

Accounts of Jewish Adelaide Feminist Lesbians (JAFL)

The Jewish Adelaide Feminist Lesbian (JAFL) group started in 1989. We believe we're the longest surviving Jewish Lesbian Feminist group in the world! We are a group of Jewish Feminist Lesbians based in Adelaide. We come from a range of backgrounds, have diverse lifestyles, world views, interests and ideas. We find our common ground in being Jewish, Lesbian and Feminist, and in all having a strong sense of social justice.

As a group we have had good times and not so good times, we have had fun and sadness, we've had harmony and we've had conflict. We drink cups of tea and always have food. We talk and we talk, we read and we study - and sometimes we don't. This year we held our 10th Seder.¹ These pieces are a window into who we are.

CONFERENCES - by Rosa Rubin

Australia's lesbian feminists hold their first ever conference in 1989 in Adelaide - where else?

Miriam tries to fulfil her quest to find other Jewish Feminist Lesbians and holds a workshop - what else? Miriam herself is nowhere to be seen, but the workshop happens anyway. This is the start of JAFL.

Adelaide Jewish women hold the first ever Jewish Women's Conference in Adelaide. JAFLs are there and do a stunning presentation on being Jewish and Feminist. This is a small town, so we play safe, but hell, you don't have to be too smart to figure it out. Nice day, nice place, nice women, nice men in aprons doing the catering. We discover that one of our group has a secret admirer in the Jewish community. We are amazed, but then we all know that Lesbians are everywhere!

Jewish Gays and Lesbians hold an international conference in New York - where else? Five JAFLs travel half way across the world to teach New York how to nurture your Jewish Lesbian Feminist group. They've tried and failed. They think we're terrific (we **know** we're terrific); they love our accents (we don't tell them that half of our accents aren't even Australian).

A conference in Israel, a conference about ecology and water resources. What has this to do with being Lesbian, Jewish, Feminist and from Adelaide? Nothing, but Rosa can't resist a conference. A thousand ecologists and water experts from all over the world and Rosa - positive that her disguise is foolproof - is 'spotted' by a JAFL (Jewish *American* Feminist Lesbian). Rosa is amazed, but then we all know that Lesbians are everywhere!

¹ Seder – a ceremonial dinner marking the beginning of Passover

THE WORLD CONGRESS OF GAY AND LESBIAN JEWISH GROUPS by Helaine

In 1995, five members from JAFL managed to get away from the quiet life in Adelaide and meet together in the bustling metropolis that is New York for the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Groups.

The conference was held in the Sheraton over a hot and humid July weekend. Four of us booked to share a room together, the first time we had stayed together overnight. We had decided in Adelaide to present a workshop, which we managed to discuss briefly before we left. It was decided that the theme of our group would be “Lesbian Feminist Groups” and was to be offered to women only.

The day before the workshop we met together in an Asian diner for planning, and as usual, eating. In typical Jewish fashion (over egg rolls) we do our best planning whilst eating. We decided to introduce ourselves and talk about JAFL and how we got started, what we do, and what it means for us to be a part of our group. Then we thought we would open it up for other women at the conference to share their experiences and groups.

What a surprise on the day to find there was a great amount of interest in our workshop! The lesbians packed into the room, we had to bring in more chairs and still women had to stand or sit on the floor.

As usual, there was some discussion / debate (not amongst the women) about our workshop being for women only, although that wasn't really a surprise. Over the entire weekend there was only one other workshop for women only; one on body image run by Jyl Felman. (*Hot Chicken Wings*)².

The most surprising thing for us came from the discussions that occurred during our workshop. The majority of the women there were surprised and impressed by our ability as a group to remain together for what at that time was six years. (This year we celebrate our 11th year together!) They spoke of their own experiences of groups that started and stopped, of wanting and seeing a need for a group like ours but somehow that didn't last. They questioned us on what we attributed our success to. At that time, in tongue in cheek way, we said that we were very polite to each other and didn't challenge each other so conflict didn't happen!

In retrospect, there are many influences that contribute to the success of our group. One important influence is that of a feminist ideal. This seems to ensure that we value each other's experiences as women, we accept our differences and we find where we can meet spiritually, politically and personally, so that conflict doesn't destroy us. We do actually challenge each other, but as we have grown together we are able to do so without feeling attacked, and yes, we are polite to each other!

