Preface
Unraveling, a Personal Story

. . . nobody’s life is a mere embodiment of American good fortune. Even the inhabitants of a culture of plenty can be intimately acquainted with loss.
—Jonathan Rosen, The Talmud and the Internet, 125

No event informs the narrative of 20th-century Jewish history more than the Holocaust. Against this backdrop of traumatic loss, the lives of ordinary American Jews who have grown up in “a culture of plenty” are seemingly immune to such devastation, and their lives and losses are somehow less consequential. What does it mean to explore the provocative and uneasy tension between this traumatic narrative of Jewish history and the more ordinary narratives of loss that have shaped the lives of contemporary American Jews? What happens when we focus on ordinary losses as they animate our engagements with this larger legacy of Jewish loss? Can we do this without having to bind the everyday stories to, or contain them within, the larger Holocaust narrative? What happens when we take the time to explore the complicated and messy strands within these quotidian legacies of loss and dwell on them? What do they tell us about ourselves, and what do they tell us about the Holocaust?

In an effort to address these questions, this book moves between an intimate tale of loss from my own family, a series of intertwining stories about my father and his two mothers, and pieces of that larger history as depicted in contemporary works of Holocaust commemoration. Making associations and distinctions, I use intimacy as a way of making connections between these different legacies of loss.

My father’s mother, Lena Levitt, died in 1936, at the age of thirty-seven. She left behind three children and her husband, my grandfather.
My father was ten years old at the time. Even now no one in the family knows for sure the cause of her death. This was not a topic ever discussed in my father’s extended family. Three years after Lena’s death, in the midst of the Depression, my grandfather remarried. Mary Levitt became my father’s mother and the woman I would come to know as my paternal grandmother. Perhaps our relatives never told us about my father’s first mother out of a deep love and respect for Mary, but this was never articulated. They seem to have had a desire to smooth over those parts of this family’s story that did not fit together neatly. Not only was Lena’s memory buried, but no one ever talked about Mary’s story—her late entry into this family and her inability to bear children of her own.

For much of my life I did not know that my father had had another mother aside from Mary. Although I had been named in memory of Lena, I did not learn that she had existed until my early teens. And it was only after Mary died that I can remember having had any open discussions about Lena in my extended family.

This family secret, this silence, speaks to a larger feeling of brokenness within my father’s family. The various relationships within this blended and extended family have always been mysterious. I was often confused about which relatives were related to one another. At times, family members joked that some relatives could actually marry each other, but none of this was ever explained. It was all somehow understood. Even now, after years of searching, critical pieces of my father’s and grandmothers’ lives remain elusive. And I remain haunted by these missing pieces. In fact, it was almost fifty years after Lena’s death that a picture of her first came to light.

These hauntings, which have profoundly shaped my relationship with my father, allow me to see how everyday legacies of Jewish loss inform our critical engagements with notions of Jewish history and memory and make tangible that which was lost in the Holocaust, the everyday lives of countless European Jews. Through a series of close readings that move between my family stories and Holocaust texts, I will argue that this strategy can open up the compelling possibility of thinking about community, family, and identity in the present. Such intimate and critical engagement, the crafting of texts and stories from our own families’ pasts in relation to works by contemporary poets, writers, filmmakers, and scholars, can become the basis for building other kinds of intimacy. One need not be a family member, or even Jewish, to make these connections. By taking seriously ordinary and intimate stories of
loss and bringing them to bear more explicitly in my critical writing, I hope to invite others to look again at their own family stories. As we share what was once private with others outside our families and communities, I believe that we will be able to build new kinds of alliances and connections.

Unraveling

I think of the preciousness of ordinary life and of the strange, hard truth that outside fiction, some stories never end.

— Jane Lazarre, *Wet Earth and Dreams*, 122

Far from being faraway, ancient times, people and places are made familiar and close at hand by the telling of stories. But in the process of storytelling, what cultural work is done? In making the past familiar and usable, what complexities are flattened and effaced? Whose past does it become? We create our pasts, in various ways and with various texts and artifacts. Despite the habit of wrapping history in objectivity and stability, our pasts are pliable.

