

## Yocheved (Judith) Herschlag Muffs HESPED

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Where do Americans get their misconceptions about Jews and Judaism? Before the late 1960's, when Judith Herschlag Muffs began her work at the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) of B'nai Brith, synonyms for *Jew* in *Rogel's Thesaurus* included "cunning/lender/rich/extortioner/heretic."

In American textbooks today, Jews are rarely accused of killing God; information on the Holocaust is widely available; Moses is no longer pictured with actual horns growing from his head instead of horns of light; and the illustration of the Torah is usually shown right-side-up. These are among the many significant achievements of Judith Herschlag Muffs during her 28 year career with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) of B'nai Brith. During her tenure, Herschlag Muffs succeeded in modifying dozens of textbooks and reference books--dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopedias--printed in hundreds of thousands of copies, read by a million students or more.

From 1964-1990, Judith Herschlag Muffs served on the professional staff of the ADL, receiving the coveted Milton Senn Award for Professional Excellence in 1982. Yocheved effected changes in publications by an alphabet's worth of major text and reference publishers, from Educational Testing Service and the Encyclopedia Britannica to Warner Books and Xerox Education Publications, in addition to changes in the *Official Scrabble Player's Dictionary*.

Judith Herschlag was born on August 5, 1927, and grew up in Jamaica, Queens, the youngest of three children. Her father, Alexander Herschlag, owned a wholesale bread bakery with her uncle. Her mother, May Friedman, a homemaker, died when Yocheved was 13. The Herschlag family, though not religious, was sympathetic to Zionism.

Judith Herschlag attended Hebrew school, which she loved, and where, when she was about 11 years old, a group from Hashomer Hadati, a religious Zionist youth group, performed.

She was hooked. Her teacher, Rabbi Moshe Weiss [father of Rabbi Avi Weiss] told her that, in order to join, she had to become religious. Yocheved asked, "How do I become religious?" He answered, "You don't brush your teeth on Shabbat." Yocheved recalls: "The next Shabbat I came to Junior Congregation and said, 'Mr. Weiss, I didn't brush my teeth.'" [*This and other direct quotations by Yocheved are from an interview with Susannah Rebecca Sharon Nadler for a Heschel School project in 1998.*]

In the winter of 1946, Yocheved dropped out of NYU and joined a training farm for Hashomer Hadati in upstate New York. "It wasn't to drop out of college, it was to go to somewhere that was more important to me. I wanted to get to Palestine to be in Kibbutz, *livnot unlehibanot bah*, to build and be built by it." The credo of Hashomer Hadati was Torah and Kibbutz, emphasizing manual labor, study, and socialism.

In 1947, when she was barely 19, Yocheved immigrated to British-controlled Palestine, arriving by unconverted World War II troop carrier within a day of the famed "Exodus" ship.

Yocheved settled with her "*garin*," her emigration group, at Kibbutz Ein Hanatziv, and became kitchen manager. She recalls the catch phrase, '*zeh tsarich lehaspik*,' "this will have to be enough," about stretching meager food stores to feed four hundred people at a meal, cooking with three primus stoves.

Her *garin*, together with other *Anglo Saxim* from South Africa and America, fought off several Arab attacks during the Israeli War of Independence in 1948. Yocheved served as a messenger during times of alert, learning to throw grenades and to shoot a rifle. The degrees of danger were distinguished by whether, when they fell into bed fully dressed, they were allowed to sleep with their shoes on [full alert] or off. On the evening of Purim, 1948, there was an attack on the whole area. The entire Kibbutz was deployed in war trenches. Ten at a time, in shifts, they crept into the dining room, which also served as the synagogue, to read the Book of Esther aloud, and then returned to the trenches to let others take their turn. "Needless to say," she recalls, "no one made any noise blotting out Haman's name!"

