



# “WOMEN’S HISTORY IS NOT JUST ABOUT WOMEN—IT’S ABOUT THEIR TIMES!”

*What’s Revealed in Those Boxes at the American Jewish Historical Society*

by AMY STONE

**T**hree dozen women artists and writers sharing white gloves around a conference table. Not post-feminist performance art, but a genuine blast from the past emanating from the archives of the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS) in Manhattan this past April.

Archivists’ stretchy white gloves were the ticket of admission to lay hands on precious 18<sup>th</sup> century letters or to unpack 1940s public affairs bulletins from Hadassah, printed on letterhead with the union bug, clearly demonstrating the mighty organization’s respect for labor.

These literary and visual artists—from poets, novelists and painters to filmmakers and playwrights—were invited by Lilith and AJHS to unpack history, plumb the historical record, scrutinize our collective past, and use it in transformative ways in their future work. Among them were *Love, Loss and What I Wore* author Ilene Beckerman, poet Irena Klepfisz, artist and comic Flash Rosenberg and graphic novelist Leela Corman.

Three distinguished historians gave their perspectives on more than 300 years of woman-generated American Jewish history, complete with clues to the lives of



From left: Artist Anat Litwin and Lilith board member Frances Brandt look for clues to women's participation in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century collections of Jewish organizations; In the back-office stacks, playwright Susan Dworkin encounters files of people she once knew well. The files reveal lacunae, too: a large box labeled "Fannie Hurst" contains only an announcement of the writer's work.

the 2,000 Jews who lived in the American Colonies before 1776. AJHS has the pre-eminent collection of these pioneers' wills and other legal documents, along with rare personal letters.

Hasia Diner, New York University professor of American Jewish history and of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, singled out AJHS as "almost the only depository" for the "amazing documents" written by the women of these early Jewish communities. These were well-educated, privileged Sephardic women, whose men were merchants and whose lives were tied to the Jews of London, Amsterdam and the Caribbean.

If you're a writer out there looking for a sophisticated 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mother in America, Abigail Franks could well be your woman. White gloves were at the ready as Diner passed around Franks' letters, written in elegant script and mailed from Philadelphia to her son Naphtali at the "coffee house near the Royall (sic) Exchange" in London. Franks never spoke again to the two of her nine children who married non-Jews. Her husband was kinder, providing for their daughter Phila in his will and keeping channels open with her and her non-Jewish, politically connected husband.

Abigail Franks' papers provide "the most intimate look" at Jewish history in the Colonies, Diner posits. "Women's history is not just about women; it's about their times. The best windows into the past are through women." As the letters show, even a broken heart did not restrain Abigail Franks from finding fault with her religion, writing, [I] "heartily wish a Calvin or Luther would rise among us," decrying the "idle ceremonies" of the Jews and the Papists.

No idle ceremony, punishment was swift for Sephardic-Ashkenazic intermarriage in that early era. If a Sephardic man married an Ashkenazic woman in



Photos by Joan Roth

Colonial America, the man was ousted from his synagogue. Not so for a woman, however. As Diner explained, “A woman was the chattel of her husband. A Sephardic woman couldn’t be thrown out of the synagogue because she wasn’t a member.” (Does this inspire the wail of a Greek chorus?)

Then there are the Shabbes candlesticks, these time-honored symbols of the Jewish woman’s domain. Annie Polland, vice president of education at New York’s Tenement Museum, focused her talk about 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish women in America on the pair of silver candlesticks made in Poland and bought in St. Petersburg by the Grossmans of Kiev. Under attack, the matriarch of the family was shot, but one of her candlesticks took the bullet! In 1892, the Grossman family emigrated, bringing the candlesticks, one intact, one with a bullet hole, with them to Boston. What would a more pristine pair of Sabbath candlesticks indicate, asked Polland. “Unused!” shouted one of the writers. Right. “The

complications of America,” said Polland, are written in such gleaming and polished candlesticks, and she noted that women began to carve out roles in synagogue life, rather than exclusively in their homes, in order to demonstrate their middle-class status in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. And, interestingly, Polland observed, “Women can bridge class divides.”

Deborah Dash Moore encouraged the participants to make their own selections from the boxes of 20<sup>th</sup> century documents brought into the light of day. “Engage with the materials themselves,” she exhorted the women, each of whom sat facing a box of archival papers.

Demonstrating how “the perspective Jewish women bring is not the same as Jewish men,” Moore, professor of history at the University of Michigan and director of its Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, cited the role of Jewish women’s organizations, especially in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when many women did not go to high school. These organizations

were a place for women to learn. Later, the Women’s Division of the American Jewish Congress inspired the AJCongress to become the “pro-feminist lawyer of the Jewish people.” There was no monolithic Jewish community. The American Jewish Congress files document court cases of Jews vs. Jews, with women often bringing these conflicts to the fore, such as when the AJCongress defended Jewish women suing Jewish male employers for workplace discrimination twenty years ago. (Is there the seed of an opera here?)

The goal of this extraordinary day was to inform, provoke and inspire creative uses of Jewish women’s particular history. Watch for films, fiction, plays, sculpture and poetry from the women in the white gloves. ■

*Amy Stone is a founding mother of Lilith.*

*For a full list of the participants, go to [www.Lilith.org](http://www.Lilith.org). To learn more about AJHS collections, visit [www.ajhs.org](http://www.ajhs.org). Hear podcasts of this remarkable day’s presentations at [www.Lilith.org/blog](http://www.Lilith.org/blog).*



Clockwise from upper left: 19<sup>th</sup> century Shabbat candlesticks, bearing bullet-hole damage from an attack against Jews in Kiev in the 1880s; Amy Stone with documents on Jewish women in the movement to free Soviet Jewry; novelist Rachel Kadish, reading what she described as “two haunting drafts of a report written by an American Jewish woman working in the DP camps after WWII—the final, ‘official’ draft, and the more emotional, despairing one marked ‘Never sent’. Because you trusted us with the raw material, we were able to have an unmediated encounter with a few small pieces of history.” Below: Turn-of-the-last-century minutes from meetings of the National Council of Jewish Women.