² Jyl Lynn Felman *Hot Chicken Wings* Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco 1992

THE PROBLEM WITH STRUCTURE - by Vivienne Lieberman

From time to time someone will say, "we should organise a program for the coming year, let's make a list of all the topics we want to discuss or follow a theme." And we do. We spend a great evening planning. Books we would like to read and discuss. Videos that someone has seen and thinks would interest the Group. Topics that we could research and present for debate. Jewish festivals that we might like to celebrate. And we change and restructure meeting times to suit changed work schedules, family commitments, and sport or health regimes.

For a meeting or two, we do quite well. But then there is the moment when someone says; "didn't we plan to discuss that article tonight?" And another will say, "well, I don't mind if the meetings are less structured and just see where that takes us". The discussion that follows is usually about whether that might be a bit pointless and next time we should bring that article and discuss it. And sometimes we do. And sometimes we don't. But looking around the group and realising the changes that have taken place in everyone's lives, it is remarkable that the group has kept meeting at all.

Four babies have been born and a couple of grandchildren too. One member is regularly away visiting family in Israel. Another has had times commuting between Adelaide and Sydney. Others visit families overseas or have traveled all over the world. Those working in the Public Service have survived 're-structuring' and 'downsizing'. Others manage the stresses of opening nights, of theatre or concert seasons and festivals, another launches of exhibitions. Some deal with field trips in the outback, teaching and marking or consultancies that rush from one job to the next.

But in spite of all these other commitments we now have our own history together. Structured or unstructured. We have been on the edges of more or less part of each others lives for over a decade. I have a sort of kaleidoscope of memories, which contribute to its own structure. A development of new meanings, and the loose practice of new traditions.

Going to Festival³ events together in Adelaide on warm summer evenings. Sitting around many different kitchen tables sharing food that we enjoy as part of our culture. Candles being lit on a beach to say goodbye to someone. Candles being lit in a house to welcome Shabbat. Candles being lit in a cool December garden to celebrate Chanukah⁴ where children dripping wet and blue cold from the swimming pool stand wrapped in towels around the Menorah⁵.

³ Festival – the biennial Adelaide Festival of Arts

⁴ Chanukah – an 8 day festival marking the return of the light (the winter solstice in the Northern hemisphere) and the victory of the Jews over the Hellenistic Syrians in 165 BCE and the miracle of the oil for the menorah in the Holy Temple lasting, not one, but eight days

⁵ Menorah – a nine-branched candelabra used during the Hanukah festival

Then there are many Pesachs shared with family and friends. Each of us reading from a version of the Haggadah⁶ written by members of the group. A Feminist version

that puts us as women back into our own history. It's a moment when everyone seems to take on a particular role of organisation or food preparation. It doesn't happen magically. It is beautifully structured by those in the group for whom it has the most meaning. Over time this celebration of Pesach has tapped into my childhood memories. It has increasingly become more significant as a reminder of my Jewishness. The symbolic meaning of the festival of Pesach is a celebration of freedom from oppression. Given the history of the last eleven years it is an important reminder for us here in Adelaide that life is good for us.

On Pesach Jews everywhere ask, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" Tradition answers that on this night we can ignore the structures of conventional behaviour. But for our group, it seems to be the other way around. On this night we have no problem observing structure, but for the rest of the year - well, that is another matter.

TO BELONG TO NOT TO BELONG - by Julia

It was 1989 I remember arriving home from London where I had spent some time with a friend who was studying to become a rabbi. Meeting her friends, one already a rabbi with her own congregation in London and a German girl-friend who was openly accepted as her partner, brought up a longing for my Jewish heritage to be part of my life again.

Brought up liberal⁷, I chose to break with Jewish tradition and marry in my ex-husband's orthodox⁸ shule⁹. I liked the building better. My parents could hardly object. They had been married at the same shule before my aunt convinced them to move to the newly established liberal shule 'around the corner'.

My husband's family was orthodox in shule membership only, but they were big on tradition. Shabbat¹⁰ dinners with white cloths, the beautiful old, worn, silver candlesticks carried from Poland, pickled cucumbers and chopped liver, chicken soup, then chicken with hideously overcooked vegetables, and salad, and dessert. Then came "clear the bloody table" when Grandpa was ready to play poker.