— Miriam Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies, Rabbis, Gender and History*, 1

To unravel is to undo, to separate tangled threads or clarify the elements of something mysterious or baffling. It is to solve a mystery by taking apart its component pieces or its various threads. One can literally unravel a knitted fabric and reuse its threads, or one can, more figuratively, untie the pieces of an intricate tale and, in a similar manner, put these pieces together again to form new stories. That is one way of imagining what comes from unraveling.

One can also simply live with the various loose threads. For me it has been helpful to think about my efforts to untangle the story of my father and his two mothers as a kind of unraveling. The challenge has been trying to figure out how these narratives do and do not come together to form any single story. Like the ancient tale of Penelope, whose own story of spinning and unraveling is a complicated story of fidelity and arrogance, purity and deception, I, too, can neither spin together nor fully unravel the stories I have to tell. And like Jane Lazarre’s narratives of the preciousness of ordinary life that do not end, the stories at
the heart of this book also have no endings. Caught in the contradiction between the interplay of creating and then destroying that which I have created, I begin by simply appreciating the unfinished character of ordinary life. It is this “strange, hard truth,” in Lazarre’s words, that connects me to Penelope; my loyalty is about both putting together and taking apart my beloved family stories. I may not be waiting for an explicit return of those who are now gone, as Penelope waited for her husband, but I am attempting to make sense of these stories by putting together some of the pieces and challenging others. And so, it is in these ways that, as with Penelope, my fidelity to my family stories is necessarily ambivalent. Both my efforts to weave these stories together and my insistence on pulling them apart are signs of my loyalty to these same legacies. This book is about these double and contradictory impulses. Oddly, they reflect a tension built into the word “ravel” itself, which means both to tangle and complicate as well as to separate and clarify. Even when the prefix “un” is attached, the word continues to have these contradictory meanings.

Of course these efforts are not as simple or as innocent as they might seem. There is an urgency to these engagements. The all-too-familiar landscape of the grand narrative looms large. That familiar tale provides the context for these stories and it is, after all, a story of Holocaust and Redemption, the destruction of eastern European Jewish life and the rebirth of the Jewish people in their ancient homeland. This overwhelming legacy demands our urgent attention. And yet, even as I say this, I am keenly aware of the fact that there are other stories, more immediate, more intimate tales of loss that remain open-ended and that also somehow demand our attention. The narratives of the so-called lucky ones, my own immediate ancestors, the segment of eastern European Jewry who made it to America well before the Holocaust, those who came to the United States in the vast migration of eastern European Jews at the beginning of the 20th century, need to be studied. And yet in the face of the Shoah, the destruction of the worlds, the lives, and the communities many of our families came from, how can we possibly address these “lucky” American stories? But, how can we not? This is the challenge at the heart of this book.

In order to appreciate the intimacies that link contemporary American Jews to these pasts, I argue that we must explore the legacies of those closest to home. By raveling and unraveling these embodied and
intimate tales, like the story of my father and his two mothers, we can begin to imagine other Jewish futures after the Holocaust.

And so I begin at home with the family stories that tie me to a specific eastern European Jewish immigrant past. And because endings are often beginnings, I need to turn to the death of Mary Levitt, the grandmother I knew, as it marks another beginning of the tale I will unravel.

My Grandmother's Death

During the summer of 1979, my paternal grandmother, Mary Levitt, died. Her death was not unexpected. It was the culmination of many years of illness and physical ailment. For as long as I had known her, my grandmother had been frail; her health had always been vulnerable. My grandmother was a tiny person, considerably shorter than five feet tall. I was told that this was the result of some kind of congenital condition. Even still it puzzled me as a child because her sisters towered over her—at least that is how I remember it. The sister to whom she was closest, Rose, was around five feet eight inches tall, and Rose's son was well over six feet tall and played basketball.

