

In the rapid-fire world we live in, more and more people are desperate for contemplative experience. Yoga and meditation, the slow-food movement, eco-living—all are drawing women in. Even more popular is writing: especially memoir. From San Francisco to Atlanta, workshops are proliferating, and they're packed with Jewish women. A lot of us seem to love writing about our lives as a means of thinking about, integrating and making sense (and art) of our experience. In shared rooms of our own we are thriving... and accomplishing a lot: writers' groups not only give us intelligent, empathic readers and friends of similar kidney, but deadlines, too—a gift not to be underestimated by dreamy procrastinators.

Jewish women are pretty gifted at yakking and offering support, at sharing intimacies and food, at working hard and taking—and giving!—criticism. That we are diving into writers' groups seems a natural.

What follows is an inside look at five writing groups. We thought you'd like a peek behind the scenes. Two "how-to's" are intended to help readers who think they might like to start their own.

– Susan Schnur

## Believing in Ourselves:

### “If You Can Write It, I Can Write It, Too.” BY KAREN PROPP

#### BOSTON

**A LONG TIME AGO, I WAS A GRADUATE STUDENT** in a university Creative Writing program. I was 26 and desperately wanted to become a writer. On the first day that the Poetry Workshop met, I arrived early and found myself alone in the room with the Famous Poet teacher. I sat down and tried to think of what to say. Here was my chance to have a minute's private audience with the Famous Poet about my work. I knew my poem would be discussed by the class that day—“workshopped”—and I

blue eyes on mine. “About your poem—”

I leaned forward to glean every pearly drop of wisdom.

“You can't use *that* word in a poem,” he said.

“What word?”

“Vagina.” He said it quickly and with some distaste. For emphasis, he raised a long, tapered palm in the air, and let it fall—slap—on the desk at which he sat.

I felt scared and shattered, but summoned up a rather smug retort. “I didn't use *that* word.”

The Famous Poet looked momentarily stunned. I could see the wheels turn in his head. Had he read it wrong? Did he have me confused with another student?

“The word I used,” I said, “was ‘ovaries.’”

“Oh. Well—not that word either.” He shook his head as

It wouldn't matter. The Famous Poet had already pronounced it wrong. What took root in me was the knowledge that the Famous Poet (and his male writer-peers) ruled what language was and was not permissible for me to use. There were other rules, too. While a piece was being workshopped the writer had to remain silent. We students competed to deliver the sharpest, most cutting criticism. Whatever you had tried to say or do in a particular piece was irrelevant. If you wanted to become a writer you had to learn that the only thing that mattered was what was on the page.

I excelled in my writing program. This had a lot to do with my ability to discern what would please the Famous Poet. It was only after I graduated that my writing problems began. Without the Famous Poet's judgments and opinions I no longer knew what I wanted to say or how I should say it. I drifted. I doubted. I despaired.

And then, by chance and good fortune, I found myself in a writers' group. We were four or five or six women from our

if trying to rid his mind of these strictly female, verboten words.

I sank into my chair. The other students filed in. I no longer remember what else was said about my poem that day.

**“In a single evening we might cover one writer's ob-gyn visit, another's new love interest, bio-diesel fuel, an alderman's race, and kitchen linoleum.”**

vacillated between a trembling fear that my poem (and I) would be judged stupid, and an exalted hope that it (and I) would be deemed brilliant.

The Famous Poet fastened his electric-

mid-20s to our late-40s. We met every Thursday night in one another's homes. Creative Writing program survivors all, we consciously sculpted our group against the critical norms under which we'd come of age as writers. We were supportive first, critical second. If someone was experiencing a life crisis, that person got the floor. We talked about obstacles to writing (time; money; fear; depression) as much as we talked about writing. The rule was you could talk about any topic as long as it held strong feelings for you. Fun and interesting were other prerequisites. In a single evening, we might cover one writer's gynecological visit, another writer's job offer, terrorism, a tantrum-ing child, bio-diesel fuel, a local alderman's race, kitchen linoleum, weight loss or gain, a new or old love interest, psychiatric medications—the free-ranging, ribald, and honest conversation in which women have always engaged in spaces where they feel safe.

