

## EMERGING FROM THE MARGINS OF HISTORY

## Writing women into the past - and the future

“HISTORY is not the past – It is the record of what’s left on the record.”

It was Hilary

Mantel, the Man Booker Prize-winning English writer who penned these words; who implores us to deploy the same reserves of consideration for those who write the stories of history, as the history itself.

Indeed, the stories confined to the annals of history say as much about the historical figure or event, as the person who wrote it. The way in which we view the world is inevitably shaped by our personal perspectives, coloured by our experiences and our biases. These factors are inextricably bound not just to how we understand and interpret; but what information we – as individuals, and as a society – deem to be important, and what we do not.

According to the English historian and author Dr Bettany Hughes, while “women have always been 50 per cent of the population, they only occupy around 0.5 per cent of recorded history”.

I recently spoke at the National Council of Jewish Women (Victoria) Mina Fink Lecture. While Dr Margaret Taft recaptured and celebrated the achievements of a woman who wowed, Mina Fink, I reflected on the broader context of women in history. It was a moment to consider why Mina, and so many other remarkable women of our local – and global histories – have been largely denied their pages in the canon or had their accomplishments relegated to the shadows. It is long overdue that we examine the impact of these omissions, and how we can reclaim our women and their stories to positively affect our futures.

They are just stories. Why do they

Now, more than ever before, barriers are being broken down. But some remain, with dominant narratives still monopolising the historical landscape and drowning out other stories.

matter though? As the features editor and a news journalist at *The AJN*, I am at times met with this derision expressed by others. Stories are my everyday, my life. And they are yours too – perhaps more than you even realise. They are more than this week’s newspaper, or a book gathering dust. They are the stories of us, the cornerstones of how we construct our identity.

As Jews, we know this too well. We read the Megillah to remember Purim; the Haggadah to recall our struggle in Egypt; and each Shabbat, we read another parashah. The Torah is not just our oral law, it is our story, the story of the Jewish people through elation and exile, preserved and shared from generation to generation. It keeps us rooted in our past, so that we can flourish into the future. But imagine if we did not have it? What would Jewish identity look like without being anchored by our story?

In *Modern Women’s History: A Historiography*, historian Professor Karen Sayer wrote, “The history of



women ... had been obscured, hidden and lost, because no one had taken an interest, no one had recorded it, it was not written; women were not, it had been believed, the legitimate subjects of history.”

Because, she continued, “the prevalent view had been that historians should only be concerned with change and with major political and economic movements ... while women, if they conformed to their ascribed feminine roles, did not play a decisive role in such processes”.

But this was not always the case. In fact, when we venture way back to pre-history, we see the antithesis to this modern construct of the place of women. Have you ever been to the Israel Museum? Walking through the artefacts, what do you notice about the figurines from the Late Stone Age, through the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age? Many are those of women. Indeed, women form around 90 per cent of figurines from the period between around 40,000 BCE and 5000 BCE. But then as pre-history clicks over into history, our girls largely begin to disappear. So, what happened?

“At the birth of civilised society, you have these very highly productive and sophisticated settlements, with women having great status; they are high priestesses, they have property rights and own land, they write poetry – but these new civilisations want to expand,” explained Hughes.

A celebration of femininity does not fire up a civilisation on burgeoning expansion. And as

society became more militarised, the balance of power shifted. Consider the arrival of powerful warrior gods in archaeology and literature – *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, narratives which are representative of “the gear change in how we are told the story of humanity,” said Hughes.

This becomes the new norm, “whereas previously a measure of achievement might have been the physical survival of the community, and of quality of life, it is now expansion and success. Women’s roles remain diminished”, she added. And they do so for quite a while – until the 1970s when new feminist historians began retrieving women from beneath the cloak of invisibility.

Up until this point, “history had largely been written about men or men’s interest, or rather, that it had been bounded by dominant constructions of masculinity and rooted in what has since come to be called separate spheres ideology,” asserted Sayer.



Photo: Seregeybogachuk/Dreamstime.com

“Those who wrote the history decided what was significant, and what the legitimate objects and subjects of study should be. As it was largely white, middle-class, men who were the recognised ‘historians’ – leaving aside the past as represented outside of the academy – women were as a consequence excluded from history.”

