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PHYLLIS CHESLER

b. 1940

*by Richard Landes*

Phyllis Chesler, is an Emerita Professor of Psychology and Women’s Studies at City University of New York, the author of twenty books and thousands of articles which have been translated into many European languages and into Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Hebrew, a pioneering radical feminist leader and a former psychotherapist. She is also a committed Jew and Zionist. Chesler currently submits courtroom affidavits on behalf of women who are in flight from being honor-killed.

Her books include the landmark classic *Women and Madness* (1972), which has sold three million copies (the first feminist work to receive a front page review in the Sunday *New York Times Book Review*); *With Child: A Diary of Motherhood*(1979)*;* *Mothers on Trial: The Battle for Children and Custody* (1986, 2011);  *Letters to a Young Feminist*(1998); *Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman*(2002); *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism’s Holy Site* (2002); *The New Anti-Semitism: The Current Crisis and What We Must Do About It*(2003); *An American Bride in Kabul* (2013) which won a National Jewish Book Award; *A Family Conspiracy: Honor Killing* (2018); *A Politically Incorrect Feminist* (2018); and *Requiem for a Female Serial Killer* (2020).

Born in 1940, Chesler grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family in Borough Park, Brooklyn. Her mother, Lillian (Hammer), was eventually a school secretary, and her father, born in Lutzk, and orphaned when his mother was murdered by Cossacks, delivered seltzer and soda. Chesler believes she was a born rebel but she also traces her understanding of oppression and liberation back to her experiences as a child when, at age eight, she joined Ha-Shomer ha-Tza’ir, a radically left and secular Zionist youth organization, and later En Harod, an even more visionary Zionist youth group which advocated Arab-Jewish kibbutzim.

She attended Bard on a scholarship and worked full-time while she attended Graduate School at the New School for Social Research. Chesler worked in a Brain Research Lab, obtained a fellowship in Neurophysiology at New York Medical College, published two articles in *Science Magazine*—and then received her Ph.D in 1969.

She also co-founded the Association for Women in Psychology in 1969 and the National Women’s Health Network in 1975. Chesler delivered a keynote speech at the first-ever “Speak-Out on Rape” in 1971 in New York City. She taught the first course in Women’s Studies at City University of New York in 1970; it later became an accredited course of study at every campus.

Chesler has pioneered many issues in her research, writing, and activism, including the mistreatment of women in cases of rape and incest; the psychological importance of female role models; the class, race, and sex biases of most psychotherapists; and the importance of believing women’s testimony (*Madness of Women*); rape, prostitution, pornography (*About Men*); woman-battering; the scandal of good mothers losing custody even when pitted against abusive husbands and fathers; (*Mothers on Trial*); the misogynist nature of commercial surrogacy (*Sacred Bond*); the ways in which women are aggressive towards each other and have internalized sexist beliefs (*Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman*); the alarming rise in anti-Semitism after 2000 (*The New Anti-Semitism*); the nature of Islamic Jihad-terrorism, and the treatment of women, dissidents, apostates, and gays in Muslim countries (*An American Bride in Kabul; Islamic Gender Apartheid* and *A Family Conspiracy: Honor Killing*) and the failure of feminists to confront misogyny in Arab and Muslim culture (*Death of Feminism*; *Politically Incorrect Feminist*).

Chesler has always believed that “the kind of feminist I am has everything to do with my Jewish passion for justice”—and with her time in captivity in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Her direct involvement with Jewish feminism began in 1971, when she encountered Jew-hatred among left and lesbian feminists. Chesler started wearing a large Jewish star around her neck when she delivered radical and left feminist speeches. Her first visit to Israel in December 1972 began a long-standing connection with the then nascent Israeli feminist movement. She gave feminist speeches and held meetings in Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem all during the 1970s and 1980s.

In the US, with a handful of other Jewish feminists, including Aviva Cantor Zuckoff and Cheryl Moch, she issued a press release and planned a first-ever conference about Judaism and feminism which took place in 1973 at the McAlpin Hotel in New York City. In the 1970s, she also sought feminist signatories for petitions which opposed the UN’s Zionism=Racism resolution. In an interview with *Lilith Magazine* (winter 1976–1977), Chesler advocated the creation of “feminist sovereign space,” drawing a parallel between feminism and Zionism.