Although our group tended to be comprised of mostly Jewish women, we were not ostensibly a Jewish women's writers' group. Yet you could say it displayed Jewish characteristics: uninhibited display of neurotic tendencies; well-honed analytic and storytelling skills; vigorous debate; abundant food; preoccupations with family relationships. And an intangible quality that seems the provenance of both Jews and writers: the sense that something is not entirely real until it's down on paper.

What about standards, excellence and hard work? How does a gal gaggle turn out published, award-winning work? Here's what I did not learn in graduate school. Stuff that's not on the page—writer talk—really matters. That's the arena where a writer hashes out her passions, discovers her voice, learns to fight for her subject. Men have always known this. Historically, they've found safe, public places in which to relax, like the British pub or the Viennese café, where they can discuss, debate, and joke. Women historically have had the kitchen, a place where conversation must compete with cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Writers' groups,

comprising several hours uninterrupted time, are a contemporary invention, akin to the kaffee klatch, slumber party, and ladies' night out.

In a writers' group, a person can find profoundly essential mirrors, and if the writer happens to be a Jewish woman, it's perhaps easier (though not necessary) to see herself in another Jewish woman. In my strong-bonded, long-term group, we all learn from and are shaped by the others. Writing styles and topics may coincide in the natural cross-fertilization that occurs, but much more important is to see how another writer handles the challenges

of a writer's life. Seeing a friend continue to believe in her work after 18 publishers' rejections is heartening. Watching another friend churn out 300 pages is a challenge worth taking up. Hearing that a third friend has rented a room in which to write is inspiring. Always the refrain is: *If she can do it, I can do it too.* ■

*Karen Propp is the author of two memoirs and the co-editor of Why I'm Still Married: Women Write Their Hearts Out on Love, Loss, Sex, and Who Does the Dishes. Her writing group meets in Cambridge and Somerville, Massachusetts.*

---

## HOW ONE GROUP WORKS

### Sharpening Our Pencils: Jewish Text Comes First... then Adrienne Rich BY SHELLY R. FREDMAN

#### NEW YORK

**I TEACH A WEEKLY, TWO-HOUR WRITING CLASS TO NINE WOMEN** and one man at the Skirball Center at Temple Emanu-El on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Skirball is exceptional for its commitment to teaching Judaism through the arts. It employs a visual artist to teach Jewish texts through drawing, painting and sculpture, and it employs me to do the same through writing.

I start each class by teaching a Jewish text—either something that the rabbi has given me and the visual arts teacher to work from, or—increasingly—something I come up with myself. After 30 minutes of discussing, say, Leviticus 19:1-18, “You shall not wholly reap the corners of your field”—during which I might offer some ancient context, rabbinic commentary or a dollop of contemporary critique—we sharpen our pencils for the integrative work to come: “What does ‘not reaping the corners of your field’ mean to *you*?” I might ask my students. “Are there things you possess that you never use? That you keep explicitly for others? Are there things you use entirely yourself, but perhaps shouldn't? What corners of *your* field remain ungleaned?” The writers work for 10 minutes, pulling from their own personal experience and committed to enlarging their lives by connecting them to sacred text.

Joseph Soloveitchik's *The Lonely Man of Faith* always inspires interesting work. In the first chapter, Soloveitchik describes the two versions of the biblical Adam—Adam 1 and Adam 2—found in Genesis's two disparate Creation stories. We write about the “Adam 1” part of ourselves—the part

that “masters” and “dominates”—and the “Adam 2” part of ourselves—the part that is “pure being.” One student (who, at 90-plus, is my oldest) wrote about herself at midnight. After her therapist’s practice is over and she has spoken to each of her children, she explained, she takes out her Adam 2—“pure being”—and chats with her long-deceased husband.