Of course there are exceptions, female figures of strength and sass who are documented, and challenge the status quo. The Greeks’ Athena, Saraswati in the Hindu tradition, Seshat from Ancient Egypt. Of course there are our matriarchs and movers and shakers: Esther who led her people to freedom, and Deborah the prophet and judge. In more modern times we see women such as Joan of Arc and Marie Curie.

But other women are portrayed as the overly-sexualised seductress – think Cleopatra or Helen of Troy, Eve or Mary Magdalene. Comparatively overall, the stories of women are cast to the margins, deemed unfit for a lead role in the narrative.

The margins are a place where I like to play.

Some years ago, I undertook honours in history, and this is where I was taught to look. Whose story has not been told? Why is that? Who has been telling the story? What can you contribute to this historiography?

In this age of democratic history; oral history is the great equaliser, giving voice to those who previously lacked the literacy to tell their story, those denied access to education because of their socio-economic status, skin colour, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Now, more than ever before, barriers are being broken down. But some remain, with dominant narratives still monopolising the historical landscape and drowning out other stories.

Take the Melbourne Jewish community for example, where the post-war Polish experience is the popularised and pre-eminent account dictating the historical discourse. Yes, it is a huge part of the

collective identity of our community (as it should be) – home to the largest number of Holocaust survivors, per capita, anywhere outside of Israel – but focusing too narrowly on one narrative inherently marginalises others.

I examined this further in my honours thesis, which investigated why our post-Soviet Jews – the largest immigrant group in our Jewish community – are so narrowly represented in our public spaces.

Similarly, as a journalist, I am always looking for stories on the periphery. Earlier this year, I wrote a feature article about Abby Stein, the first openly transgender woman raised in a Chassidic community. Born into Brooklyn’s Vizhnitz sect, the only books that Abby was exposed to were strictly moderated religious texts. She recalled that as a child, she felt a profound uncomfortableness in her identity. Yet, she was bereft of the tools, vocabulary and language required to even remotely describe or understand her inner turmoil, and was isolated from the knowledge and support to address it. Because of the parameters of such a heavily cloistered community, the idea of homosexuality is almost unknown, and the concept of gender identity is completely unheard of, told Abby. She went on to detail her struggle in breaking free, and coming to understand her own identity.

Abby’s example illustrates the challenges of not having access to a similar experience as a point of reference, shared in the public space. Her story further underscores the important role of a newspaper – to include the stories that have the potential to reach individuals. To enlighten, inform, educate, normalise. Imagine the impact of reading Abby’s story for a teenager who is undergoing a similar internal struggle? Suddenly they are a little less alone, and a little less isolated.

Abby’s story is just one which highlights the importance of sharing the “less popular” stories. Annette Matov is another example. In a

feature last year, she courageously shared her very personal story of losing her sister to suicide with me.

Then there was Dana Pinhasov who told me about the day a suicide bomber boarded her bus in Jerusalem, the severe injuries she incurred, and her road to survival.

Rita Migdal shared with me her story of losing her family in the Holocaust, only to find herself on a harrowing voyage aboard the infamous Exodus.

Ros Ben Moshe spoke on how she got through bowel cancer with laughter and mindfulness.

And a woman, whom we shall call Rachel, choked back tears as she recounted the years of domestic violence and sexual abuse she experienced at the hands of her then-husband.

These are all stories of women in our local and global Jewish community – powerful, inspiring, sad, triumphant – and the act of telling their stories allows for the breaking of stereotypes, taboos, and instead gives visibility and power. It is a proud owning and assertion of identity.

Tayyibah Taylor is the founder and editor-in-chief of *Azizah*, the first-ever magazine to focus on Muslim American women’s perspectives and experiences. She said, “We can either allow others to tell our stories; or we can tell our stories ourselves.”

Yes, we can.

As journalists, and historians, communal organisations and corporations.

From the pulpits of our shules, and from our classrooms.

As mothers and daughters – and fathers and sons; telling the stories of our women to our family, friends, colleagues – and anyone who will listen.

Because by validating and celebrating our women and their stories from the past, we pave the way for our women of the future.