

The Mother Issue

Yenta, Mame, or Invisible Woman?
Reconfiguring the Jewish Mother
in the Twenty-First Century

WINTER 2023

AJS

PERSPECTIVES

THE MAGAZINE OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR JEWISH STUDIES



Professional Discount from the *Jewish Review of Books*!

From fiction to philosophy, from ancient history to the latest show, the *JRB* brings you Jewish subjects worthy of serious and accessible (and occasionally even playful) attention.

Join the more than 100 AJS members who are contributors and writers, and our 1,000 AJS subscribers, by scanning the QR code below with a special rate just for this conference, or call 1-877-753-0337 and ask for the AJS discount.



JEWISH REVIEW *of* BOOKS



The Mother Issue

Yenta, Mame, or Invisible Woman?
Reconfiguring the Jewish Mother
in the Twenty-First Century

WINTER 2023

From the Editors	14	Berta R. Golahny's Portraits of Her Mother	74
From the President	16	Emily Kopley	
From the Art Editor	26	My Fat Jewish Mother Problem (and Yours)	80
Editor: Douglas Rosenberg		Jennifer Glaser	
Artists: Douglas Rosenberg, Helène Aylon, Kel Mur, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Allen Ginsberg, Sally Gross		Ritual and Childcare, Time and Place: A Feminist Abuts the <i>Mitzvot</i> <i>'Aseh She-Ha-Zman Grama</i>	84
"From Where Should I Steal to Give You More?" 46 The Jewish Mother in Anzia Yeziarska's Fiction Sally Ann Drucker		Ilana Webster-Kogen	
"Momma Is a Saint": Christianizing the Jewish Mother in Drake's Black Jewish Rap Jonathan Branfman	50	Motherhood as Metaphor: The Jewish Mother as Stand-Up Comedian Grace Kessler Overbeke	86
Refusing to Be a Zionist Mother Naomi Brenner	56	Mothers and Motherhood in Jewish History and Culture: A Teaching Reflection Jessica Kirzane and Elena Hoffenberg	90
Portrait of My Mother as Four Sons Debra Cash	61	Teaching Motherhood: A Reflection Sari Fein	93
Musings of a Jewish Mother Jennifer Seligman	62	Roundtable: "Ethnography and the Jewish Mother" Editor: Jason Schulman Contributors: Jennifer Creese, Mercédesz Czimbalmos, Rebecca Slavin-Phillips	98
An Improbable Likeness: Olga Lengyel's Auschwitz Tale of Motherhood Lost Sheila Jelen	64	Teaching with Film and Media	104
What Bacon Can Tell Us about Jewish Mothers Nancy Phillips	68	Editor: Olga Gershenson Contributor: Avner Shavit	
The Original <i>Yente</i> : <i>Yente Telebende</i> and the <i>Yidishe Mame's</i> Long Shadow of Misogyny Gil Ribak	70		



Read AJS Perspectives online at
associationforjewishstudies.org

AJS Perspectives: The Magazine of the Association for Jewish Studies

Please direct correspondence to:
Association for Jewish Studies
15 West 16th Street
New York, NY 10011

T: 917.606.8249
ajs@associationforjewishstudies.org

www.associationforjewishstudies.org

AJS Perspectives is published
bi-annually by the Association
for Jewish Studies.

© 2023 Association for
Jewish Studies ISSN 1529-6423

AJS Perspectives reserves the right to
reject advertisements or other items not
consonant with the goals and purposes
of the organization. Copy may be con-
densed or rejected because of length
or style. *AJS Perspectives* disclaims
responsibility for statements made by
advertisers and contributors.

Front Cover

Portrait of Joyce Rosenberg with
son Steven, c.1960, photographer
unknown. Courtesy of Douglas
Rosenberg

Back Cover

Portrait of Joyce Rosenberg, age 85,
photo by Douglas Rosenberg

Editors

Laura Limonic
SUNY Old Westbury

F. K. Schoeman
University of South Carolina

Art Editor

Douglas Rosenberg
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Roundtable Editor

Jason Schulman
New York University

Teaching with Film and Media Editor

Olga Gershenson
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Editorial Board

Samantha Baskind
Cleveland State University

Olga Gershenson
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Ruth Panofsky
Toronto Metropolitan University

Douglas Rosenberg
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Jason Schulman
New York University

Christopher Silver
McGill University

Mark L. Smith
American Jewish University

Daniela R.P. Weiner
Stanford University

Melissa Weininger
*California State University,
Northridge*

Managing Editor

Karin Kugel

President

Robin Judd
The Ohio State University

Vice President / Membership and Outreach

Ari Y. Kelman
Stanford University

Vice President / Program

Laura Leibman
Reed College

Vice President / Publications

Joel Berkowitz
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Secretary / Treasurer