When we studied Exodus 6:6-7—“and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm”—one woman connected it to the experience of fainting on a New York subway and awakening in the hands of nearby, solicitous commuters. Another, when we studied the Havdalah blessings that speak of a God who “separates between holy and unholy, between light and dark,” connected the prayer to the Before and After moments when her daughter, crossing a street in Cambridge, MA, was hit by a car. When we studied the biblical text in which King Solomon, immediately after building the Temple in Jerusalem, asks, “But will God really dwell on Earth? Even the Heavens ...cannot contain You,” a woman with a super-palatial, Upper East Side apartment wrote of being 10 and discovering a “sanctuary” of climactic forest and swamp in Lexington, MA.

During the second hour of our class, we “workshop,” with kindness, each other’s manuscripts. Our work is generally material that has grown from classroom exercises and is being developed and polished. At the end of the year we publish a booklet. Tobi Kahn’s class and mine stage an art show and reading.

So what happens in these classes, after we study sacred text and then read aloud our truths and desires, our secrets and doubts, one voice layered upon

**“One writer connects Exodus 6:6 with the time she fainted on a New York subway.”**

another? Well. It starts to sound like prayer. We end up in a place that everyday conversation rarely touches. When you are given only 10 minutes in which to put

your newly generated thoughts down, trolling them through the 3,500-year-old collective wisdom of the Jewish people, you tend to outdo yourself. The process forces us beyond what we thought we knew about our stories, our lives, our world.

*This is not a memoir class, I must say.* I have taught memoir in university settings, and what distinguishes this class is that, first and foremost, we’re interrogating ancient Jewish text. The deep brilliance of the texts and the playfulness of the rabbinic imagination stand behind us, with us. The text becomes our Muse. And that tends to take us further in, beyond where we could go by simply documenting our lives.

Look. People in our rushing world don’t have time to sit with a thought, to look at their lives through a sacred lens, through a lens that’s not ironic and isolating. This class is about wrestling with some of life’s most important questions. In the process we become a deeply bonded community.

Adrienne Rich has said that women (and, I have to add, the occasional man) tend to be more willing “to dive into the wreck.” Deep down, where the treasure is. Perhaps women know best the urgency for that other Torah—the one still being written today. ■

*Shelly R. Fredman teaches writing at Skirball and Barnard College. Her work has appeared in Lilit, Best Jewish Writing 2002, The Chicago Tribune Magazine and elsewhere.*

## After Laura Died The Last Writers’ Group BY MARA SOKOLSKY

### PROVIDENCE

**A THICK, HEAVY SNOW HAD FALLEN THE NIGHT BEFORE** and by morning the air was icy. I shook the snow from my boots and gingerly entered the funeral home. I was a little surprised to be escorted to a dark, open space in the basement, where Ava and Diane already sat, huddled in their coats. It seems another body was laid out in the prep room, and until Laura could be ritually washed, she was waiting her turn in a tall refrigerator unit that sat in this space near the garage. The funeral home wasn’t used to people sitting there, but because Ava and Diane wanted to be as close to Laura as possible, the funeral director dutifully brought out folding chairs and a small heater, and my writing colleagues positioned themselves in front of the refrigerator.

I dragged in a third folding chair to help form a circle. Now we were complete. We began by singing a Yiddish song that I’d sung to Laura over and over when she’d been lying on her daybed in the living room, eyes closed, toward the end.

When Laura’s cancer came back, it wasn’t hard to change our monthly meetings to accommodate her chemotherapy schedule. We were a pretty informal group anyway. Sometimes we brought copies of our finished pieces, and other times we read from scribbled notes, torn hastily out of a notebook. Though we loved our writers’ group, it was understood that family life and work came first, and we were just impressed when any of us had the time to actually compose something.

Our group was first conceived in 1997. By that time, both my daughters were attending a Jewish day school and I was ready to go back to my early love of writing. Toward that end I found myself at a day-long writing seminar. It was held on a Saturday, at a local church. I remember feeling funny about being in church on Shabbat. At the far end of the meeting space, I noticed another mother

## On Taking Laura Seriously

### LAURA CHAKRIN CABLE'S "REAL" JOB WAS AS A CLINICAL SOCIAL WORKER,

and she struggled with the idea of taking herself seriously as a "writer." After she died, her family "kept stumbling across her poems, left tucked away in unlikely places—in files, in between outdated tax forms, in notebooks left on bookshelves throughout the house, in boxes in the attic," writes her daughter Anna in her afterword to *Crossing the Stream: Poems by Laura Chakrin Cable*, a tender, fastidious book that Laura's writers' group edited and brought to press after her death. Laura's husband Rob filled two shopping bags with these "found" poems and dropped them off with the writers' group. For the next few months, the women read poem after poem: Yes, no, maybe. They always lit two candles to welcome Laura's spirit to guide them, "just as we would welcome the Sabbath bride on Friday night," they note in the book's Foreword.