Pesach¹¹, when no one understood a word until our 'girls' went to Jewish day schools and wanted to participate in the seder. Rosh Hashanah¹². Yom

⁶ Haggadah – traditional text used during the seder or ceremonial dinner of Passover

⁷ liberal – the progressive movement of Judaism

⁸ orthodox – the traditional movement of Judaism

⁹ shule - synagogue

¹⁰ Shabbat – the Sabbath, commencing sundown Friday and ending sundown Saturday. A Shabbat meal and lighting of the Shabbat candles is traditional on Friday evenings

¹¹ Pesach - Passover

¹² Rosh Hashanah – New Year

Kippur¹³ and the breaking of the fast (which hadn't really happened). I remember helping to prepare food all day with my in-laws, setting the table with beautiful dishes and silver cutlery, moving couches and tables to accommodate the extended family.

Then came separation and finally divorce. It seemed as though there was nothing more for me as a Jewish woman. My ex-husband became involved in a new orthodox congregation where my two youngest daughters were being prepared for their batmitzvahs¹⁴. He was in fact sleeping with a woman who was a 'respected' member of that congregation. Another woman also belonging to the congregation appeared in court during the subsequent custody hearing and told the judge she wouldn't allow her children to come and play with my children when they were at my place. I had never met this woman. He got the three girls. The court orders re my time with them listed things like: I had to observe Shabbat (something I have done all my life) and only two Lesbians were to be present at my home.

Aware by this time that my 'defection' was public news, I was reluctant to attend shule alone. I had been once with my daughters and sat upstairs where the only other woman was my ex's new girlfriend, who was converting.

My mail had piled up while I was overseas, and amongst it, on the front page of *Liberation*¹⁵, was a column headed Jewish Lesbian Group and Miriam's phone number. 'Are you Jewish?' was her only question.

I remember vividly before the first meeting, wondering if I should wear a skirt makeup. I had no idea if I was walking into a group of young, radical feminists or a blue rinse group of older closet dykes. I called in to see my teenage daughters on the way there and one of them commented on my apparent nervousness.

I arrived at the meeting and recognised Miriam as I entered ... and relaxed ... experiencing a profound sense of coming home, which has never changed.

JAFI is with me wherever my travels take me. I come and go, sometimes with years between meetings. This beautiful group of women, and their partners and their children, is my family. JAFI is where I am absolutely comfortable being myself.

Blessed group.

¹³ Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish year. It falls on the first day of the Jewish month of Tishri

¹⁴ Batmitzvah – a ceremony marking a girl's 'coming of age' (around 13 years) as a member of the Jewish community

¹⁵ *Liberation* – a monthly Feminist newsletter

SO WHO IS JEWISH? by Vivienne Liberman

What does it mean to be Jewish? I guess that was the question that drew the group together. We called ourselves the Jewish Adelaide Feminist Lesbian Group — JAFL. So when Deanne wanted to join, the question what does it mean to be Jewish was raised again. Deanne's father had been Jewish but her mother had not and she had been raised as a Christian.

I don't think we had been meeting as a group for more than a few months. Though I could be wrong about that. It is almost 11 years ago now. We met at Rosa's or was it Miriam's? The group was what you call professional women. The youngest was 30, the eldest nearly 50. Some had been married. Some had children. Others felt that they might like children one day. Some of the group lived openly as lesbians, others had not come out yet.

The majority of the group were immigrants to Australia, from America, South Africa, Europe and New Zealand. Like Jews everywhere, our families had their own refugee and immigrant histories. Two of the group were children of Holocaust survivors. After just a few meetings, a shorthand had developed based on a shared history, a shared identity and an understanding about alienation and anti-Semitism. We might not be able to articulate what it was to be Jewish but we all identified as Jews, even though not all of us had grown up practising Judaism in a religious way.

Here we were, sort of caught in a straitjacket of our own upbringing where Talmudic law defined you as a Jew if your mother was Jewish. That is the official origin of our own Jewishness. It is the source of our belonging and it also sets us apart. It makes us outsiders, pariahs in the wider world.

My memory when Deanne asked to join the group was that we all fell silent, which was a most unusual occurrence. This was not at all typical of this group.

