



ELANA SZTOKMAN

CONVERSATIONS

ESSAYS ON MY LIFE AS A JEWISH WOMAN

WITH MY BODY

**Conversations with
my Body:
Essays on My Life as a
Jewish Woman**

Dr. Elana Sztokman



Conversations with my Body

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*This book is dedicated with love and appreciation
to my beautiful soul sister*

Chana Erin Griver

*With an ocean of gratitude between us.
Thanks for sharing the journey.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue: A personal reckoning with my body

“Modesty” they call it... as if

Between Baalat Teshuva and Britney Spears

On Skirts and Daughters

My Body Is Not Just an Object in Your Landscape

Dignified in Pants

Olympics 2016: Two Cultures, One Sexual Gaze

When Modest Is Hottest

What Banning Facebook is Really About

Did a Rabbi Permit Self-Mutilation to Promote 'Modesty'?

Keeping Young Women Hidden – at the Expense of Their Bodies

Hair

On Hats and Hindrances

The Case Against the *Sheitel*

Some Scholarly Looks at Women's Hair Coverings

On Purim Wigs, 'Modesty,' and Rabbi Broyde's Defense of the *Sheitel*

The Promises and Pitfalls of Discussing Hair-Covering with Women on Facebook

Why Jewish Women Are Wearing Burqas

The Feminist Debate Over France's Burqa Ban

Rav Yosef's Wife Shows Some (Gasp!) Hair

Voice

Bnei Akiva, and the Efforts to Silence Women

Women are Jews, too

Unlikely Orthodox Superstar Finds Her Voice

The Story of a Boy and His Witch-Aunt

Sexuality

Sex and Women's Pleasure Debated in the Orthodox Sphere

It's Time to Tell the Truth about Kallah Teachers

How the Freundel story triggered me

Don't Blame Mikveh Attendants for a Broken System Created by Men

On Teaching Talmud and Sex Toys

Amy Coney Barret and Me: Women who protect the patriarchy

A Nice Jewish Girl Falls in Love with Beyoncé

Sex Cultures and the "Chosen" People

Why Israel's Mikveh Bill Is About More Than How Orthodox Women Immerse

Food and Fat

Passover: Freedom for Women NOW – Not 3000 Years Ago

My First Girdle and Other Religious Moments

The Shabbat Binge

Choosing Not to Fast: Eating Disorders and Yom Kippur

Does Judaism Generate Eating Disorders?

Why I Hate Hearing 'You Look Great'

Barbie's 'Real' New Body Still Ain't Too Real

A Large and Lovely Beauty Pageant

Crowning Miss 'Fat' Israel

Rebellions

Why Orthodox Girls Don't Figure Skate

An Orthodox Jew Leads Toledo to a Women's National
Basketball Title

Former Gur Hasid: 'A Hole in the Sheet' Saved My Life

When Religious Girls Become Beauty Queens

Where Women of All Shapes and Sizes Do the Hula

Watching My Daughter Fly

Reflections

Orthodox Feminism: Where to from Here

What is My Story?

Epilogue

Appendix: Dissertation Excerpts

Measuring Religiousness on Girls' Knees

The Nurse's Class

"Shiur Kedusha": The Holiness Class

Acknowledgments

About the Author



Prologue: **A personal reckoning with my body**

*“To lose confidence in one’s body is
to lose confidence in oneself.”*

— Simone de Beauvoir

*“Every woman knows that, regardless of all her other
achievements, she is a failure if she is not beautiful.”*

— Germaine Greer



I turned fifty years old this year. I did not mark the event by giving away cars, nor by taking my friends and family to Morocco for the weekend. Instead, on the day itself, I spent the morning taking my daughter wedding dress shopping, and then spent the afternoon meeting with a group of women to establish a new women's political party in Israel. It was a nearly perfect day for me, a kind of a neat summary of Elana@50 – the personal and the political; the private and the public; my family but also the world; drawing on the love while stoking my fire; my drive for political change for women alongside a perhaps deeper drive to carve out my own little niche of newness. Perhaps it was an eclectic reality of my life as a Jewish woman – weaving my public work toward women's empowerment with my real, everyday experiences of, essentially, building loving and healthy relationships.

Sounds nice, right? Except that a moment later, the world crumbled into little pieces.

