

# The JAP

## Reclaim Her or Reject Her?

by Alana Newhouse

**L**ast year, I inadvertently came out of the closet. No, not that closet. Mine, I suppose, was a closet full of the best clothes and the most gorgeous shoes. I had outed myself as a Jewish American Princess.

It was in an interview given for a book on Jewish journalism. The discussion ranged from the relevance of the Jewish laws to news reporting, to the current state of Jewish fiction, to reconciling ideas of art and Jewish law in the Orthodox community. But, judging from the feedback I received, what sparked the most interest was a series of questions about my personal background. As I explained, I grew up in a modern Orthodox community, attended yeshiva through 12th grade, and at one time or another have exhibited many of the traditional accoutrements of the stereotypical girl from Long Island's "Five Towns": great clothes, even better shoes, nose job at 16, dark curls blown straight weekly.

"I grew up in Lawrence," I was quoted as saying. "To this day, I can do a better French manicure than any French manicurist you can get in Manhattan. I can put lipliner on in a dark cab. . . . I'm a well-honed JAP."

More than a year later, I'm still not sure why I made this comment on the record (and yes, I wince when I read it now). I certainly didn't mean it to present the full picture of me; in addition to my sartorial interests, I have avid intellectual, emotional and psychological ones. Perhaps, I wondered soon after the interview was published, I thought it might round me out, make me seem edgier or hipper than just some nerdy girl toiling away in the office of a Jewish newspaper.

Whatever I was angling for, I did not expect the rather fierce criticism I received in response, from both women and men whom I held in great regard. (There weren't many of them; as someone joked, this book about Jewish journalists would likely have the same number of readers as interviewees.) At 29, I have been for some time, and hope to remain, a proud feminist—not post-feminist or proto-feminist or paleo-feminist or what have you—as well as a very proud Jew, one so insatiably curious about her religion and culture that she devoted her professional life to it. Yet, according to some, I had just identified

myself with one of the most misogynist, anti-Semitic slurs in modern history.

So why did it feel so right?

Over the past year, I began hearing the term used more and more. I received galleys for a book titled *The JAP Chronicles*, a novel by Isabel Rose out in May from Doubleday; Rachel Factor, a Japanese-American actress who converted to Judaism, began touring the country with a one-women show titled "J.A.P."; I read that the Style Network was casting for a show called "JAP Squad," for which an executive sent out an e-mail looking for "girls who know where to go in NYC for the best deals, who know the nail salons, the bakeries, the spas, the nice places, too." Perhaps even more interestingly, a slew of new novels were guided by Jewish female protagonists evincing equally strong strains of intellectualism and material interests; one, in Julius Lester's excellent *The Autobiography of God*, is even described as "first-generation American, child of Holocaust survivors; fluency in Yiddish, Polish, Hebrew, Aramaic; ordained rabbi, therapist, and beneath it all, the soul of an editor at Vogue."

Clearly something was going on—after years of taboo, consumerism was once again being connected with Jewish identity—and, in this trend, I was no mere observer.

**A**s readers of this magazine well know, the term "Jewish American Princess" emerged in post-World War II America (though, as Riv-Ellen Prell argues persuasively in *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble Between Jewish Women and Jewish Men*, the basic stereotype has existed, under different names, for more than a century). Usually portrayed as the daughter of an upwardly mobile, doting immigrant father, the Jewish American Princess—embodied prominently by Herman Wouk's "Marjorie Morningstar" and Brenda Patimkin in Philip Roth's "Goodbye Columbus"—was on the receiving end of the best in life. And, like all stereotypes, she embodied a variety of contradictory traits, all negative—shallow yet supremely powerful, sexually



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frigid yet knowledgeable enough to use sex as a tool of manipulation, stupid yet cunning enough to always get her way.

Feminists, including those associated with this magazine, waged battles against the JAP stereotype for years, but its Waterloo appears to have come in 1987, with the emergence of a fierce strain of JAP-baiting on college campuses. The examples ranged from offensive—graffiti, “Slap a Jap” T-shirts, anti-JAP rap song lyrics—to the downright frighten-

ing, including housing ads warning “No JAPS” and one particularly vicious newspaper cartoon that advised readers to exterminate the JAPS by “setting up trucks offering bargains, collecting the JAPS as they scurried in, and dropping them over a cliff.”

