

NYMA NEWS

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Books, a Life

A Scholar Reflects

@ Spring Conference

by HALLIE CANTOR

Acquisitions, Yeshiva University

Ah, books. They're our very lifeblood, our *raison d'être*. But for how much longer?

The love – and future -- of books was the topic of NYMA's Spring Conference, held Wednesday, May 20th, at the Rabbi Arthur Schneier Park East Day School. Guest speaker Phyllis Chesler – feminist scholar, author, and columnist – eloquently discussed a life and love for the printed word.

Goodbye to All That

The conference began with a changing of the guard: Roz Friedman, NYMA's incoming president, read aloud a "farewell letter" from her predecessor Leslie Monchar, who was away at a double graduation ceremony. In her letter Leslie fondly acknowledged her past two years as NYMA leader and the contributions of her fellow board members.

Roz then introduced Phyllis Chesler, author of noted works as *The Death of Feminism*, *The New Anti-Semitism*, and, her most recent, *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*, which describes a radical feminism gone dangerously awry. (Co-author of her *Women of the Wall*, Rivka Haut, had kindly filled in for an ill Ms. Chesler at last year's Fall Conference.)

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Baruch Habah!

Taking on the presidency of NYMA at this time is something I do with great trepidation. Times are tough, even worse than they were a year ago. Many of our colleagues find themselves out of work; others, like me, are working abbreviated hours due to budgetary constraints at their places of work. Still others continue in their current jobs but have no budgets with which to work.

As I write this, I am reflecting on AJL in Chicago, where it was good to see colleagues who have been a wonderful source of support all these years. This is an awesome group from whom I have learned so much over the years that it is unimaginable to think of not being able to draw on your collective knowledge.

I have received a letter from the Avi Chai Foundation announcing the official end of the Bookshelf Grant Program that has enabled those of us who work in high schools to do some truly wonderful things for the duration of the grant. Nina Butler, representing the Bookshelf program, addressed us at AJL to speak about how far we have come. Participating libraries are now using OPALS for their catalogs and are all able to network with one another and share resources. I hope this will help sustain us through this difficult period.

Future conferences and workshops are in the planning stages and I am confident that there will be wonderful programs in the coming year. I look forward to seeing you all there.

Roz Friedman
(New) President, AJL-NYMA

“There is Much to Be Done”

The following is the “farewell letter” of departing NYMA president Leslie Monchar.

I am unable to be with you this afternoon for a very good reason. I am attending the graduation of UMDNJ. I am privileged to witness my daughter-in-law, Elana, receive her M.D. degree, and my daughter, Sarah, receive her Physician Assistant Certified/M.S. degree. They have worked so hard for the past several years and I am so proud of their achievements.

But there are many others who have worked very hard over the past several years, too. And, I am referring to the many who have volunteered countless hours to our professional organization, AJL, and specifically, our local chapter, NYMA. Dear board members, it has been both a privilege and a pleasure to work with you these past two years. You have been generous with your advice, and I have learned much (though I admit, I still feel like a novice, not one of the old-timers). And, along the way, I feel we have become more than colleagues: we have become friends.

At the beginning of my administration, we set out to accomplish several goals. Not all have been met; there is plenty of work left for Roz to complete. Probably the biggest project of all is the reworking of the chapter constitution. Maybe that can be done during the next two years.

There have been several innovations, however. The first is that our banking and financial records have become more streamlined. Thank you, Joyce and Marlene, for making sure that this happened. And thank you, Joyce, for keeping the records and using those GoogleDocs!

Secondly, I would like to thank Steven Bernstein, who manages our NYMA website. If you haven't seen it lately, it is worth a few minutes' time at the computer. All the information about our chapter can be easily found in one address. And, also thanks to the new technology, we digitally record all of our meetings and workshops. Steven then uploads the files onto our website, so if you miss a workshop, you may listen at your leisure at home. It is the next best thing to being there!

And, finally, speaking of technology – NYMA is going “green.” Our flyers and all publicity is now sent electronically (thank you, Rita and Chaya). Our NYMA news is now delivered via e-mail to our members. This saves trees and NYMA dollars as well. Thank you, Hallie, for putting it all together so beautifully.

There is much to be done. We are going through some tough economic times. Now, more than ever, we must support each other. So, please volunteer. Trust me, you get out much more than you put in.

Roz, thank you. You have always graciously come to my aid. I hope that I can help you as much as you have helped me. But now the gavel is passed to a new administration . . . *mazel tov* to Roz Friedman, new president of AJL-NYMA.

(Conference, cont'd from Pg. 1)

Ms. Chesler covered quite a few issues: reading as a way of life, the onslaught of non-print technology, and its social and intellectual repercussions. In addition she mentioned her own activism and her confrontation against the raging liberal agenda. Her speech is reprinted here, with photos, courtesy of her own blog and website <http://www.phyllis-chesler.com/blog/>.

Like you, I love books. I love our sacred Jewish texts and the many splendid commentaries that accompany them, but in truth: all leather-bound, gold-embossed books call out to me. Verily, I am a person of the Book. I read them, I write them, I consume them. I love libraries, their respect for work done in silence and solitude, the

quiet solicitousness of librarians, their efficiency and kindness. I love fine writing, great writing, the kind that lasts.

Enchanted

A book lover lives an enchanted life. She is someone who can, in an instant, escape her ordinary life, travel to any country on earth, time-travel to any century; she can enter a peasant's hut or a king's bedroom, witness a childbirth, a love affair, a murder, a coronation.

A book lover is someone who is never exactly lonely, someone who probably believes that fictional characters are more real, more alive, than “real” people are, and that their stories are as important as the stories of our “real” lives. If I want to know something about someone, I'll find out what

books they've read or are reading. Then, I'll inquire about their childhoods.