I mean, before Corona hit, 2020 was set to be a year of intense activity for the world and for me – 2020, I said in January, *a year for two of my kids' weddings, and two significant elections*. As an American-Israeli activist living in Israel for nearly 30 years, I am active in political systems in both Israel and America, both of which had elections in 2020. I serve as Vice-Chair for Media and Policy for Democrats Abroad-Israel, a position that holds a political and moral urgency especially in the Trump era. And as a feminist activist in Israel, I am the founding Chair of the *Kol Hanashim* Voice of Women party that we formed on my 50th birthday and that ran in the March 2020 general elections intending to achieve deep-rooted systemic change for women all around Israel. It was going to be a complicated but exciting year, I thought.

Of course, by the time the Israeli elections rolled around, attention turned to Corona, and it became clear that everything was shifting, and entering utterly uncharted territory, in all realms – politically, economically, socially, medically, scientifically, and culturally. Within days after the election, my husband and I bought a new freezer and a new food pantry – which we dubbed our “end of the world pantry” – and madly filled it up, like we were on an episode of *Laverne and Shirley*. While I was panicking, our four kids all moved back home – along with a few significant others, a stranded niece, and a lone soldier – we miraculously found beds for everyone, and together we hunkered down. We made an impromptu, small garden wedding for my daughter and her now-husband (at least she had the dress), an even smaller garden wedding for my son and his now-wife, by another miracle everyone stayed healthy, and here we are. I mean, sure, the year 2020 has turned into what Israelis might call a *balagan* – chaos – but we're still standing.

Well, it's not quite the end of the world (*yet*). However, something is different. This is the year everything stopped, while in some ways everything changed. Roads and airways cleared, but the house became a flurry of activity. We were stockpiling food, and at the same time, cooking and eating tons. School buildings closed while the students in the family transformed the house into a big study hall with devices going on in every corner. Some of us lost jobs and direction while others pivoted to entirely new realms. And most jarring,

relatives and friends have gotten sick, and some have died of Corona, but the lack of connection makes it all feel a bit far off and surreal, even as the stories flood our living room. The numbers of dead are staggering, and yet we do not even know all the names and faces of the victims. The world is in some ways screaming – between *Black Lives Matter* in the States and *Bibi Go Home* protests in Israel, the communal outcries are in many ways unprecedented – but at the same time, the distancing and disconnections between people have never cast a greater silence. I have regular protests right on my corner, which I sometimes participate in and sometimes don't. Sometimes I feel too emotionally drained from all of it. A year of contradictions, confounding, and a lot of cries.

This is not how I planned the year, but you know, people plan, and God laughs. (The original expression is that “man plans,” but I've obviously fixed that). The truth is, I had started the year thinking that 2020 would be the year I was going to finally impact transformative change on behalf of women in Israel via political action. Starting the party was quite a grandiose act that was many years in the making, and I had big dreams. Not only did our party not even come close to achieving our goals; instead, all hell broke loose in Israeli politics. Corona became an excuse to trample individual rights, as the first-ever sitting Prime Minister on trial threatens democracy while receiving a million NIS payback from the taxpayers still struggling with economic collapse. Ministers come and go, as do managers of the Corona crisis, and the government has had so many about-faces in how to contain the pandemic that governance seems like a farce. The once great “hope” to replace Bibi – Benny Gantz – has been reduced to a shred of nothing, and now the new potential competitor has emerged from the right flank, effectively obliterating what remained of Israel's left. The long-envisioned normalization with Arab nations has left discussions of real peace with the Palestinians in the gutter, and “peace” has lost all real meaning, replaced instead with grotesque arms-deals. And perhaps most significantly in my mind, Corona has particularly threatening to the well-being of women, who are fading out of the workplace, regressing to home-managers, and increasingly at risk from violence. Yet, the issue of women's equality is nowhere on the public agenda. *Nowhere*. Like so many other topics and issues, it has faded behind the big story of the pandemic and all that came with it.

