

SCREENGRAB FROM "ESTHER BRONER, A WEAVE OF WOMEN"



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## A very progressive Passover: how I became a Jewish feminist convert

The feminist activist and writer Esther Broner called Judaism's old patriarchal order into question by writing her own women's ceremony for Passover.

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BY [ELEANOR MARGOLIS](#)

Despite their traditional Jewish wedding in the Seventies, my parents raised my siblings and me without the slightest hint of religion. Some time after putting on a white dress and making various promises in Hebrew to honour my dad, my mum –

one of the fiercest women I've ever known – gave birth to me and promptly taught me never to take shit from anyone. Especially men.

As a kid, the closest I came to recognising a higher power was when my dad would threaten to “phone God” whenever I misbehaved. Then again, I wasn't entirely sure who or what God was. Likewise, the closest I came to a religious experience was tasting my mum's chopped liver and listening to Woody Allen's Moose routine.

By the time I was old enough to understand what feminism was and recognise that *I* was a feminist, I was convinced that nothing could be more misogynistic than the Abrahamic religions – three faiths that are patriarchal to their core.

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I'm still not entirely convinced that women can reconcile their Jewish faith (as opposed to culture) with their feminism, but, having watched *Esther Broner: A Weave of Women*, a documentary featured in this year's London Feminist Film Festival, I'm far more open to the idea.

Esther Broner, who I'd never even heard of until recently, was a Jewish American author, academic and activist. She was also a feminist. A big one. From Gloria Steinam (a friend of Broner's) to Betty Friedan, a striking number of American Jews played key roles in Sixties and Seventies "second wave" feminism.

Broner wasn't so much a key player – her name certainly never came up in the "women's stuff" module of my history GCSE – as a fascinating and, nowadays, undervalued character. Her most significant contribution to the cause, and the focus of *A Weave of Women*, was her creation of what's thought to be the first ever women-only Passover Seder.

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As someone who went to her first ever Seder earlier this year, I can hardly claim to be an expert in Jewish rituals. What I do know is this: in a traditional Seder, gender roles are as rigid as the tile-like slats of matzo (that's "unleavened bread" to the goyim) that sit in the middle of the dinner table. The man of the house reads from the Haggadah (basically the Passover instruction manual) while the role of women is entirely domestic. They cook matzo ball soup and rid the entire house, sometimes using a cotton bud, of all traces of chametz (leavened bread).

The irony here, one that Broner clearly recognised, is that Passover is a celebration of emancipation. For anyone who didn't pay attention in RE at school, the Passover story is the one where the Israelites leg it out of Egypt where they're being *rudely* enslaved.

In 1976, the year of the first women's Seder, Broner took the Haggadah and applied its focus on deliverance and revolution to the struggle for women's rights. The Plagues of Egypt became "patriarchy" and "bad sex". The "vermin" referred to in the story, usually thought to be lice, were transformed into – decades later, when the women's Seder had become a regular fixture – George W Bush and, err, Mel Gibson.

Broner also applied what she saw to be the radicalism of the Seder to the battles fought by other oppressed people in the US and worldwide. Not only a woman, but a Jew, Broner's sense of double "otherness" afforded her insight into the plight of, for example, black Americans who were campaigning for equality. This empathy, of course, was shared

by many other Jewish women (and men) who were quick to align themselves with the civil rights movement.

In a patchwork of amateur footage of Broner's Seders, and retrospective interviews with Gloria Steinem and other members of the matriarch's feminist "coven", director Lilly Rivlin (who was involved in the women's Seders herself) tells the story of a woman who may not have revolutionised Judaism, but certainly called the old patriarchal order into question.

The footage of the Seders, mostly from the Eighties, is a visual love letter to women with big glasses, even bigger hair and an *even bigger* sense of fun. There's singing, dancing and a whole lot of fucking the patriarchy. Intellectually speaking, at least. And actively using Judaism to fuck that patriarchy is a little bit like carving a dildo out of cheese and trying it out on your vegan girlfriend.

But Broner's Seder was very much of its time. In *A Weave of Women*, Rivlin captures a distinct moment in feminist history – one in which there was a strong, almost spiritual, emphasis on woman-on-woman love (not necessarily the lesbian kind, but yeah, I guess a lot of that was going on) and the political potency of "weaving" together women through ritual. There's a lot of stuff with incense and wands, which I dearly hope was an ironic joke about feminists being "witches", but, well, may have been at least a little bit in earnest. The way I see it, feminism has a place in spirituality, but spirituality has absolutely no place in feminism.

By the Nineties, attendance at the women's Seder had thinned out significantly and Broner's last Seder, sometime before she

died in 2011, was notably poorly attended. In this particularly moving scene, we see an elderly and ill Broner conducting the Seder sat next to her granddaughter, someone to whom she very clearly passed on her Jewish feminist philosophy.

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In the women's Seder, the protagonist of the Passover story isn't Moses, but his older sister Miriam. Broner dealt cleverly and poetically with the erasure of the female contribution to Jewish emancipation. But *The Women's Haggadah*, which she wrote in the Seventies, wasn't published until the early Nineties. At which point Hasidic women didn't start burning their sheitels (wigs) and demanding freedom from domestic slavery.

Jewish feminism may never have the same draw as, say, Taylor Swift feminism (whatever the hell that is) but I'm, theoretically at least, a convert.

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