Everyone who knew Deanne, liked her. You couldn't not like Deanne. So, was she Jewish because she wanted to be? Or because she was searching for the source of her own feelings of difference? I don't remember any discussion. I remember feeling paralysed and knowing that by definition that we were being exclusive and not wanting to exclude Deanne. And feeling suddenly it was up to us to bestow legitimacy and wondering whether I would have felt differently if I hadn't liked her. And if so, what did that mean about who belongs and who doesn't and why?

Deanne joined the group. She bravely told us how she felt when we didn't all rush to welcome her. She became Jewish because she felt her identity was Jewish and until she went to work interstate in the mid-1990' she was, and still is a much loved member of the Group.

Looking back I was reminded of the moment when I discovered Feminism. It felt as though I had come home. I had answers to the questions I had had all my life. I wonder if Judaism feels like that for Deanne. I hope so.

MY JEWISH JOURNEY - by Meri

Two years ago I was asked by a teacher at my children's school if I would talk to a class of 17 and 18 year olds about what being Jewish means to me. Each week the class, in a study of spirituality, would learn from a person of a particular religion or spiritual discipline. I immediately agreed, welcoming the opportunity to identify publicly and proudly as a Jew.

On the appointed day the teacher introduced me to the class as "a parent from our lower school who is a Jewess". I tingled with fear and challenge. My first public presentation as a parent and my third as a Jew. My first two public appearances as a Jew had been with other JAFI group members at Jewish community conferences. They had been great experiences - stimulating, friendly and at times, thrilling.

Standing out the front of that class, with no other Jews in the room, I carried with me the whole of my Jewish journey, so much of which has been in the past 10 years with my JAFI community. I told the students how much my sense of myself as a Jew has extended from its beginnings with Melbourne cousins (all brilliant high achievers), a family love of food and sharing food, barmitzvahs¹⁶, weddings, the rag trade and slightly eccentric aged aunts.

The teacher in me easily found three headings under which to arrange the threads of meaning in "What Judaism means to me".

The first - "belonging".

I am proud to be a Jew. I'm proud to be a Woman. I'm proud to be a Mother, a Daughter and a Good Seamstress.

[Interesting, I'm not quick to say I'm proud to be a Lesbian. I didn't tell the class I am a Lesbian. I wasn't brave enough or proud enough? It didn't feel like what a "lower school parent" would say.]

I love the ancient tribal belonging part of being a Jew. An ancient cord that can not be severed threads itself through me to my children attaching us for all time to our Jewish past and future. I'm drawn to the traditions and the memories. I love the words Anne Michaels¹⁷ wrote in her book *Fugitive Pieces* - "memory is like ground water seeping in the very being of Jews"

I love being in a Jewish family with a long recorded past. JAFI, my Jewish community, has been established 11 years. I hope it will go on all my life.

¹⁶ Barmitzvah – 'coming of age' ceremony for boys at around 13 years of age to mark the joining the Jewish community in their own right

¹⁷ Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, Bloomsbury Publishing 1996

The second - “justice”

The work of justice and beauty to make the world a better place. The commitment to pursue a just world. This is my life’s mission - whether I want it or not (and mostly I do). This is and has been the work of so many brilliant (recognised and unrecognised) Jewish people. It is the work and talk of all the members of JAFL.

It is community work, political work, political talk, artistic work, writing, reading, talking about books, listening to music, playing music, watching films, talking about films, writing our own rituals - our own naming ceremonies, our own Haggadah, and much more.

The third - “feeling the presence of God”

I didn’t feel the presence of God as a child or as a young woman. I couldn’t even say the word “god” without embarrassment. Now I feel more and more the deep and mysterious source of all being. I have come to this through talking and listening to other members of JAFL, through reading and listening to feminist religious Jews, teachers from the Jewish Renewal¹⁸ movement as well as teachers from other spiritual paths and through conscientiously developing my own spiritual practice.

I love this Marcia Falk¹⁹ blessing, which we recite at each family meal -

*Let us acknowledge the source of life
for the whole of creation and for nourishment.
May we conserve the earth
that it may sustain us,
and let us seek sustenance
for all who inhabit the world.*

SHABBAT WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS - by Maurissa

The Shabbat of Friday, 27th July, 1997 was special as it was a mezuzah²⁰ ceremony with a difference.

Affixing a symbol to the right hand post of the front door distinguishing our new home, as a Jewish home.

