

Chapter 20: The Sound(s) of Sustainable Stewardship: Composing Audio Essays with the JHFE

Jewish Kentucky Oral History Repository and Undergraduate Researchers

By Janice W. Fernheimer, University of Kentucky, Lexington

featuring Madison Cissell, Hannah Thompson, Hannah Newberry, and Laura Will

2. “The F-Word” by Team Feminism: Emma, Emilee, Ashton, Veronica, and Lindsay

In this audio essay, Emma, Emilee, Ashton, Veronica, and Lindsay explore the role modern conservative Jewish women in Kentucky play in the larger context women’s liberation movements.

Transcript

[*Music: Cheerful acoustic rock, with prominent bass and drums*]

Emma: Hey guys. We are Emma Logsdon . . .

Emilee: . . . Emilee Veltkamp . . .

Ashton: . . . Ashton Kheradmand . . .

Veronica: . . . and Veronica Scott. We are students in WRD 112, Writing Jewish Kentucky, and we have one thing in common: We’re all women. How we construct our identity is deeply entangled with where we grew up [*sound of car starting up and driving across gravel*], who we’ve known [*sound of a group laughing*], and what we’ve read [*sound of pages turning*]. Our beliefs are shaped by the social movements that have ebbed and flowed as we’ve grown up—movements like Black Lives Matter or [*sound of quick bird whistle, a Twitter notification sound*] hashtag #MeToo. But that’s not just an “us” thing [*sound of crowd talking at once*]. That’s a human thing [*sound of the same crowd, a bit louder*]. Feminism. Judaism. Women. Kentucky.

Emma: Or, more specifically, “What roles do modern conservative Jewish women in Kentucky play in the larger context of women’s increasing liberation?”

Emilee: Guys, I think this sounds a whole lot like the F-word.

Ashton: The F-word? [*sound of someone gasping*]

Emilee: Yeah, feminism! [*sound of a group of children yelling, “Yayyy!”*]

Veronica: [*recording sped up to sound a bit higher, along with robotic bleeps and bleeps in the background*]: “Feminism: noun: the advocacy of women’s rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes. [*sped up just a bit more*] Synonyms: the women’s movement, the feminist movement, women’s liberation, female emancipation, and women’s rights.”

Emilee: So, basically, feminism is just a different word for equality. But sometimes it has a bad connotation.

Veronica: [*same sped-up voice and robot bleeps*] See: feminazis and man-hater [*sound of a man screaming*].

Emilee: There are always a few people that give the whole movement a bad reputation. But feminism is really just the belief that both genders are equal! Many people are feminists even if they don’t realize it! As long as you believe that people are equal despite their gender—well, you’re a feminist!

Veronica: But feminism comes in lots of forms, so it can get pretty complicated. And it has a history.

Emma: Before the feminist movement, women in the United States were largely relegated to the roles of wives and mothers, unable to vote and unlikely to work. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, feminism really collided with the United States in 1848 with the Seneca Falls Convention. Feminism emphasized different things at different times, always expanding the roles and rights of women as equal human beings. The right to vote, the ability of women to work for equal pay, and the value of women in leadership have all been focuses of the movement. While feminism always has the goal of equality, there are at least four different types of feminism.

Emilee: It's almost like human belief systems are nuanced or something.

Veronica: [laughs] Yeah. And of course, each subculture reacted differently to this massive movement, based on what they already believed about women. Take Kentucky. [sound of a high, male voice saying, "Yee-haw!"] One scholar, Penny Miller, explains this really well in her "The Slow and Unsure Progress of Women in Kentucky Politics."

Veronica: [reading the Penny Miller quotation with a distinct, stereotypically "scholarly" voice, as traditional Bluegrass plays in the background] "Throughout its history, what political scientists have called the 'traditionalist' political culture of the commonwealth [of Kentucky] has proven disadvantageous to women. Kentucky is a classic example of the southern political culture in which government's active role is primarily that of maintaining the old social order and patriarchal status quo."

Veronica: [in sped-up robot voice, with robot noises again] Patriarchal, Noun: relating to or a characteristic of a system of society or government controlled by men.

Ashton: That doesn't mean no one was a feminist, it just meant that geographically, some cultures as a whole embraced feminism more slowly than others. But it wasn't just geography that determined how people responded! Religion also played into it. For example, many Jewish women's roles expanded a lot because of feminism's influence.

Emma: Wait, so women weren't already viewed as equal in the eyes of the Jewish religion?