Laura had been the child of Holocaust survivors, but in life she'd been reluctant to share poems that spoke to the intensity of that experience. Some of these poems appear in *Crossing the Stream*, along with explicit poems called "Stage IV Breast Cancer," "Biological Clock," and "Why Is It Women Who Always Lose Their Voices?"

In the final days of Laura's life, Anna writes, "when I learned how to hook up IV tubes and read aloud to my mother as she had once read to me...[we] talked less often about shopping, weight, politics. More often than we ever had, curled up together with the pages spread around us on her bed, we read her poetry."

"Spirits sing/in sadness, inside me, incessantly—" one poem runs. "Delight!/in the forest/in our memory/You will find a true path!...I pray for cleansing,/purity of purpose;/I cross the stream."

Coterminous with the year of mourning ending, a first-rate volume, *Crossing the Stream: Poems by Laura Chakrin Cable*, was published. Below, a sample.

—Susan Schnur

### TRANSFERRING EDDIE'S HOURS

I'd listened for years:  
Dad had drowned on an August beach,  
Mom then threatened their fractured home.  
Eddie's booze, cocaine, the black dog.  
Sobriety, degree, job, woman, child.  
  
Tests, lapses, moving on.  
Hour beyond hour I'd held  
a steady mirror to his boyish cheeks  
and budding heart, those eyes  
that desired tomorrow—  
  
Till today, and my disclosure:  
"Unfortunately, my diagnosis  
is serious and uncertain.  
And so we must find you another  
therapist with more hours."

After quiet, he replied,  
"Will you have more hours, later?"

Truth ruptured.  
My jaws spasmed, my eyes spit.  
I'm sorry, I didn't mean this  
to happen, the quiver of lips,  
the tissues.

I never meant this,  
To have holes in my  
spine, my hold,  
my hours.

[Note: *Crossing the Stream* is available for \$15 from: Temple Emanuel, 99 Taft Avenue, Providence, RI 02906. Proceeds support The Chakrin Cable Family Youth Fund.]

I had chatted with casually outside my kids' school.

After the seminar, I walked over to her and found that she also was uncomfortable being in such a place on this day. We left the building together. On a whim, and more for dramatic flair than because I had any real idea what it entailed, I remarked, "Hey, do you want to start a writers' group?"

"Sure," she responded. "What do we need to do?"

I didn't really know, but I suggested that she think of someone else who might be interested and so would I, and that four members would be a good beginning.

It was. We started off meeting once a month, around someone's dining table or perched on living room couches. It turned out we were four Jewish women.

On the days when no one brought in anything to read, we chatted about our children, our childhoods, and sometimes our spiritual purpose. In our more productive months, we gravitated toward different genres. Ava brought in stories with a dark, decidedly offbeat flavor. Diane crafted vignettes from snippets of memory and occasionally tried her hand at a poem. I wrote personal essays about navigating my way through the brambles of grownup life. Laura, the child of Holocaust survivors, wrote poetry that often wound itself back to that primal loss, and to subsequent ones: her father's early death, her mother's illness, her own struggle to get well. As a group, we were definitely more poignant than funny. Needing tissues after hearing a piece was considered a good sign.

None of us had known Laura well when she was first diagnosed, which was long before the group started. Yet we had images from the poetry she brought in:

This journey unasked for:  
waters loud and shaking  
I stay afloat in a *tayva*  
woven with get-well notes  
and casseroles...  
Messages left like medicine  
on my answering machine

We knew she'd gone through treatment, worn bright headscarves, come out healthy. That was more than five years ago. So we weren't prepared to hear one day, sitting with banana muffins and two typed stories before us, that the cancer had spread to her bones. She would have

chemotherapy again, she said calmly. This time, she and her husband were going to a macrobiotic center to learn how that diet could help: they'd heard too many testimonials not to give it a try.