The fading of women's needs from the public agenda is taking place around the world. In fact, over the past year, whenever I felt like it was too hard to watch Israeli politics, I would take a peek over the Atlantic to see what Trump has been doing to America, and some days I would thank God that I'm not living there right now. Sometimes, when I would see Trumpist America screaming for their rights to shop without a mask, calling science a “hoax,” allowing police to tear-gas anti-racism protesters, or idealizing White Supremacist ideologies, I would wonder if I'm living in an episode of the *Twilight Zone*. *Has America always been this way?* It's hard to know. What an insane year – unlike anything anyone could have imagined. And even though Joe Biden and Kamala Harris thankfully won the election, it still does feel, at times, like we are nearing the end of the world.

Something is happening in me, too. I've also turned in many ways from activist to observer, from noisemaker to quiet homemaker. I am in a pause of sorts, so overwhelmed but what I observe in the world that I cannot bring myself to take a step. *To do what? To go where? To try what?* This experience has been a moment for me to turn inward. Like many people, the hunkering down at home has sent me on a path of personal reckoning and cleaning house –

literally and figuratively. For example, to make room for the new family additions, we rearranged a few rooms, threw out many old pieces of furniture and finally removed useless storage (how quickly CDs, video cameras, and dictionaries became obsolete). It feels like the end of something. Maybe a lot of things. It may be the beginning of things, too, although it's hard to see what's next when there is so much fog around you.

In some ways, this has been cathartic for me. Like many others, I have been cleaning through mountains of old files, transferring boxes of archives to flash drives, clearing spaces, and often asking myself what I *actually* need.

One of my discoveries was just how much I have crafted over the years. The pile I made that started with the label "Portfolio" became larger than I could have imagined. I have an entire box of old journals, even though I am an inconsistent-at-best journal-writer; even though I have gone through what I thought were long periods of not journaling, I have still apparently pulled out a lot of words over the years from my ever-rattling brain. I also collected essays, articles, and blogs that have been published in different places. I regularly wrote for *The Forward* for nearly ten years and discovered that I had over 200 essays published there. I never counted them quite this way, but once I did, it gave me pause. I am inspired to journal from Virginia Woolf, who considered journal-writing an essential practice for writing women. For me, the writing is about leaving breadcrumbs in this world. It's about feeling like I've actually existed.

It's also about chronicling my own evolution. As I read some of my earlier words, I realized that I have changed through the writing process. Some of what I wrote earlier, I would not write today – some of it was too judgmental, while some of it was too soft. Many of my ideas have crystallized over the years, while in other instances, I am even more ambivalent than ever.

Yes, I have definitely changed in some noticeable ways. When I started my writing career, I was still mostly Orthodox, trying to justify *halakha*, or Jewish law, and find my place within that. Today, I do not engage with the halakhic process or see myself in that world at all. But my changes are about more than just my religious practice. They have something to do with what I want out of life. About how I define freedom. About what permissions I give myself to think for myself. I'm a much freer person, even if my Jewish identity does not yet have a proper home. Maybe it never will. Maybe I am not even looking for that anymore. I'm not sure.

I can track many of these processes in my writing, in subtle shifts. I wonder if my readers detect that, too.

I find myself trying to make sense of all this, finding some kind of story or clear arc in my life. Perhaps it's another outcome of the whole end-of-the-world atmosphere.

What exactly have I done with my life? I stared at this mountain of writing and thought to myself: *The answer is in this pile.*

As I started poring through all these pages, I discovered a milestone that had not occurred to me until then. This year marks the 25th anniversary of what I have come to think of as my feminist awakening. Although these kinds of complex shifts are generally hard to mark with

a precise date and time, there were two events in 1995, when I was 25 years old, that I consider significant watersheds in my life – one public, and one personal.

The public activity that I think of as the beginning of my feminist journey was starting an organization called Mavoi Satum, literally “The Dead End” to help *agunot*, “chained women,” or women stuck in unwanted marriages. At the time, I was a young religious mother of a two-year-old toddler living in Jerusalem – and pregnant with my second child. I spent most of this pregnancy alone with my 2-year-old daughter, as my husband was away doing his army service. We lived up on a second-floor walk-up – 45 stairs, to be exact, which I know because I counted every day – and I was struggling. I was new in the country; I had no money, no real job, very few friends, no car, no particular career aspirations, and not enough knowledge of working Hebrew or Israeli culture to make my daily life easy. I had sort of dreamed of moving to Israel and living on a farm somewhere, but that wasn’t happening. Instead, I was drowning.

