person or what I felt the Jewish expectations of me were or the Jewish expectations I had of myself—they weren't just external. I never felt

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that these two could ever reconcile. I wrote occasionally for a magazine called *Heeb* and the editor emailed me that he was doing a guilt issue. And I thought, “Well that’s a funny idea,” and I started thinking about how Jewish guilt is a notion created by Jewish men in the 1960s and 70s, which by and large places Jewish women as the butt of the jokes.

**Kedma:** In the introduction you refer to modern Jewish women as “Portnoy’s daughters”? Are there “Portnoy’s sons”? Why is guilt such a women’s issue?

**Ellenson:** Yes, but Jewish men have had more options in how to express themselves than Jewish women. We grew up in a world where Jewish female identity and Jewish feminist identity was taken seriously on a Jewish institutional level. Becoming a rabbi wasn’t such a revolutionary thing. Going to a Yeshiva to study Talmud in Jerusalem—you certainly wouldn’t be breaking any ground in doing that. When you have all those opportunities, how do you go about choosing what’s right and how do you go about living up to the opportunities

that you have? That was certainly one of the ideas behind it. My background is a little unusual. I am the Daughter of the American Revolution who is also the daughter of a rabbi. The competing loyalties I felt...where does my allegiance lie? Does it lie with my grandmother—sitting in a church in Virginia with my grandmother who is a very devout Methodist and feeling more Jewish than I probably had in my entire life? I grew up as an Upper West Side Jew. I felt it more acutely as I got older and wondered how did I find myself there and was I wrong to be in the Church at all, or worse, to disrespect my grandmother and not be there and enjoy part of my life with her? And I just wondered if other people found themselves in situations like that. I tried to reach out to writers across the denominational and age spectrum and of different observance levels, also to see if they have that similar type of push and pull, and sense of competing loyalties and how they went about making their decisions. In the introduction, I say between the ideals of what should be and the ideal of what is, lies guilt and nothing. You

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never have guilt without a great deal of love and attachment; otherwise you're just rejecting something. The guilt shows there is a real devotion to finding a Jewish identity. Essentially, when you have a society that champions the individual and teaches you to believe in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...when you're Jewish you know that that is basically a lie. When you're Jewish, you know you are part of a community. You are one link to thousands of years before you and thousands of years after you, and your actions count for the group and not for yourself. So how do you reconcile that with a society that puts so much emphasis on the freedom and happiness of the person?

**Kedma:** With the advent of *Heeb* magazine and *Jewlicious* and the surging popularity of Matisyahu, Judaism is now seen as hip. What do you think of this resurgence of Jewishness in the mainstream culture?

**Ellenson:** Is a Jewish identity that subsists of things that are kitschy really a Jewish identity or is a Jewish identity solely based on religious

devotion a Jewish identity? Ideally what happens is things like *Jewlicious* or *Heeb* hopefully appeal to people who have not had these conversations beforehand and gives them a way to conceptualize how their Judaism is important to them without making it everything, and that leads to a more substantive reading of Jewish history and Jewish culture. Some people wear the T-shirts "100 percent kosher beef" and that's it for them and for other it's not. I think *Heeb* and this Jewish hipster culture serves a sociological function that is new to this generation of Jews—or my generation of Jews. This is a generation of Jews that doesn't follow a traditional Jewish life pattern; what happens is you graduate college and some people don't get married for ten years or so, and there is ten years in there for which no place within Jewish religious culture exists. This is something that allows them to live their life as individuals and serves an important sociological function in that way—the thought is that when people get married and have children they find themselves more involved in a Jewish world.

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**Kedma:** How was the process of writing and editing the book? Was it a cathartic experience or more guilt-inducing?

**Ellenson:** I want to be careful with the word guilt—the book is pegged on guilt and guilt is a catchy title, but it also deals with what is complicated about Jewish identity. I certainly did not feel more guilty after I wrote it. I found a community of Jews that I truly understood who came to struggle with the same things I did. It was really lovely and reassuring and cathartic in a way to find that there were so many Jewish women who struggle with the same things I did and in that sense it really gave me a sense of community and belonging, which is something I always wanted Jewishly and something I sometimes had a hard time feeling authentically.

**Kedma:** How do people respond to your book in general?

**Ellenson:** The biggest response I get is “Do I have a story for you that should have been included” which is always fun because part of me likes the fact that it creates this feeling of instant

bonding and people relate to it so well and see themselves in it. Oftentimes I get women who are older and who are offended by the term “girl” or who are offended by the term “guilt.” The book is very much about shattering the stereotypes of Jewish women, and giving Jewish women a place to stand. The title is for those who have a sense of humor—I don’t understand how being funny and being substantive can’t coexist. I hope the title draws people in who wouldn’t normally find it. The most powerful reaction is people standing up and saying, “I think about all this stuff, but I would never have the courage to say it.” This is exactly how I sort of felt and I find it incredibly gratifying when I hear that. People from liberal backgrounds saying they never realized Orthodox Jews were conflicted and Orthodox Jews saying they never realized that liberal Jews were conflicted. The other thing that has been fascinating for me was the reaction by people who are not Jewish. I think anybody who is part of a minority group in America in a western liberal society goes through this push and pull. They are trapped

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in a grey area as an individual and living in a larger American society and wondering how they maintain their loyalties. The strongest group I get a response from is black women. With regard to the essay with a discussion about conflicting views on Israel, an African American woman said to me you could substitute that for civil rights, and another women came up to me and her name was Shanda and she said after reading the book that she thinks that Jewish women with their noses are like black women with their hair—it is a signpost of a cultural

identity. Do you straighten it and make it more accessible to the mainstream, or do you sit there and try to let your freak flag fly and stick your shnoz up in the air or wear the biggest afro you can, and what does that say about how you perceive yourself? I thought those were interesting insights and questions. It was the most gratifying to see how far across cultural lines this extends.

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*Sarah Breger is a senior in the College of Arts and Sciences and Editor-in-Chief of Kedma. She is often riddled with guilt.*