Ashton: Well, that's not exactly true. Since religion is a very personal experience, it can be different for each person.

Emilee: And on top of that different denominations of Judaism have different opinions—about everything, too, not just women's roles.

Emma: What do you mean "different denominations of Judaism"?

Emilee: According to the *Jewish Virtual Library*, there are almost 6 million Jewish people in the United States and around 11 thousand in the state of Kentucky. American Jews tend to fall into three main categories: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews. Orthodox is seen as traditional, Reform is seen as modern, and Conservative is somewhere in the middle.

Ashton: Wait, tell me more about that.

Emilee: Let's phone a friend! [sound of a telephone ringing twice]

Lindsay: Hello?

Emilee: Hey! Lindsay, can you explain the denominations of Judaism?

Lindsay: Well, about 10% of American Jews identify as Orthodox Jews, and though there is definitely ideological variation, all of them believe that God gave Moses the Torah directly [*lightning bolt sound*] and that it is unchanged throughout time.

Emilee: So most American Jews don't identify as Orthodox. What do they identify as?

Lindsay: Around 35% of American Jews are Reform Jews, who believe that the Torah is comprised of different sources that were combined into one book. [*writing and page turning sounds*] They don't follow the commandments per se, but do value what they consider to be "Jewish" ethics and morals. They will practice some traditions and cultural aspects. [*a man exclaims, "Mazel tov!" and the sound of a glass breaking*]

Emilee: And then there's Conservative Jews, right?

Lindsay: Yeah! About 26% of American Jews identify as Conservative Jews. Conservative Judaism is the medium between orthodox and reform and emerged as a response to what some saw as the excesses of reform Judaism.

Ashton: Wow! I didn't realize that the Jewish history and religion was so broad and diverse.

Emma: So how does each denomination view women and women's roles?

Veronica: Well, it really depends. Orthodox Judaism is usually pretty strict. So, for example, it tends to limit the participation of women in its services and doesn't allow them to do Torah readings or sit with the men. Conservative Judaism is much less strict, and depending on the congregation, may let them do those things.

Emilee: Also, according to the *Jewish Virtual Library*, the conservative rabbinical school even voted to admit women as rabbinical candidates in 1983.

Veronica: Good point. And Reform is the least strict, with women always counted in the quorum, called the Minyan, and with women always allowed to participate in Torah readings. Reformed Jews also usually celebrate their connections to the women's rights movement.

Emilee: Yeah, and two scholars, Nelly Las and Ruth Morris, suggest in *Jewish Voices in Feminism* that Jewish women were pretty heavily involved in the women's movement. They didn't just benefit from feminism—they helped create it. Feminism emerged in the United States around 1848, right? Turns out, Reform Judaism was brought to America in the mid-1800s by immigrating Germans and emphasized women's participation in services. Basically, they got here about the same time. Pretty soon Reform Judaism was the most popular denomination of Judaism in the nation.

Veronica: And by the way, the center for Reform Judaism—the Hebrew Union College (HUC)—is just up the road in Cincinnati!

Ashton: And then the denominations changed over time, right? Like, how they approached women?

Emma: Right! At least, some of them. The Director of Jewish Studies at Arizona State University, Hava Tirosh-Samuels, says in *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy* that Jewish philosophy changes over time because it is shaped by those who identify with it. And in this case, she says modern Jewish thought has trended towards following feminist ideology.

Veronica: Even though some evidence suggests that Kentucky as a whole was slower to embrace feminism, there are a lot of Kentucky Jewish communities that have. Lexington

especially is home to some very powerful Jewish women. One of them, Judy Saxe, remembers how conservative Judaism changed over time:

Judy Saxe: *[interview clip]* But the seminaries weren't taking women in those days. It was only after we were here in Lexington, I remember when Sally Prizand graduated from Hebrew Union College up in Cincinnati, and it was such a big deal.

Emma: So she got to watch these changes happening, but she didn't necessarily get to participate in all of them.

Judy Saxe: *[interview clip]* And then, the struggle until the Jewish Theological Seminary, which is conservative, began to accept women. Um, and I don't know, a few years ago, I thought if things had been different then, I very probably would have applied to a rabbinical school.

Emma: But it gets better! She wished she had the chance to enter rabbinical school, but one woman actually did!

Sharon Cohen: *[interview clip]* Although a third of the women coming out of rabbinical school in my class were women—um, third of the students. So we were growing. We weren't, we weren't among the pioneers, certainly, but at the same time—we were kind of transition. We weren't among the pioneers, but we weren't, also, the, um, commonplace. I think it's certainly—I would like to hope that in most places it's pretty common now.