Our meetings continued. Laura brought in more poems now than before.

Her wig was becoming. Her skin looked good from her restricted diet. I simply assumed she'd get better.

For our August meeting, we swung on two porch swings on Diane's deck. Laura read a poem about traveling with her son to look at colleges, while we closed our

**"Sitting with banana muffins and two typed stories, we took in the news."**

eyes against the late afternoon light. We were all so glad she was traveling again.

Several months later, while lighting Chanukah candles with friends, Laura suddenly went incoherent, and a trip to the hospital revealed that the cancer had spread to her brain.

The meetings stopped. We sagged under the weight of the news. Our group members, as well as Laura's other close friends, were mobilized into staying with her at various times during the day so she wouldn't be alone. At first, it was almost luxurious to have several hours with nothing to do but hang out and talk with someone you really liked. But as the weeks went on, Laura was in more pain,

and there was less and less talking. By February she was fitful both waking and in sleep.

When the call came that Laura had died, I quietly panicked about being asked to sit with her body. According to Jewish practice, corpses are never left alone. It turned out to be a first time for Ava and Diane, too. After the Yiddish song, we recited some prayers that seemed appropriate. We read

excerpts from books on Jewish wisdom and Jewish mourning practice. We recited three of Laura's poems. We included her in our conversation because it was the last time she'd be present with our group.

The funeral director came in and gently inquired if we'd like to move somewhere warmer. We pulled up our collars and shook our heads. There was no question that this was the right place to be; the four of us together while it lasted. ■

*Mara Sokolsky is an Alexander Technique teacher and freelance writer in Providence, RI. She writes Mid/Yid, a bi-monthly column for the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent on midlife issues.*

## After Growing Up in a Orthodox World: Raising My Voice BY ESTHER MIZRACHI MORITZ

### AUSTIN

**I STAND WITH MY BACK PRESSED** against the cold glass of the sliding door, heart pounding, wishing to disappear. Uncle Ben towers above me, asking questions about school in his booming voice. I try to answer but it's no good. I can barely whisper.

"Is something wrong with you?" he asks. I press harder into the door, unable to take my eyes off of the bagel crumb on the floor next to his polished black loafer.

"What's wrong with her?" Ben bellows to my mother and father. "She won't talk to me. Come to think of it, I don't think

I have ever heard Esther's voice." I feel queasy. My cheeks are hot. My mother tells Ben to leave me alone and, as they quarrel, I open the sliding door a crack and slip through it into the backyard, avoiding contact with the relatives for the rest of the afternoon.

On the way home, my mother continuously complains to my father, "She's shy. Why should she talk to him anyway?... Plenty of children are shy.... How dare he!" Nobody asks how I feel. I sit silently staring out the subway-train window.

I swallow hard but the painful lump in my throat won't go away. At home, I go directly to the basement, sharpen my #2 pencil and take my diary out of hiding. My letters are wavy and uneven as I pour my feelings along with my tears onto its pink pages. Then, with a thin silver key, I lock the day's embarrassment in along with my dreams and fantasies, fictional stories and drawings, musings and random thoughts. I hold the book to my heart for a few seconds before returning it to its hiding place.

Fast-forward 30 years. I am an outspoken attorney and nobody believes that I am shy. I have a family and many friends. My colleagues marvel at my effortless ability

to write a convincing brief. Yet nobody knows about my other writings—the ones that continue to bubble up inside me and spill out into my journal and laptop.

I have just turned 40, my interest in legal work has faded, and my desire to write has become urgent. I have come to understand that my voice was silenced in the Orthodox, male-centered, Syrian-Jewish community where I grew up. It is only in my hidden writings that I feel safe to explore my true, authentic self.

