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Hungry and unfulfilled: Jewish women struggle with their bodies

By Joanne Weintraub

On the one hand, there's the grandmother who offers homemade knishes, blintzes, rugalach and the adoring advice, "Ess, ess, mein kind!" — "Eat, eat my child!"

On the other, there's the mother who sees you at the refrigerator door and warns, "Are you sure you're going to be able to fit into that dress you bought for Cousin Traci's wedding?"

Add in the fact that these two maternal figures are often the same person, and is it any wonder Jewish women have some issues about food and body image?

OK, it's easy to blame Mom. The fact is, most women, Jewish or not, have a hard time balancing the lean, lithe, willowy ideal with the reality of the (usually) rounder, softer body they live in.

Add in a heritage where sour

cream is practically a cultural touchstone and where the genetic predisposition is not to resemble Heidi Klum, and Jewish women can find themselves confused, depressed, resentful and sometimes even the victims of serious eating disorders.

"Ours is a culture where food is used for all kinds of celebrations and gatherings, and none of these are low-fat, low-carb kinds of foods," says Dr. Stacey Nye, a Mequon therapist who specializes in the field of eating disorders, body image, women's issues, depression and anxiety.

Then there's the traditional body type of Eastern European Jewish women, the ethnic group from which most of American Jews descend.

"It's round, curvy, often with a big nose and kinky hair," says Nye, who recently joined the staff of Oconomowoc's Rogers Memorial Hospital as eating disorders program specialist. "It's not the Western ideal of beauty."

As a result, some Jewish women can become preoccupied with how

"wrong" their bodies are, and how much they need to change them. Nose jobs for Jewish teens have become so common that many parents don't question them, Nye notes. Judging one's worth by the size of one's thighs is perceived as perfectly ordinary.

Anorexia and bulimia

Mara Schulman knows well what relentless self-judgment can lead to. At 29, Schulman is in recovery from years of eating disorders that included both anorexia, which involves compulsive self-starvation, and bulimia, which is gorging on food and then intentionally purging.

A longtime volunteer at the Harry & Rose Samson Family Jewish Community Center who now works professionally at the JCC's Gan Ami preschool, Schulman is a graduate of Nicolet High School and Bradley University in Peoria, Ill.

She's a dark-eyed, lively woman who speaks with warmth about her lifelong immersion in Wisconsin's Jewish educational programs, including her many years at Steve and Shari Sadek Family Camp

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Israeli serenade — Kinneret Mordoh, from the Israeli singing group Kolot, serenades a group of teenage girls during the Yom HaAtzmaut concert on Monday, April 19 at the Harry & Rose Samson Family Jewish Community Center. The concert was part of a two-day celebration of Israel sponsored by the JCC and the Milwaukee Jewish Federation. Photo by Elana Kahn-Oren.

New Catholic-Jewish center will continue scholar's interfaith work

By Leon Cohen

In academia, it often happens that "If you have someone with a particular passion or interest," and who has created a niche for it in the institution, "when that person retires or leaves, it ends."

And as Richard Lux, Ph.D., said in a telephone interview on April 18, he doesn't want his "particular passion and interest" to end when he completes his 37-year tenure this spring as professor of scripture studies at Sacred Heart School of Theology (SHST).

Why should the Jewish community care what happens at this Catholic seminary that primarily trains men for the Catholic priesthood, and has at present 100 seminarians and 40 other students in other programs?

Because Lux's "particular passion and interest" for much of his career has been Catholic-Jewish relations; and that has made him a significant figure in the Milwaukee Jewish community.

Both in his academic and his community-service activities, Lux has worked with Milwaukee Jewish religious and interfaith leaders to create what is one of the strongest such interfaith community relationships in the entire country.

"If I had to point to one person



Richard Lux, Ph.D.

who changed the landscape of Catholic-Jewish relations in Milwaukee, it would be Richard Lux," said Kathy Heilbronner, interim director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation and long-time co-chair of the Milwaukee Catholic-Jewish Conference. "He has been the quintessential bridge-builder."