Emilee: That was Rabbi Sharon Cohen, one of the first female Rabbis. She used to lead the congregation at Ohavay Zion Synagogue in Lexington. We got to work closely with Rabbi Cohen's interview, which was conducted by fellow WRD 112 students, on March 31st, 2017.

Veronica: As the United States in general has slowly increased the number of women in leadership roles, many in the conservative denomination have responded . . . just like Cohen.

Ashton: Hang on—did *all* Jewish communities in Kentucky embrace feminism like that?

Emma: That's where the denominations come back in. Sue Ezrine identifies as a feminist Jewish woman in Lexington who has worked with Ohavey Zion and many Jewish organizations for years. When asked whether the trend towards feminism was shared among Jewish denominations, she clarified that one denomination in particular has changed from more restrictions on women to fewer.

Sue Ezrine: *[interview clip]* I'd say in the American Conservative Jewish community . . .

Veronica: We had the honor of interviewing her at the Nunn Center on November 9th, 2017.

Sue Ezrine: *[interview clip]* . . . there are still very, many, many, many very traditional Orthodox synagogues where women and men sit separately and the women can't be involved in the, you know, the services. So I think it's the, you know, the Conservative movement that has made those steps.

Veronica: She would say she definitely benefited from the feminist movement, especially since it paved the way for her before she was even born!

Sue Ezrine: *[interview clip]* For 40 years, the conservative movement has gone through its growing pains with equality for women. So when I first moved to Lexington and got involved with our sisterhood, the first time, it was a sisterhood Sabbath and the Rabbi at the time said we could not be in the sanctuary. We had to do it in the social hall because

he wouldn't allow women to come up to the pulpit. So there's been a huge transition in our congregation for that as well. . . . I think it was happening across the country, it wasn't just happening here in Lexington. Um, but people were breaking out of what were their just traditional set roles . . . and then it was a gradual transition. Um, that original Rabbi passed away; the next rabbi who was here was more open, and it was a gradual involvement of women in the whole process. And then we got to the point where we actually had a female rabbi for 8 years.

Veronica: She says she really saw that trend begin in the mid-to-later '80s. Oh, and by the way, that first female Rabbi she mentioned was Rabbi Sharon Cohen, who we talked to earlier.

Ashton: Wait, so Cohen and Ezrine were feminists?

Emma: Based on our definition, we'd say so. But not everyone identifies that way explicitly, or even embraces nontraditional roles for women. However, even those who don't embrace "feminism," per se, can still empower women. Take for example, Harriett Rose. She doesn't list any wild leadership roles, but that doesn't mean she wasn't a women's advocate.

Harriett Rose: *[interview clip]* And I don't know how things ran at the synagogue. I really don't. But I know that the integration of the temple, the management of the temple, was a—women were integral in many ways. They didn't have the offices, but they ran the place.

Veronica: So it sounds like the women there were really influential, even if it was behind the scenes.

Emilee: Wow! This is so cool! I love hearing about how we are moving forward! And I really feel like we've all learned so much! *[sound of a high note on a xylophone or something, like a light bulb moment]*

Ashton: Me too! But this has been so much information in so little time. Can we like . . . recap?

Veronica: Yeah, of course! Basically, feminism is a really important movement that sought to liberate women in the United States by expanding their options and giving them institutional power. *[cash register sound]* Reform Judaism arrived in America about the same time, so many Reform Jewish women contributed to the movement! Kentucky may have been initially resistant to feminism, but in the modern Jewish Kentucky community, there were really diverse, but often positive, responses. Even those who don't consider themselves feminists, or who identify as maybe more traditional, often still mirror many of the advances that feminism and women's liberation allowed. That's the observable trend.

Ashton: And that is always how it will be.

Veronica: Because there is no *[in exaggerated, angry voice]* "the Jews" with their one collective mindset.

Emma: Just like all people, Jewish people are diverse and unique in their own practices and beliefs.

Ashton: Because people are complicated.

Emilee: And that's what makes us human.

[Music: cheerful, major-key rock plays under the following narration]

Lindsay: Thank you to Dylan Morris, Patel Trupte, Hannah Thompson, Janice Crane, and Dr. Janice Fernheimer for conducting the interviews we have used in our podcast.

[Music gets louder for a few seconds, emphasizing an airy keyboard melody and horns before fading out]