Lila Corwin Berman
Temple University

Past President

Jeffrey Shoulson
University of Connecticut

AJS Staff

Warren Hoffman
Executive Director

Mary Arnstein
Conference Content Manager

Karin Kugel
*AJS Perspectives Managing Editor;
Website Manager*

Melinda Man
Membership and Database Manager

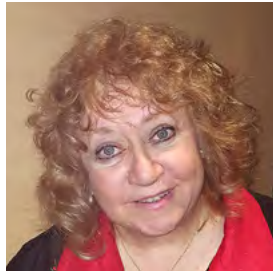
Amy Ronek
*Director of Marketing and
Communications*

Amy Weiss
*Senior Grants and Professional
Development Manager*

Contributors



Douglas Rosenberg



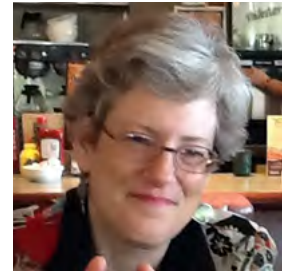
Sally Ann Drucker



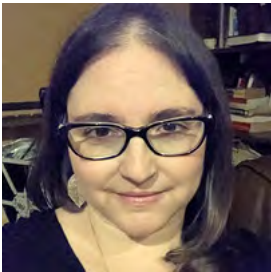
Jonathan Branfman



Naomi Brenner



Debra Cash



Jennifer Seligman



Sheila Jelen



Nancy Phillips



Gil Ribak



Emily Kopley



Jennifer Glaser



Ilana Webster-Kogen



Grace Kessler
Overbeke



Jessica Kirzane



Elena Hoffenberg



Sari Fein



Jason Schulman



Jennifer Creese



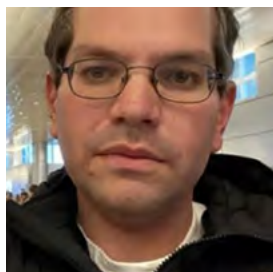
Mercédesz
Czimbalmos



Rebecca
Slavin-Phillips



Olga Gershenson



Avner Shavit



Read AJS Perspectives online at
associationforjewishstudies.org

Berta R. Golahny's Portraits of Her Mother

Emily Kopley

My mother's cousin Dvorah once wrote a play in which she performed as her grandmother Fannie, who had died when the cousins were under two years old.

Fannie's daughter Berta, the sister of Dvorah's mother, attended a performance. After the show, she said to her niece, "You know, Bubbie Fannie had *excellent* posture. She wasn't stooped at all. And she worked very hard to get rid of her Yiddish accent. And she didn't wear a babushka." Her comments were not only negative; they were *in* the negative. How Fannie really was, she did not put into words. She had already conveyed Fannie in another medium: visual art.

Berta Rosenbaum Golahny (1925–2005)—Birdie, as we all called her—was my maternal grandmother. She was a painter, printmaker, and, occasionally, sculptor, who blended abstraction and realism, often in a single work. In her art, now in private and institutional collections, she expressed a humanistic, utopian impulse instilled by her parents.

Fannie Hencken Rosenbaum (ca. 1891–1953), born in a shtetl outside Vitebsk, arrived in New York as an orphan in 1907 and worked for years in the garment district before marrying a fellow immigrant from eastern Europe and raising three children. In the broad contours of her life she resembled thousands of other Jewish women. But, of course, in the specifics of her life and character she resembled no one. Her many roles included member of the Bund and of the Arbeter Ring, strike organizer, leader of women's *leyenkreyn* in Detroit, and, for her younger daughter Berta, artist's model. Because of this

last role we can discern the individual behind all of her roles—or rather, we can discern how her daughter saw her.

Fannie showed off her excellent posture throughout my childhood. Her reddish-brown head, a painted plaster cast, was a constant in an otherwise temporary living-room exhibition. Birdie would display her recent work on two large easels and a row of S hooks, but this erect head forever challenged me: Could I attain such physical and metaphysical strength? There is nothing like a bust to make someone seem venerated and remote. The hooded holes of eyes added to the effect.

Birdie made the work from life in the summer of 1944. She had returned home after a year at the Art Students League, where she had studied sculpture with Ossip Zadkine. From 1941 until the end of the war, Zadkine was in New York to avoid being the son of a Jewish father in Paris. Still in Europe were many relatives of Birdie's father. After the war, he would learn that two brothers and one sister, along with extended family, had been murdered in the Holocaust. His other sister, with her husband and two daughters, had been in hiding in France and had survived.