I admit it. I eat books. I possess them. I write in the margins and on the blank front and back pages. I plant my post-its everywhere. Unlike a librarian, I am no longer willing to lend my books out. They are part of my daily life. At any given moment, my writing might require just that book. Also: They are so . . . "used," so lovingly battered. How can they unashamedly leave home? In my lifetime, whenever I've made a major geographic move, I have been forced to



SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE - NYMA's new president Roz Friedman introducing Ms. Chesler.

give away books—anywhere from 2,000-10,000 at a given time.

Once, 1000 books of mine were held up at the Khyber Pass—but that's a story for another day. Actually, I have written about this adventure in one of my books and may expand it into a memoir. You may find it in my book, *The Death of Feminism. What's Next in the Struggle for Women's Freedom.*

I began reading when I was three and writing when I was eight. My first poem was published when I was seventeen and my first article when I was twenty-three. I decided to get a PhD and became a professor-psychotherapist (a "Viennese witch-doctor") in order to support my writing habit.

Changes

I've been publishing for nearly 50 years now. I've published thirteen books and

written fifteen. I've worked with many major publishing houses. As we all know, many things have really changed. There's a lot less money lying about. Newspapers are shutting down. Small bookstores are shutting down. The chains rule. Buying online rules. Discounts rule. Even some library branches are shutting down.

But mainly, I fear that books, and the habits of thought that reading shapes, the time it takes to shape such habits of thoughtfulness, may rapidly be going out of style. Technology, youth, and marketplace demands have conspired in the minimization of books as we've known them. I fear that one day, our books may reside in museums, not in libraries.

Younger people prefer books on Kindle and online. Even in an era of book clubs, people still prefer quick books, easy books, books with a "point," especially books by celebrities which are often ghostwritten by ghosts who are not great writers. Books that can be listened to while driving, books that are easy to market, books that "sell," books that can be turned into blockbuster movies, videos, small *Youtube* sensations, maybe even into tee-shirt logos. Some people prefer blogs, others Twitter.



READING SIGNS? - "I fear that one day, our books may reside in museums, not in libraries."

I fear our traditional aesthetic and intellectual standards, for fact checking and for the quality of writing, have plummeted. Short is now sweet, long is out. Anything goes on the internet. There's no mediator, no editor, no expert, no grown-up in charge.

We are shortchanging the coming generations by accustoming them to books-as-information, books packaged as entertainment, preferably presented visually—easy for
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(Conference, cont'd from pg. 5)

people with a culturally enforced attention deficit disorder, or who multitask while they read (!) – this is the rapidly incoming fashion. Everyone's articles can be published online whether or not they have been edited for grammar or accuracy. Is this democracy in action or the triumph of Big Lies and foolish vanity? Clearly, it's both.

The truth is: I love blogging. I publish 3 articles a week, every week. Such deadlines demand enormous discipline. I read 10 to 20 newspapers and an additional 40-50 articles every day in order to be "up on the news." I do this because there are moments in history when writers (who might rather be working on long books) must take a visible, immediate, and ongoing stand against evil and injustice. This is one of those moments. The internet allows me to do so.

Disenchanted

What happens when a writer evolves, deepens, or changes her mind about certain things? What happens when a writer -- this one -- decides to stand up for the Jews, for Israel, for America, for the truth, for the virtues and traditions of Western civilization? What happens when a writer decides to oppose fascism and totalitarianism? And to criticize Islamic gender and religious apartheid and jihad—and will still not surrender her feminist ideals?

Why, all happy hell breaks loose.

And then I spoke freely about how ideas matter and about the consequences of sharing ideas with the world. I did a brief reading from *The New Anti-Semitism*. It is unconscionable that such gentle, educated, Jewish people are still the targets of so much hate. Yes, Jews are also thieves and scoundrels, but they are in the minority.

One woman, who turned out *not* to be a librarian, asked me to comment on the Golden Age in which Jews, Christians, all lived together in harmony. I told her that many scholars now strongly dispute this. We had quite a spirited discussion.

One librarian said that she'd lived in Israel but, after fifteen years, had missed her family in New York and had returned. She admitted that once, she'd had dreams about peace that have been chipped away at, tarnished, even shattered. She asked me what I thought about this.

Don't give up your dreams or your ideals. Simply allow reality a place at the table. Anyway, Jewish dreams, Jewish ideals belong to a Messianic Age. We are not there yet. Our job is to take up our places in the great chain of Being, to "love or regard our neighbor as we love and regard ourselves," to be kind to others, try to do no harm, to do some good on earth, and to walk humbly with God.

All the rest is commentary.

(Reference workshop, cont'd from pg. 3)

mate area of university study, foster the revival of Jewish life in Russia, and discover and describe all Jewish-related materials held in the archives of the FSU.

Contrary to what we might have thought, Judaica publishing is flourishing in the FSU. Close to 2,000 quality books on Jewish topics in the Russian language have been published in recent times, including *siddurim* and other religious books; publications on Jewish history, culture, and traditions; fiction translated from Yiddish and Hebrew; and several periodicals. (The only genre not represented was children's books.) The market for Judaica written in Russian is not

only for residents of the FSU, but also Russian and former Soviet emigrants in North America and in Israel, where considerable numbers of Russian-speaking *olim* have lacked previous exposure to Jewish books. Dr. Fishman brought a cartload of books with him and passed them around, so that even those who could not read Cyrillic, could appreciate the variety of publications.

The Reference Workshop broadened the horizons of all who attended, reminding us that the world of Judaic librarianship is wide, which we may forget as we work day to day in our own familiar spaces.