I quit my legal job and sign up for Creative Writing I at the University of Texas, University Extension. There, I encounter a diverse group of 15 strangers who view my writing as “exotic.” They question me about being Jewish, about being a mother, about being 40. They don’t “get” me, and that gives me comfort. I feel safe because they are far removed from my “real life.” The classroom becomes my grown-up basement; my classmates extensions of my pink diary. Several of us sign up for Creative Writing II and III, and then III again. Before I am ready to stop taking classes, I run out of classes to take.

I continue to write on my own and tell almost no one. When friends ask, “What do you do all day when the kids are at school?” I blush and quickly change the subject. When pushed, I apologetically confess to writing and feel as though I’ve revealed a shameful secret. Somehow Leila, an acquaintance, finds out and asks me to join a writing group. The women in the group are in my “real” life—they are my age and they have children. They are members of my temple.

My heart pounds. Part of me wants to disappear. “No,” is what I intend to say to the invitation because the thought of her—or anyone—seeing my work is unbearable. Instead, I hear my voice responding loudly. “Thank you. I would love to.”

As I drive to the first meeting, I feel like I am about to shed a mask that has kept me safely hidden my whole life. Having been raised in a culture where women did not have permission to express themselves, I am sure my writings are insignificant and insufficient, at best. In revealing those writings—and with them, the most inti-

mate parts of myself—I wonder if I am about to expose something grotesque.

The first meeting is agony. The group discusses my work and I force a smile as I try to shake off the feeling that a band of strangers has entered my bedroom and is scrutinizing my naked body. The discomfort extends through many meetings, but I force myself to take notes dutifully on the group’s feedback, and go home to rework my manuscripts. At some point, I come to understand—and actually believe—that the group is not judging me. They care about what my writing means to me. They want to help me dig deeper. They want me to share my truth.

As a group, we go through several incarnations; members come and go. Leila and I are together for the duration. In the end, four of us settle into a cozy sisterhood—Andrea, Kit, Leila and me. This incarnation feels right, like the cylinders of a lock clicking into place. It is warmer and more intimate than earlier combinations of people in the group. We never get right to work in a business-like fashion, but customarily hug hello and spend the first 20 minutes catching up.

We did not intend to be a homogeneous group—each of us believes in the value of diversity—but we are all in our mid 40s to early 50s. We each have two kids; they attend the same middle school and high school. Three of us are born Jewish and Kit is as good as Jewish—married to a Jewish man, living a Jewish life and raising Jewish children.

Our writing is diverse with the only common thread being Judaism. Andrea often writes about Jewish food and traditions—her family’s experiences with pressing olive oil in Israel at Chanukah; her quest to find the perfect challah recipe for Shabbat. Kit is writing a young-adult novel about a girl in post-Holocaust Germany who finds a diary in her attic and learns that her house had been taken from a Jewish family during the war. Leila is working on a memoir about growing up

with an emotionally detached father whose touchstone experience was liberating concentration camps. My fiction inevitably takes me back to my Orthodox upbringing in Brooklyn: an Orthodox woman secretly befriends a gentile, lesbian neighbor; an elderly woman rejoices in her freedom when her husband—a former stand-up comic in the borscht-belt—is near death.

We give loving attention to each of our works, one by one. First what we appreciate: Andrea’s note that challah dough should feel like a baby’s *pulke* when properly kneaded; Leila’s poignant description of the elderly World War II veteran who broke down crying.

Pretty quickly, we turn to our questions and to pointing out inconsistencies: “Kit, Steffie seems older than seven, her

**“Challah dough when properly kneaded,” Andrea writes, “should feel like a baby’s pulke.”**

conversations with her grandfather are too sophisticated.” “Leila, do you have any childhood memories of warm, loving times with your father? You write only about his detachment.” We welcome the difficult questions; we have unshakable respect for one another’s intelligence and emotional insight. And we all have the same goal.

At the beginning, I share only fiction with the group. Many of my characters are women not quite satisfied with their lives. They are searching—always searching—for meaning, for some unknown something. The group probes and prods for emotional details. “How does Reva feel when she discovers Lucy is lesbian?” “What does Emma really long for?”

“Well, um, I’m not sure,” I often respond.

“Free-write on it,” Leila advises over and over again.