The sculpture of Fannie is proud and a little sad. Fannie's neck muscles deny the disappointments of history, but her slightly furrowed brow and stoic mouth betray them. Along with the surety of carriage, the larger-than-life scale gives an impression of a woman firm in her values and herself. Fannie was fifty-three but



Figure 1: Photo of Fannie Rosenbaum with plaster bust of her by Berta R. Golahny, 1944. Photo by Berta R. Golahny (?), from the Golahny/Kopley family archive, Newton, MA. The sculpture is 13.5 in. x 12 in. x 13 in. A single bronze cast was made; both plaster and bronze are in a private collection.



Figure 2: Berta R. Golahny. Conversation: My Mother and Mrs. Kost, 1947. Oil on canvas. 17.5 in. x 24 in. Estate of Berta R. Golahny, Newton, MA. Photo by Amy Golahny

looked older. (Figure 1 shows her posing beside the plaster cast.) The bust's rough texture conveys her weathered skin, especially on the large slabs of cheeks. Three thick ridges frame the head, making of Fannie's short, coarse hair a tipped-back wreath.

Fannie's cultivated American accent cannot be guessed from *Conversation: My Mother and Mrs. Kost* (Figure 2), the only work of Birdie's that depicts her mother speaking. Birdie painted this in late 1947, some months after receiving her BFA from the School of the Art



Figure 3: Berta R. Golahny, *The Human Abstract*, 1990s. Oil on canvas, 30 in. x 30 in. Estate of Berta R. Golahny, Newton, MA. Photo by Aaron Bourque

Institute of Chicago. Birdie's older sister Ida had married David Kost in 1942, before he enlisted. Mrs. Zlote "Lottie" Kost was David's mother. Fannie and Lottie would have spoken in Yiddish; Lottie, too, was from present-day Belarus. Fannie in profile seems to be speaking with conviction, her eyes lost in middle distance, while Lottie listens with boredom mixed with skepticism. Whatever Fannie is saying, her upraised palm offers something that Lottie, with her closed fist pushed into her cheek and her eyebrow raised, is not accepting. It is painfully comic, the gap between earnest telling and reluctant reception. If I were Lottie, I might raise an eyebrow at Fannie's idealism. Decades earlier, Fannie and her husband had formed with friends a group called Land and Freedom and

collectively bought a large piece of land in Florida on which to establish a utopian community. The land turned out to be swampland; they never moved there. The experiment was doomed anyway by incipient infighting. I admire Fannie's plans for a perfectly equitable society, but I lack her trust in the possibility.

Fannie's hair flies free in every photograph and depiction I've seen. I think Birdie saw this choice as consistent with her mother's Americanized accent. In *The Human Abstract* (Figure 3), painted in the 1990s, Birdie contrasts her mother as she knew her with someone like her mother at Ellis Island. The young woman wears a babushka.