But with his coming retirement, Lux said, "I was afraid that what I had done at the school" in this area "would fall into a black hole."

So with the help of several people in the Jewish community, the school is taking steps to continue his work.

In March, the school announced its plans to create the Lux Center

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Were American Jews silent during the Holocaust?

By Leon Cohen

In the summer of 1956, teens at the Reform movement's Union Institute camp (later renamed Olin Sang Ruby Union Institute) in Oconomowoc, Wis., published their own literary magazine.

And while this magazine was filled with recollections of camp activities, the teens who wrote the articles obviously felt haunted by something else — the destruction of European Jewry during World War II; and they referred to it often.

New York University historian Hasia R. Diner mentioned and quoted from this magazine at the beginning of her 2009 book, "We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust 1945-1962" (New York University Press, 2009).

That magazine was just one item in an abundance of evidence Diner had uncovered showing that, contrary to a commonly believed myth,



Hasia Diner

during the first two decades after World War II, Jews throughout the United States were not indifferent to, nor did they try to avoid or suppress discussion of, the Holocaust.

Indeed, as Diner said in a telephone interview on April 16, "I was pretty irritated, kind of appalled, by the way other historians wrote about this subject" because they made their claims

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Body image

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Interlaken in Eagle River. As Schulman recalls, food wasn't a subject of great drama in her family. Yet she wasn't more than 5 years old before she stood at the mirror and thought, "I need to lose weight." When she was a little older, she began skipping breakfast and eating only half her sandwich at lunch. In high school, being 5-foot-5 and just over 100 pounds still seemed too chunky to her.

But it wasn't until she became an Interlaken counselor that things took a more serious turn. Training the camp's lifeguards, she spent many strenuous hours in the water — and at the same time, decided to go on a juice fast.

Fatigue and undemourishment took their toll, and soon her supervisors noticed. In 2006 they took action.

"I was asked to leave until I could go and get myself healthy," she says, and it's clear the memory is still painful. "I was in such denial that I didn't even know what they meant." Reluctantly at first, she enrolled in the first of what was to be a series of eating-disorders programs. Only in the last year has she felt confident enough to describe herself as in recovery.

Part of what motivates Schulman to maintain a healthy weight is working with young people and knowing that she's a very visible role model.

At Interlaken, she says, "my heart sank when I would hear young girls who weren't at all fat talk about what was wrong with this part of their body and that part of their body, and how they needed to lose weight."

She's very conscious, she says, that

the little girls at Gan Ami look to adults like her for cues on how to eat and how to look — and she's determined to project a healthy image.

Nye, too, believes it's important to walk the walk as well as talking the talk. For her, at 47, that means being comfortable in her 5-foot-4 inch, size 16 body. After years of yo-yo dieting, she now thinks less about her size and more about her health. She exercises, eats well, enjoys dressing up and notes that "the size of my thighs isn't part of my identity."

For someone who first joined Weight Watchers in her native Lincolnwood, Ill., at age 12, that's an accomplishment.

"I take care of myself, and I love adorning myself," Nye says. "But as soon as you start looking at yourself and start thinking, 'This or that has

to change,' you might want to ask yourself why."

A uniquely Jewish approach to preventing eating disorders and body-image problems among girls is offered by the program "Bishvili: For Me," developed by Harvard University's Dr. Catherine Steiner-Adair with support from the Hadassah Foundation.

The program aims to counter mainstream messages about "good" and "bad" body types by "strengthen[ing] girls' connection to their Jewish identity as a source of spiritual nourishment that increases their self- and body acceptance."

"Bishvili" serves as a Jewish adjunct to Steiner-Adair and Lisa Sjostrom's 2006 book "Full of Ourselves: A Wellness Program to Advance Girl Power, Health and Leadership." Learn more at www.bishviliforme.com.

Joanne Weintraub is a monthly arts columnist for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and a freelance writer and editor.

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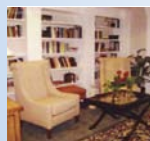


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