So I free-write in my characters’ voices and I discover that they are deeper and more alive than I imagined. I discover that their choices and their desires are their own, channeled through me but not

controlled by me. I begin to cherish my characters. They are wonderfully flawed and irresistible in their vulnerability. My writing sisters embrace my characters, too, loving and nurturing them with all of their imperfections. They do not judge Reva's dissatisfaction nor do they begrudge Emma her freedom after all the years.

And then, something amazing happens. My fiction goes on hold and I begin to write about my own life, my own emotions, my own search. I don't make a conscious decision to do this, but it is what pours out onto the page. I reveal deeply personal thoughts and feelings that, in the past, I would have hidden away between the covers of my journal. But here I am, willing—even eager—to explore my innermost emotions with my writing sisters. With their encouragement, I send my essays out, seeking publication—eager to open my heart to all. Something has shifted. I trust my readers. I trust myself.

Our group solidifies and becomes a unit. We begin to do more than “critique” each other's writing—we work together as a creative team, brainstorming ideas, coming up with connections that spill over between our writings. Like Leila's terrifying dream, vividly described in the middle of her memoir. She is peacefully swimming until she comes upon a lifeless, waterlogged woman sitting at the bottom of the lake. The woman reaches out a white wrinkled hand to grab her. Leila awakens, terrified, heart pounding. The dream comes often, haunting her and causing her sleepless nights.

I point out to Leila how significant the lake dream is to her story. “Early in your memoir you talk about learning to swim in a lake in upstate New York at summer camp,” I say. “Then the lake lady comes in the middle. I think you need a water scene at the end, too.” She looks at me, interested but puzzled. We are all silent—contemplating.

“The mikveh!” I say, finally. “Water as purification—that would be a perfect ending.”

“Yes, yes,” Leila nods, smiles and quickly scribbles some notes. “Burke went to the mikveh when he converted to Judaism. And then there is my swim in upstate New

York last summer—right after I came home from Germany...” Her eyes are shining, her cheeks, flushed. Five, maybe six months later, I write an essay about my one experience at the mikveh, a purification that led me away from a life of lies. Leila reads it and calls me before our meeting. “Wow, you have a mikveh story, too!” she exclaims. “What are you talking about?” I don't remember until she reminds me that I helped her make a mikveh connection in her work. “It must have been sitting in your unconscious this whole time, Esther,” she says, “just waiting.”

Sometimes, as we sit together over warm mugs of tea, the group tells me

that my voice is not loud enough—that my words are not coming through. They tell me lovingly, in compassionate tones that encourage me to try again. They wait patiently until I bring in another draft. But they are fierce, too. Their questions delve deep and refuse to let me go silent. In their support, they will not let me disappear.

And I do the same for each of them. Together, we come out of hiding. We speak. ■

*Esther Mizrahi Moritz grew up in Brooklyn. She is at work on a novel about Reva, a strong Orthodox woman searching for her voice.*

## HOW ANOTHER GROUP WORKS

### Sundays at the JCC: 12 Writers in a Room BY MICHELLE BRAFMAN

#### WASHINGTON, D.C.

**EVERY AUGUST FOR THE PAST SEVEN YEARS** the Washington, D.C., Jewish Community Center sponsors a four-day writers' retreat. Anyone may attend, but typically only women do. Each day the group writes in a different genre: renowned author Faye Moskowitz teaches memoir, visual artist and poet Miriam Mörsel Nathan teaches poetry, and I teach fiction.

After attending the summer retreat, participants are eligible to join the ongoing writers' workshop that meets every six

weeks at the JCC. In the workshop, participants are free to write in whatever genre they want. We meet in a small conference room off the main lobby, the backdrop the hum of a vibrant JCC on a Sunday afternoon. We've organized carpools for our kids, rearranged work schedules, and sometimes braved snowy roads to be together. We always have a minyan—usually a core group of eight and a revolving crew of four or so more. I'm the teacher, and my biggest challenge is squeezing, into two-and-a-half hours, enough discussion time (continued on page 45)

**“Writing about our lives turns out to be no less Jewish an experience than a trip to Israel.”**