To create some kind of structure or community, I joined a women’s organization in the neighborhood called Esra, literally “Help” (an ironic name now that I think about it. Was I helping others or helping myself? Hmmm.). We met every few weeks to discuss what is called “*chesed*,” or charity work. We would sit around the table, eat, share life updates, and then review cases of women in the community who needed supporters – new mothers who needed diapers, women in the hospital who needed visitors, or mourners who needed meals. It was a classic Jewish women’s activity, and quite a lovely gathering, even if I was the only one around the table under the age of 65.

Little did I know that one of these meetings was destined to alter the trajectory of my life. One day, we heard a different kind of story. It was about a woman named Gratzia, who was an *agunah* – literally a “chained woman” who could not get divorced. Israeli divorce law follows Orthodox interpretations of *halakha*, or Jewish law, which holds that divorce is subject to the will and volition of the husband. As a result, women who want to get divorced are often victims of extortion by their not-yet-ex-husbands. Some women wait for years while their husbands make demands. Women in this situation, *agunot*, cannot remarry or have children or get on with their lives. Men, on the other hand, who hold their wives hostage, have no such constraints. They have ways of remarrying and even having children while their first wives are still in chains, so to speak, tied to a non-existent yet still abusive marriage while their husbands are free. There are estimated to be thousands or even tens of thousands of women in this situation in Israel and around the Jewish world.

I knew about the *agunah* situation from growing up in Flatbush, a modern-Orthodox neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York where every once in a while, my community rallied around a woman who was denied a divorce. We would show up at the workplace of some husband and hold posters and chant – sometimes for weeks or months – until he gave the *get*, the bill of divorce.

However, with Gratzia, this was the first time that I encountered an *agunah* who indeed had a name and a face, and who was asking me for help, so to speak.

The story of Gratzia shook me, and I got involved. I went to meet the late Leah Ain Globe, a then- 80-something Jerusalem activist on behalf of *agunot*, who introduced me to Judith Djemal, another young mother like me who was also keen to *do something*. At Leah Globe’s instructions, Judith and I raised money to help Gratzia pay for legal representation, which

ultimately led her to obtain her divorce. As a result of this experience, we realized that this seemingly simple tactic of making sure that women had legal representation had the potential to change women's lives radically. In December 1995, Judith and I went to the Not-for-Profit Authority, each of us with newborn babies in tow, and opened up an organization to help *agunot* called Mavoi Satum, literally, "The Dead End," a name coined by Leah Globe that accurately reflected the situation many of these women were in. I co-chaired the organization for seven years along with the amazing Gloria Menzin, a retired Jerusalem businesswoman and widow who built a fabulously successful granola company from her kitchen, with five young children. Although I am no longer involved in the organization, it is still around – its dedicated leaders still fighting the fight, helping *agunot*, and advocating for systemic change in the way Jewish women get divorced in Israel so that this situation might be eliminated once and for all.

The work with *agunot* was an important part of my life during the years when I was first crafting a vision of my own adulthood, but at the time I saw it mostly as a public activity to advance social change for women. I was not an *agunah*, so it wasn't personal. I was helping others, not myself. Right? Right?

The other major milestone from 1995, which may or may not have been impacted by my work with *agunot*, was personal. I stopped covering my hair. It sounds like a little thing, but I feel like the act of taking off my hat has become, in retrospect, a formative event, and I think it is a reasonably accurate description of the moment I started to make a shift. And interestingly, as I turned fifty, it also marked the halfway point of my life until now.

When I was pregnant with my son – who was born around the time we started Mavoi Satum – I was BIG. Huge, actually, or so I thought at the time. On top of all that, I was diagnosed with gestational diabetes, which meant I had to eat a special diet, prick my finger for blood seven times a day, and make my way to the Hadassah Ein Karem hospital on the outskirts of the city twice a week, preferably without my toddler, despite not having a car or a job or any real support network. I have no idea how I did all that. I read in one of my journals from the time that I felt like God was carrying me up the stairs. Maybe she was.

One day, eight months pregnant in the Middle Eastern heat, I was crouching down at the bottom of the slide in the park, waiting for my daughter to land in my arms, and I suddenly noticed how uncomfortable I was. I was wearing a long skirt, and my hair was tied up in a hat. I just felt heavy, hot, and ridiculous – and alone.

