

Entry for Encyclopedia Judaica (Revised Edition)

Phyllis Chesler, Ph.D. (1940-)

Phyllis Chesler gives meaning to the mitzvah of tikkun olam (repairing the world) through her work as a pioneering feminist, prolific author, psychotherapist, and expert courtroom witness. Chesler grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family in Brooklyn, New York, graduated from Bard College, and earned her doctorate from the New School for Social Research. Rebelling against the patriarchal aspects of Judaism that denied her full participation, she turned to secularism and Zionism. "Like many Jews," Chesler comments, "I wanted to be a citizen of the world, not of the Jewish ghetto." However, experiences advocating for women's rights in predominantly Islamic countries combined with encounters with antisemitism within the feminist movement of the 1970s, involvement in the struggle for women to pray at the Western Wall in the 1980s and 1990s, and regular Torah study since 1989 led her back toward God. Today, Chesler identifies as a meta-denominational Jew who is as comfortable worshipping in an Orthodox synagogue as in a Reconstructionist temple.

An Emerita Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at the College of Staten Island (City University of New York) who co-founded one of the first women's studies programs, Chesler is co-founder and/or a member of the Association for Women in Psychology, The National Women's Health Network, the Women's Forum, The International Committee for the Jerusalem-based group, Women of the Wall, the Arts and Letters Council of the Wyman Institute of Holocaust Studies, Scholars for Peace in the Middle East; and The Academic & Media Watch on Anti-Semitism. She was the Editor at Large for *On The Issues* magazine, and is currently a columnist for the conservative magazine *Frontpage* and various left-leaning Jewish publications including the *Forward*. Chesler explains: "Frontpage and I agree on the importance to fight [terrorism] and to defend Israel's existence; they have no problem with my feminism." She has lectured and organized political, legal, religious and human rights campaigns around the globe. A frequent guest on national and international television and radio programs, she has lectured extensively to mental health, legal, medical, interfaith, feminist, Jewish and higher education groups.

Chesler is the author of twelve books and thousands of articles and speeches. *Women and Madness* (1972; new edition forthcoming), which addresses the mistreatment of women, has sold three million copies in English, European and Asian languages. In *The New Anti-Semitism: The Current Crisis and What We Must Do About It* (2003), she risks her career to argue that in the wake of September 11, anti-Zionist rhetoric by Islamic fundamentalists, western intellectuals, and fellow progressives, is actually antisemitism perpetrated under the guise of antiracism, anti-imperialism, and anticolonialism. This work follows other publications stirring the cauldrons of debate, including *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site* (2003); *Women's Inhumanity to Women* (2002); and *Letters to a Young Feminist* (1998). Her advocacy in *The New Anti-Semitism* bears lasting significance: "Focus on the world's real problems (disease, poverty, illiteracy, violence), instead of scapegoating the Jews and demonizing the Jewish state. ...Form Jewish-Christian, Jewish-Muslim, and Jewish-Palestinian alliances. ...And above all, Jews *must* stop fighting among themselves."

By Keren R. McGinity

Bibliography

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