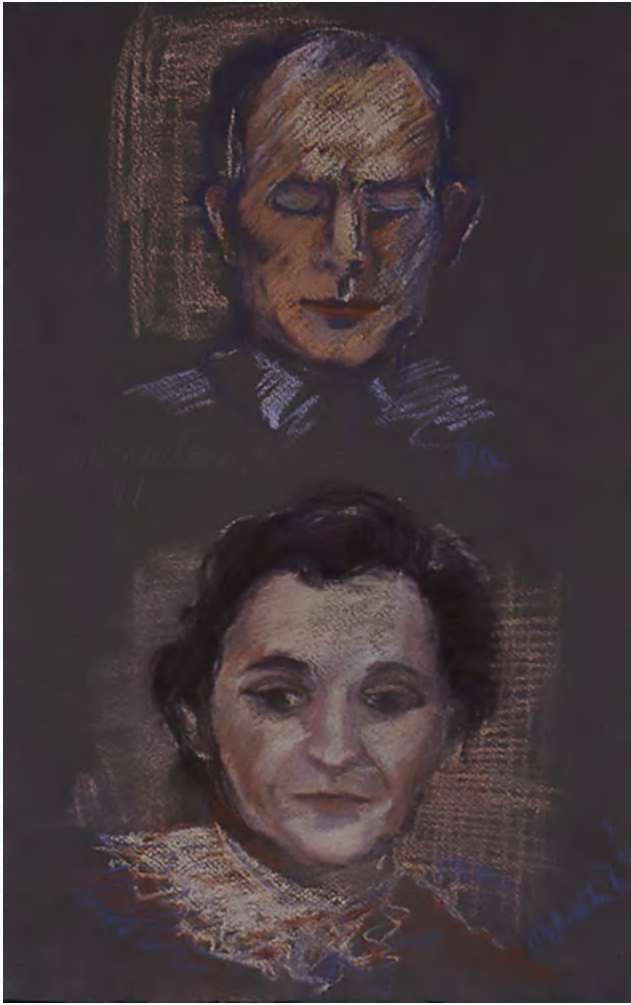


Figure 4: Berta R. Golahny, *My Parents*, 1944. Charcoal. 40 in. x 20 in. Estate of Berta R. Golahny, Newton, MA. Photo by Yuda Golahny



Figure 5: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "Young Russian Jewess at Ellis Island, 1905." The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1905. digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e85-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

Birdie wrote about the genesis of this piece. "While organizing some of my early work I found a long forgotten charcoal of my mother (1944). I responded to the emotional impact of the soft, fully modeled features in the drawing by starting a new canvas with a painted version of the drawing in the center." Probably Birdie refers to the charcoal *My Parents* (Figure 4), but she trades the bright, focused eyes of the charcoal for the holes of the bust.

She goes on, "As the painting progressed I recalled a photograph that I had loved since I first saw it in *America & Lewis Hine, Photographs 1904-1940*, published by the

Brooklyn Museum with Aperture, 1977. It is *Young Russian Jewess at Ellis Island, 1905* [Figure 5]. (My mother emigrated to the US at this time.) I painted the head in the lower left of the canvas. Many smaller heads in various colors and stages of abstraction surround the central head and are symbolic of my mother's all-embracing love for people."ⁱⁱ

Though she faulted Dvorah for portraying Fannie as a stereotypical Russian grandmother, here Birdie, too, portrays Fannie as a type, though one truer to life. Freydl Hencken was a young Russian Jewess at Ellis Island, 1907.

Like the word “mother,” all portraits, too, exceed their subject, even as our highest praise of such a work is to say that it “captures the person.”

Birdie was twenty-eight when Fannie died. Most of her depictions of her mother are by a young woman going out into the world, honoring what she leaves behind.ⁱⁱ But in this late painting, she considers what her mother saw when she left her own home behind.

The bright color, thin application of paint, and fine lines are characteristic of Birdie’s mature painting style. The title, too, *The Human Abstract*, is characteristic: Birdie repeatedly borrowed the name of Blake’s poem for her own works.ⁱⁱⁱ The phrase unites the representational with the not so, and the individual with the universal. It is a good phrase for a painting of one’s mother. The tension between the singular and the general is inherent in our vocabulary: my “Ma,” my “Mom,” my “Mama.” Some of Birdie’s work on Fannie is titled *Mother*. This is what Birdie called her, but it also renders her another type. Without the possessive “my,” the artist’s mother becomes all Jewish mothers, all unstooped mothers, all idealistic mothers, all immigrant mothers, all mothers.

Like the word “mother,” all portraits, too, exceed their subject, even as our highest praise of such a work is to

say that it “captures the person.” The portraits of Fannie by her daughter capture the person even as they imply a larger pattern of which the person is a part.

EMILY KOPLEY is course lecturer in Jewish Studies at McGill University. She is the author of *Berta Golahny: The Human Abstract (2018)*, and *Virginia Woolf and Poetry (Oxford University Press, 2021)*.

i “Notes on Paintings,” WordPerfect document. Last modified January 27, 2003.

ii Exemplifying this perspective is *Self Portrait with Parents (1949)*, discussed in Abigail MacGibeny’s “States of Being: Berta R. Golahny’s *Landscape of Man*,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 39, no.2 (Fall/Winter 2018): 22–33.

iii *Berta Golahny: The Human Abstract* is the title my mother, Amy Golahny, and I gave to a 2018 retrospective at Lycoming College, in Williamsport, PA. A PDF of the exhibition catalogue is available online at <https://www.golahny.org/resources/bertha-golahny-the-human-abstract>.

New from the University of South Carolina Press



“With impeccable scholarship, Vecchio delivers a concise history of this understudied and important Jewish community. . . . Essential to understanding the immigrant experience and the American South.”

—ORVILLE VERNON BURTON, THE JUDGE MATTHEW J. PERRY DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

ON SALE JANUARY 4, 2024 • 280 PAGES • HARDCOVER \$34.99

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH CAROLINA PRESS

SHOP ONLINE AT [USCPRESS.COM](https://uscpres.com)