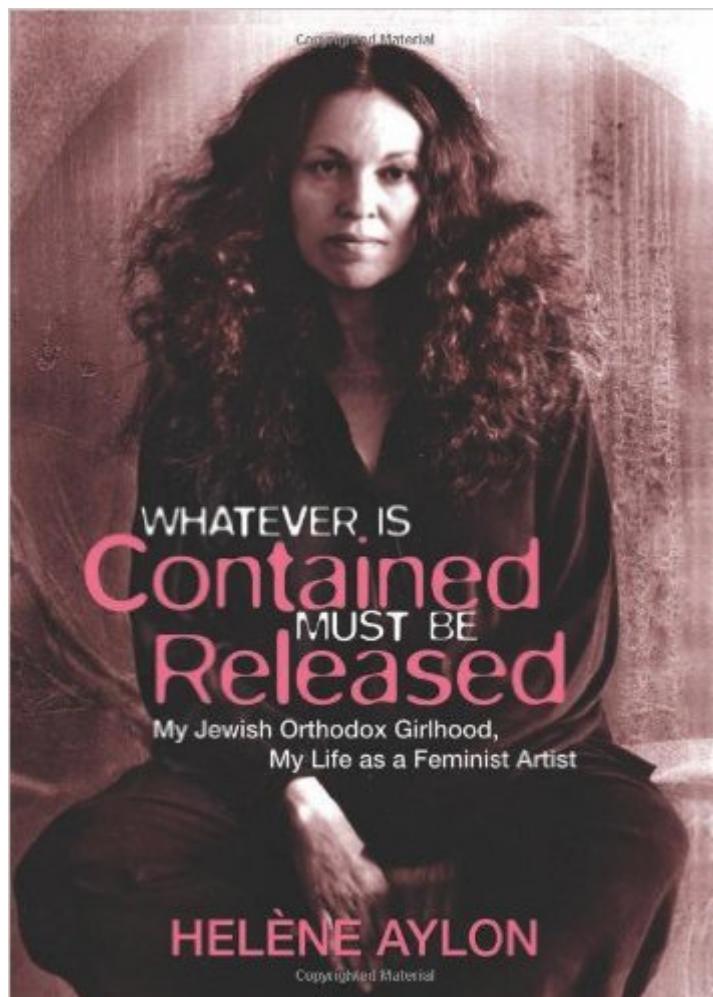


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Whatever Is Contained Must Be Released: My Jewish Orthodox Girlhood, My Life As A Feminist Artist (Jewish Women Writers)



Synopsis

Growing up an Orthodox Jew in Brooklyn, Helene Aylon spends her Friday nights in a sea of extended family as the Sabbath candles flicker. She dreams of escape but marries a rabbi and becomes a mother of two. Suddenly her world splits apart when she is widowed at thirty. Aylon finds a home in the burgeoning environmental art scene of the 1970s; creating transgressive works that explore identity, women's bodies, the environment, disarmament, and the notion of God.

Eventually she asks of Judaism what she never dared to ask as a child: Where are the women? Examples of Aylon's work included are her early doors for the Jewish chapel at JFK airport, her peace pillowcases (including one worn by Grace Paley), and her current search for the links between feminism and Judaism

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Helene Aylon's autobiography records the fascinating story of her personal and professional transformation from the daughter of Orthodox Jewish parents to an independent and formidable feminist artist. Her account begins with her upbringing, which was entrenched in Jewish tradition. For the uninitiated, Aylon parenthetically translates Yiddish and Hebrew expressions used in her household and explains the cultural significance of holy days and rituals observed by her family. While the overarching structure is chronological, Aylon easily and compellingly interjects related experiences that, in some instances, occurred at different times in her life. In this respect, her book

has an organic conversational quality that further enhances her engrossing story. While the book recounts Aylon's gradual emancipation from the strictures of her Orthodox background, her personal journey did not lead to the outright rejection of her Jewish heritage. Instead, her cultural experiences informed her art in varied, nuanced, and sometimes unexpected ways. The book is punctuated by photographs of Aylon's work in double-page spreads. Instead of interrupting the text, they revisit and expand many of the themes that run through the surrounding narrative. In this remarkable autobiography, the author's mother is a persistently important presence, even when Aylon's art challenged established notions about women, the environment, and the Torah. Although tensions sometimes arose as Aylon's progressive mindset contravened her mother's traditional worldview, the two remained close. In fact, the book begins and ends with Aylon's mother. Ultimately, this is more than an autobiography.

Helene Aylon's art is never easy. She makes you look at the world, rethink your perceptions and values and challenges you to change. So it is exciting to be invited into her life through this autobiography, to understand the genesis of her work and its development. She grew up in a Modern Orthodox home in Borough Park, NY where she attended the Shulamith School for Girls, shared her bedroom with her Yiddish speaking grandmother, and was very close to her mother. She was possessed of a bright and courageous mind that questioned everything around her, but her life was limited by her environment. She had a growing awareness of the absence of women in Jewish texts and worship and bristled at the void. She struggled with the limitations of women's lives, hopes and expectations. At 18 she married a rabbi, and at 30 she was a widow. Her second life began with her enrollment at Brooklyn College to study art, where she was mentored by the Abstract Expressionist, Ad Reinhardt. As a symbol of her new life she changed her name from Greenfield to Aylon, the Hebrew equivalent of Helene. She became Helene Helene, creator of herself. Her art became an exploration of the voids that she was always trying to understand and reshape. In the 1970s it was the body; in the 80s it was the earth and the environment; in the 90s it was God. A major part of that work is The Liberation of God. Installations of her art have been shown in major museums across America. Each one makes the viewer stop and ask the same questions that she asked as she grew up. Each one forces you to find your own understanding and response. The book deepens your experience of her art, how it was conceived and evolved, and how the artist herself understands it.

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