“[Ten years ago,] we optimistically believed that the changing reality of Jewish women’s lives would consign these negative images to the garbage can of history,” read an editorial in

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this magazine's famed fall 1987 issue on the topic. "Instead, what has happened is the opposite: they have gotten a new lease on life." Various theories were proposed for the term's resurgence; one of the most convincing was offered by Alan Dundes, the late Berkeley folklorist, who concluded that JAP jokes—which he claimed emerged in earnest in the late 1970s—were likely a reaction to the feminist movement.

The stereotype was connected to a panoply of Jewish communal frights, from undermining the solidarity of the Jewish family and causing a rise in intermarriage to connecting the Jews with the Japanese ("Japs"), America's enemy in World War II and, in the 1980s, a feared economic rival. After a vigorous campaign by activists and communal organizations—which included the formation of an organization to study the portrayal of Jewish women in the media, known as the Morning Star Commission—the term did eventually subside. For a decade or so.

**T**hat particular decade—the 1990s—was a formative one for me. It began with my 14th birthday, and took me through my first lipstick, my first boyfriend, one great camp romance, one gold lamé skirt, my first successful piece of writing, my nose job, getting my driver's license, one visit to Auschwitz, two crises of faith, my first days at Barnard, two years of regular visits to Henri Bendel, the beginning of my politics, my first paycheck, my first career and my first pair of Chanel shoes.

I had come to think of myself as admirably complicated, a woman who enjoyed intellectual pursuits as much as material ones, and who had earned the right—and the money—to embrace my materialism. Although I could acknowledge the very good arguments made by Second Wave feminists about the history of the stereotype, they seemed neglectful of a very real sociological phenomenon. I *did* blow my curls straight week after week, I *did* have a nose job, I *did* have a closet full of great shoes, I *was* from Long Island (and still have the accent to prove it).

"But why aren't you just a consumerist then?" Riv-Ellen Prell asked me, during a rather spirited discussion. "What does being Jewish have to do with it?"

## **I had just identified myself with a terrible slur. So why did it feel so right?**

That's just it: My hair was blown straight not for weekdays, but on Fridays before Shabbat and the holidays; the most beautiful clothes were bought for shul, not for Saturday night. A very typical Friday afternoon with friends included lunch at Sabra Pizza and an afternoon of window (and actual) shopping, almost always in preparation for Shabbat. Nor was this ritual limited to girls; Wear Else?, a men's clothing store, was packed with guys trying on one awful-looking Coogi sweater after another, in what now appears to me to

have been one of the earliest hot spots of metrosexuality. (In fact, on the issue of clothing, my closest male friend always had me beat—and still does.)

"My identity as a 'Jewish daughter' was entangled with shopping," said artist and critic Rhonda Lieberman, "and infected with the JAP fantasy I'd internalized (and disavowed) about the importance, especially for a woman, of being the kosher-style incarnation of Thorsten Veblen's conspicuous consumer." In Lieberman, I found a kindred spirit, another woman struggling to make sense of a part of her own history that she found at once unattractive and unshakeable.

"I took it as an unwritten 'rule' that my subjectivity as a shopper had to be somehow quarantined from the 'serious' and valid, High-Culture, Art and Thought that would 'redeem' me," she once said in a speech on the topic. "Yet I soon discovered that questioning this taboo was the key to integrating parts of my experience and my self that threatened to cancel each other—and me—out. Not to reconcile them, but to let them coexist, honoring and appeasing each one."

When I asked Lieberman about the process, she referred to it as "a classic structure of integration. You reject certain early parts of your background and then when you're grounded, you can revisit those things and—through choice—decide whether or not you want to reclaim them," she explained.

**A**ccording to Lieberman, it is perfectly normal to examine a part of one's background and then—as an adult—decide whether to reclaim it or discard it. I agree. But this raises an obvious follow-up question: Why did I choose to reclaim it?

At one point in my discussion with Dundes, he mentioned that among children of immigrants in the postwar period it was popular to tell jokes that required the joke teller to acquire an overwrought Yiddish accent, usually at the punchline. According to some observers, beneath these seemingly harmless jokes ran an unseen rivulet of self-hatred; mimicking the Yiddish accent enabled the joke-teller—whose other sentences were presumably rendered in a normal "American" accent—to differentiate himself from his "foreign" parents. Perhaps this was true of me. Maybe calling myself a JAP, tongue-in-cheek, was a safe way for me to identify with my past while also remaining distant from it.