In 1980, while working for the United Nations, she experienced the UN’s World Conference on Women in Copenhagen as a rabid precursor to Durban 2001. The NGO panels scapegoated Israel as the world’s whipping girl and focused upon “Palestine,” not women. Chesler published a second article in *Lilith,* this time using the pseudonym she’d been assigned (“Regina Schreiber”) to expose the antisemitism/anti-Zionism of the conference. She organized a panel at the 1981 National Women’s Studies Association to address the issue of Jews and Israel among feminists.

In 1988, at an international conference of Jewish Women, Chesler participated in the first-ever women’s prayer service at the Kotel (Western Wall). She was asked to open the Torah and that act wedded her to the grassroots, legal, and religious struggle that was to come. Together with Rivka Haut, her Torah study partner (chevrutah), Chesler co-founded the International Committee for Women of the Wall; she was a name-plaintiff in the Israeli lawsuit on behalf of Jewish women’s prayer, an ongoing study. She attends an orthodox synagogue and publishes commentaries on the Torah.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Chesler created alternative rituals for Jewish holidays and life-cycle events. She also organized and hosted the first feminist seder, based on a preliminary Haggadah written by E.M. Broner and Naomi Nimrod, in Chesler’s Manhattan apartment. As Chesler became more Torah-literate, she left the more secular, political, and CR style of feminist sedars.

Although Chesler was dealing with Jew hatred in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s,  something changed after the Intifada of 2000. Chesler published a book about the rise of a “new anti-Semitism” in 2003. Although—or because—it was barely reviewed in the mainstream and feminist media, most feminists did not read it; and those who did objected to her criticism of antisemitism in the Western “progressive” intelligentsia and the Islamic world.

Chesler, who had once lived in the Muslim world, found feminists remarkably resistant to reports on the misogyny there. They categorically refused to take a position on the [burqa](https://www.meforum.org/2777/ban-the-burqa), child marriage, polygamy, and honor-killings, all of which Chesler termed “gender apartheid.” This reluctance arose from a multi-cultural relativism and anti-imperialism that meant that women who condemned the way men of color treated women of color would be targeted colonial racists. Increasingly, many Western feminists were more obsessed with the occupation of a country that has never existed—Palestine—than with the occupation of women’s bodies in the vast region.

Chesler is the author of [four](https://www.meforum.org/2067/are-honor-killings-simply-domestic-violence) [studies](https://www.meforum.org/2646/worldwide-trends-in-honor-killings) about [honor](https://www.meforum.org/3287/hindu-muslim-honor-killings) [killing](https://www.meforum.org/5477/when-women-commit-honor-killings) (“intimate family femicide” or “shame-murders”), is on the editorial board of *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*; is a Senior Fellow at the Investigative Project on Terrorism, and a Fellow at the Middle East Forum and the Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy.

Chesler’s outspokenness on antisemitism and Muslim misogyny combined with her Zionism have elicited great hostility from feminists increasingly committed to critical (race) theory in which almost any criticism of Muslims is considered Islamophobic; Zionism is viewed as racist imperialism; and antisemitism could only come from the right. In a sense she is an early and telling victim of “woke” cancel culture.

Dr. Chesler has also published widely over the years (*Globe and Mail, Huffington Post, Jerusalem Post, LA Times, London Guardian, New York Times, Times of London, Washington Post*, etc.), as well as at *American Thinker*, *FOX, FrontpageMag, Israel National News, Jewish Press, Middle East Quarterly, New English Review Press, New York Post, PJ Media, Tablet Magazine, Times of Israel*, etc.

Dr. Chesler’s son, Ariel David Chesler, is a judge and is married to Shannon Berkowsky whom he met at Brandeis. She and her partner, Susan L. Bender, are proud grandmothers to two granddaughters, the spirited and beautiful, Ms. Lily (Aviva Chaya) and Ms. Kate (Miri Shoshanna).

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