What the hell am I doing?

That was the sentence that erupted in my head. Like, who was I trying to please? Who was I trying to impress? Who was I listening to, dictating how I should dress? It was like, I finally woke up and started hearing my own voice, which I hadn't heard in quite a long time.

The next day, I went out and bought myself a pair of maternity pants, and a few months later, after my son was born, I took off my hat.

That was the moment I started talking back to my culture. It was the moment I started paying attention to myself. That moment, I believe, was the beginning of my feminist journey.

For the most part, this feminist journey has seemed like a public one. I have since been involved in many organizations, completed a doctorate on gender, education, and society, written four books about gender, taught gender in places around the world and spoken at dozens of conferences, and most recently tried my hand at politics. It's a story of advancing social change for women in a very public way.

Yet, what I realized as I contemplated the path of these past 25 years is that there is also a very personal story as well, one that I do not often write about, but which is no less significant.

I was sitting with a dozen other women in Gloria's living room in Jerusalem, the board members of Mavoi Satum, listening to an extraordinary speaker. The year was 1998, and the speaker had my attention. Her name is Dr. Karen Abrams Gerber, a brilliant and clairvoyant coach and facilitator specializing in gender issues and organizational life who has since become a cherished friend. She had come to teach us about the dynamics of leadership among women, and what she said completely threw me off guard.

"What brings you here?" she asked innocuously at first.

I thought to myself; *I know exactly why I'm here.* We were there to help *agunot*. Isn't it evident?

"But why are *you* here?" Karen asked us again, looking, it seemed, at each one of us. It felt like such an easy question to answer. *There is a terrible injustice in our midst, and we are here to fix it. Simple.* We wanted to help women, to ease women's suffering, and to bring justice and equality to the divorce system in Israel. We were engaged in the process of advancing social justice in the Jewish world. We went around the room, explaining what felt like the obvious.

"Those are all lovely answers, but that's not what I'm asking," Karen replied. "I mean *you*. Why are *you* here, working on this issue?"

I didn't understand. Karen turned to me. "Elana, you're not an *agunah*. None of you are *agunot*. Not one of you! So why are *you* here doing this work? Why do you identify so strongly with these women? Why do these women, of all the people suffering in the world, grab hold of your emotions this way?"

The questions stumped me because I had never thought about it that way. Karen was right. For one thing, she introduced us to the question of whether we were objectifying others. That was a big *aha!* moment for me. But it was more than that. There are a lot of people suffering in the world, and yet this was where I felt the urgency of putting my attentions. I did not know why. My husband did not abuse me, and I was not filing for divorce. I didn't have a close friend or a neighbor or a sibling who was an *agunah* at the time. There was no palpable reason why I should identify specifically with *agunot* instead of, say, starving children or tortured animals, or victims of the Rwandan civil war. I couldn't readily explain why I was dedicating tens of hours of volunteer time each week to this organization dealing with this almost obscure problem of chained women. At the time, I had no real tools to investigate the answer, either.

"You need to ask yourselves why you identify with *agunot*," Karen said. "And, by the way," she added, "it's a good idea for you to invite actual *agunot* to join your board."

She was right, of course, on both counts. I was both perplexed and ashamed in my new and unseasoned self-awareness. I knew then – though I know better now – that the answer to this question was vital for me to understand myself and my life, but it would take me many years to find a real answer. Still, this event set that process in motion.

It set other vital processes in motion, too. The conversation taught me how patronizing it was for us to be helping people who had no seat at the table, who were still voiceless “others.” It taught me about the challenges that women sometimes have in really listening to one another instead of just assuming that we know what the other person is going through. Mostly, Karen’s session taught me one of my first real lessons in the idea that the personal is political: Everyone in the room had a personal story, a reason for getting involved in this issue. We may not have been *agunot* in the classic sense, but something about being chained to *halakha*, chained to men’s will, resonated with all of us – and scared or outraged us all enough to make it our life work. And while it was possible to try and do the work of social justice without delving into our own stories, that path of working on society without addressing our own spirits and traumas would end up being majorly flawed.

It took me a long time to figure out the answer to Karen’s questions – I would say, probably 15 years. It took a lot of unpacking and journaling, and more than a few painfully confronting events in my life, for me to have the courage to say the truth about how I felt about my life.