And maybe that's not a bad thing. For me, this process was never about embracing the stereotype, but about embracing a part of my past that, like it or not, fell under the rubric known as JAppiness. It may seem reprehensible intellectually, and the words of a weary Francine Klagsbrun repeatedly run through my head: "You think the fights are won. But things get won and then they get lost again." That's just it.

Sometimes, the fights are personal and individual, and there's just no way for women to win those except one at a time.

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# The Shame of the JAP

by Miriam Stone

**W**hen a Jewish woman comes to the table as a community activist in America—whether she wants to get involved with a campus environmental group or her local P.T.A.—certain assumptions precede

her. She is white, so she can't possibly understand the struggle of non-white minorities. She is Jewish, so she is probably wealthy and therefore distant from the "people's" struggle. If she wants to be taken seriously, she has to prove that she belongs, or no one will believe her. Trouble is, she probably doesn't believe it herself.

For many twentysomething Jews, growing up like me in more comfortable circumstances than our parents or grandparents, fitting in as activists often translates into hiding our backgrounds. And since Judaism today is associated with wealth, this often means distancing ourselves from Judaism as well. I went to college with a pot-smoking environmental science major who tried to pretend that he grew up in the ghettos of Oakland (rather than the wealthy hills) and would not admit that he was Jewish unless pressed. For him, being Jewish meant being bourgeois, a status he tried to conceal with his dreadlocks and ripped khakis. It was once uncool to be Jewish in America because Jews were poor and struggling. Now it's uncool because they aren't. The relationship between Jews and money is always shifting, and always uncomfortable.

Nowhere is this tenuous relationship more clear than in the popularization of the term JAP, or Jewish American Princess. I myself am guilty of throwing this term around, of substituting it for "sorority chick" or "spoiled brat." However, when I heard myself recently, and stopped to break it down, I realized that the term signifies much more than its common use, it is in its very essence about being Jewish. Although calling someone a WASP—a White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant—has come to connote something similarly negative, the actual words are simply descriptive; they contain no inherent bias. Yet JAP is an entirely different beast, and it all hinges on that last word: Princess. Princess—a daddy's girl, a member of the nouveau riche, an extravagant spender who doesn't deserve it, a member of the upper class who doesn't belong. Thin and well-dressed with pin-straight hair, a JAP carries the look of assimilation. But she can't be completely assimilated—who's ever heard of a *Jewish* princess?

In every way, the word JAP is about Jews trying to fit into a world in which they have historically never belonged. Yet the term has become so internalized that Jews are just about the only ones who use it. At an Upper West Side dinner party I attended with members of my parents' generation, the entire table launched into a diatribe against *them*—JAPs who live on

the Upper East Side, those self-absorbed, shopaholic social climbers who are defined by their sense of entitlement. Beneath this sharp hatred lurks the real meaning: "those women" are undeserving. Of course rich and powerful men, self-made or not, don't face the same ridicule and derision when their backs are turned.

But a JAP is only a JAP if she behaves a certain way. A friend of mine who grew up in the suburbs and attended an elite private school in Washington looks the part of a JAP. She wears designer clothes and makeup, her hair perfectly highlighted and blow-dried. When people first meet her, they often write her off as typical sorority chick. But their attitudes change when they learn that she's a graduate student in social work and wants to work with HIV-infected children. Aside from the physical stereotype, the term JAP carries with it a value judgment, a criticism of those who prioritize (or even who *appear* to prioritize) money, self-presentation and social status over making a difference in the world.

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But what about Jewish women who grew up poor and choose to become power players, lifting their families and themselves from the struggles they faced as children? Though they might be seen as more "deserving" of their wealth and status, they'll likely never be fully accepted or comfortable in the upper echelons of society, given their economic roots, their religion, and the fact that they are women. Jews, like women, aren't supposed to take up a lot of room. We shouldn't be loud or ostentatious, and we shouldn't be in power. As Jews in the U.S. have grown in economic status in this country, so have the evergreen conspiracy theories about Jews controlling the government or the media. And as Jewish women—mothers, daughters, and self-made businesswomen—have settled into wealth, the word JAP has come to life again in our everyday vocabulary, illuminating not only the discomfort of broader society with Jews' new-found status, but also our own.

I never thought it harmful to refer to someone as a JAP, yet I spent many of my college years ashamed to admit that I came from a wealthy suburb, or that I was related to a successful Cleveland family. It is this shame and division that keeps us from coming to the table as equals, as full members of society comfortable with our own positions and ready to take action to lift the bar for everyone. ●

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