“Blessed for the new and for renewal”

A symbol of my past, my present and my future.

¹⁸ Jewish Renewal – a progressive movement originating in the USA emphasising the spiritual practice of Judaism

¹⁹ Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings*, Harper, San Francisco, 1996

²⁰ mezuzah – a welcoming sign of a Jewish home, containing a parchment scroll

The past represents a rich history, family traditions over many hundreds of years from Spain, France, Holland to England.

The present in Australia with partner and children and a sense of community with JAFL.

The future is still yet to unfold.

Come in! Welcome my friends. From the kitchen, delicious aromas greet the senses. The table is set, an air of expectation.

Shabbat, the seventh day, spiritual refreshment.
Escape from the working week, a special time with family and friends
A celebration with candles, kiddush²¹, food, rituals and song
Opportunities to relax, reflect and be together

On this Shabbat we celebrate our new home sharing special contributions and contents for our mezzuzah including: drawings, pictures, writings, crystals and the shema²²:

“Hear, O’Israel –
the divine abounds everywhere
and dwells in everything;
the many are one”.

Together with blessings and song, family and friends we affix the mezzuzah –
Mazel Tov²³!

MY MEZZUZAH - by Miriam Frost

I have a mezzuzah on my doorpost. It hasn’t always been there but now it is part of my daily life and that is because of JAFL. JAFL also hasn’t always been there - but it has now been part of my life for over ten years. Because of my involvement with JAFL, my life and thinking has developed in ways and directions that I would never have expected!

Some years ago, nearer the beginning of JAFL, we had a meeting. WE talked about “how our past informed who we are today”. I remember talking about my own past. Revealing things that I would only say to people who had been close friends for years and yet, here I was doing just that. JAFL has had many moments like that for me. Despite our differences, we have a commonness that makes me feel safe. Anyway, that question made me take stock. It made me think in a new way about acknowledgment and memory. It was a small

²¹ kiddish – blessing over a cup of wine or bread to sanctify an event. Also used to refer to refreshments served in connection with a celebration or ritual

²² shema – important Jewish daily prayer

²³ Mazel Tov – Jewish greeting: “congratulations’ said on all noteworthy achievements or upon the acquisition of a desirable outcome!

moment and yet has informed so much since then. JAFIL has been a little bit like that - throwing up questions, ideas, thoughts that I never would expect.

Which leads me sort of, to the mezzuzah on my doorpost. I'm not really into 'tradition' or 'ritual' except that it can be beautiful to watch. After this meeting - later, much later - I was very surprised to discover my desire to have a mezzuzah. I wanted to put into it, not the traditional things, but some of the new thoughts, acknowledgments and memories that came from that meeting.

And so now, every day as an affirmation, a confirming, a reminder and a support, I leave home emboldened with resolve and strength as I touch/kiss²⁴ my mezzuzah.

HOUSES - by Rosa Rubin

Jewish Lesbians are smart. We live at the beach. When it's 40 degrees in town, you can feel the cool sea breeze. This is where Helaine and Miriam live. We meet in their houses where the theme is art deco - or so it seems. Each has its own special feel - from the mezzuzah on the door to the special things inside.

Jewish Lesbians are smart. We live in the inner city suburbs. Okay, it's hot on the plains, but who can resist an Adelaide stone-front house, with bullnose verandah and lacework? This is where Rosa, Vivienne and Maurissa live. We meet in their houses. Dark old furniture matches the dark old house and at the back are the modern extensions. Light floods in, great expanses of windows look out onto beautiful gardens - and in some cases on to weeds. Also tucked away in the inner city are the cream brick units next to the park and what passes for a river in this town. This is where Miriam Frost lives - now together with little Sarah - and together they are privileged to see from their dining room table, great flocks of lorikeets circling around before settling in for the night.

Jewish Lesbians are smart. We live in the hills where the winter nights are crisp and clear and you can see the stars. This is where Julia and Meri live. This is where you can live in a new modern house of your own design. Here, where it's cool, the flowers take over and you forget to notice the furniture, but you never forget the feel.

Yup, Jewish Lesbians are smart - and we've got good taste.

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²⁴ touch/kiss - it is customary for Jews to kiss their mezuzah as they leave home - to ward off evil, the mezuzah being a talisman against evil