In 1949, Yocheved returned to America. Yocheved told Susannah in her interview: "For me, *Kibbutz* had lost much of its ideology, it had changed very much, it was no longer that radical Socialist egalitarian society that I had felt was so precious, the kibbutz ideal of no private property, from each according to his ability and to each according to his needs, a sense of comradeship. Perhaps I demanded a pure society that only exists in a vacuum, not in real life. And I was not prepared to live any other place, because my mind had been so focused on kibbutz. It was time to return home."

Yocheved channeled her energy into working to strengthen America's ties with Israel. She joined Young Judaea as a group leader in 1950. Her zeal and warmth attracted many to the movement, and Yocheved counts a number of today's community leaders among 'her' Judaeans, most notably our very own Nancy Dubler. Yocheved returned to school part-time, completing her BA degree in Sociology at Brooklyn College and doing graduate work in Sociology and Anthropology at NYU.

She served the National Zionist Youth Commission, parent of Young Judaea, as National Program Director and editor of *Judaean Leaves*, the monthly program publication for group leaders. This led to her appointment to the United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, where she served as editor for a variety of books and publications. The commission was housed at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

One of her casual friends at JTS was a young professor of Hebrew Bible and Comparative Semitics, Yochanan Muffs, whom she had first met in the early 1950's, when they both attended Queens College. But their relationship took off after she invited him—by postcard—to a small dinner party in 1968. She calls him "the man who came to dinner...." They were married on April 5, 1970.

Before it was fashionable, Yocheved worked in all media. She was a consultant for documentary films and TV network productions in the late 1960's and 1970's.

Yocheved's projects included a 12-part television series on "The Image of the Jew in Literature" and "Jews and their Religion," featuring Elie Wiesel and Yitz Greenberg, developed with the Catholic Archdiocese of New York. Her bibliography *The Holocaust in Books and Films: A Select and Annotated Bibliography* (Hippocrene) went through at least three editions after its publication in 1978. She is the subject of an article in the recently published *Jewish Women in America, an Historical Encyclopedia* edited by Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore.

After Yocheved retired from full-time work at the ADL in 1990, she joined the Board of Volunteers for the Jewish Museum in New York, working with curators. She continues her own work as a fiber artist, incorporating African influences and some Jewish motifs.

Yocheved and Yochanan spend part of every year in their apartment in Jerusalem.

At a gathering in Jerusalem in honor of her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, Yocheved acknowledged before a packed crowd of friends, former Judaeans, and admirers, that she finally had come to believe that she was able to do more for the Jewish people by working in Diaspora than she might have if she had remained on Aliyah.

The Muffs joined Minyan M'at in 1986, and since then Yocheved served on the Ansche Chesed Board of Trustees on two separate occasions in the 1990's, and, until physically no longer able to do so, she attended the Ansche Chesed morning minyan regularly since 1988, where she often led the prayers, as *shlichat tzibbur*.

She was a founder of the informal Morning Minyan 'breakfast club' that used to meet most mornings at the Metro Diner following services. She also served on the Ansche Chesed Library Committee. Yocheved was a regular in the Minyan M'at Purim Spiel, most memorably when she appeared smoking a cigar, clad only in a "Freudian Slip."

On March 9, 2008, Congregation Ansche Chesed honored Yochanan and Yocheved Muffs for their many contributions to this community.

Yochanan Muffs was Yocheved's life partner for almost 40 years ; he was a renowned Bible scholar and inspired teacher.

The Muffs's hospitality was famous. Over the years a significant number of Ansche Chesed members have enjoyed Shabbat dinner at their home, which was filled with African art, contemporary paintings and antiques, and where, if you were lucky, you would have heard Yochanan pounding at the piano with gusto, playing rousing tunes by ear.

Yocheved honored Yochanan by collecting and editing his academic essays in *The Personhood of God*, originally published in 2005.

Yocheved was *in loco parentis* to me, which I often told her meant "crazy like a parent." She did not hesitate to challenge or correct me, or to tell me that she loved me. I can still hear her ringing voice as I left her apartment, "I love you! Teach well!" >>

I have lost a dear member of my family, and my heart has a Yocheved-size hole that will never be filled.

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