Aside from being small, Mary had thin hair and a chronic case of eczema. She was blind in one eye, and as she got older, she began to lose her hearing. She also developed heart disease. As a child I worried about her health and often felt helpless. I felt protective and, not knowing what else to do, I turned to God. I wondered why God seemed to pick on my grandmother. I wanted to know why he did this to her and demanded that he stop it. In this way, Mary brought me to God. This was my first serious engagement with God, my prelude to years of theological study and a PhD in Religion. But God never seemed to heed my calls. While I knew her, Mary was never granted even a brief reprieve from all of her physical ailments.

A few years before Mary died, her poor health was exacerbated by a terrible car accident. Neither of my grandparents had ever learned to drive so they had to rely on a friend who was driving them to an event when he had a heart attack and died at the wheel. It was a cold winter night. They were on the New York Thruway when their friend lost consciousness. The car swerved off the road into a huge snow bank that stopped the car, preventing them from plunging down a large embank-
ment. Perhaps it was at this moment that my prayers were finally answered, but only partially. My grandparents were saved but not unscathed, at least not my grandmother. My grandfather left the scene of the accident perfectly fine, not a scratch, but Mary was never quite the same. The impact of the car hitting the snow bank permanently damaged her balance. She now had trouble walking. In the end, it was her heart that finally failed her during the summer of 1979. She was seventy-two years old.

The summer Mary died, I was nineteen years old. It was the summer after my freshman year in college. I was in Washington, D.C., working as an intern for Senator Bill Roth from Delaware. It was my first time living away from home in a real apartment. I was sharing this space with my college roommate and some law students. I was even being paid for my labors and felt very grown up paying my share of the rent. When I got the call that Mary had died, I quickly made arrangements to fly to Albany, New York, for the funeral. My parents and my brother would drive up from Delaware and I would meet them there. What this meant was that I ended up arriving well before my parents. This was actually the first time I had spent time with any of my paternal relatives outside of the company of my parents.

Although Mary had been ill for many years, I was not ready for her death or the death of anyone I was close to. The only other relative whose death I had lived through was my mother’s father, but I was only four when he had died. Mary’s was the first funeral I attended as an adult. It would also become the first of many funerals I would attend in Albany over the next number of years. And it was on these occasions that I would continue to learn more about my father’s family.

When I was with my extended family at my aunt’s home waiting for my parents to arrive, the rabbi came to talk to the family about what he should say about Mary in his eulogy. Although there were lots of people in the house, the rabbi sat down in the kitchen with a much smaller contingent—my grandfather, two of Mary’s sisters, and Mary’s children: my aunt, my uncle, and me; I was there in my father’s place.

As the conversation began, the rabbi asked us all to tell him about Mary—about her life. The things my relatives had to say were all true. Mary was a wonderful wife and mother. She was a lovely person, good natured, caring, and kind. And yet I was disturbed by this conversation, by what was not being said or acknowledged. I do not know why I chose to speak up, but somehow I could not help myself. I just had to
say something about what made Mary unique. I felt I owed it to her to say out loud what everyone knew but what no one was prepared to say, and that was that Mary was an unusual mother. When I realized that there was a real chance that none of these things would ever be said unless I said them to the rabbi in the presence of my relatives, I spoke up. What made Mary special, I volunteered, was that she was really good at mothering in spite of the fact that she had never been able to give birth to children of her own. And she mothered many. Not only did she become mother to my father, his sister, and his brother after their mother died, but she also mothered her youngest sister when their own mother died after giving birth to this daughter. As the eldest daughter, Mary took on the role of mother in her childhood home, and she continued to take on this role throughout her life; she was a devoted aunt and grandmother who helped care for some of her sisters’ children as well as many of her grandchildren.

After I finished speaking there was a long pause. There was no rebuke, no anger, but everyone seemed to be stunned. They did not know what to say. And although I now no longer remember if the rabbi ever addressed any of these things specifically in his eulogy, I do remember that I felt that I had somehow done Mary justice. I had said these things out loud to her loved ones in front of the rabbi, who made it all somehow official. I had recognized and honored my grandmother’s virtually invisible labors of love and devotion within her family. Now, these many years later, I realize that there is more to say. There is more to Mary’s story than I had thought. There are things I have only come to know well after her death, things that have complicated my own neat depiction of her.

I have chosen a formal portrait of a young Mary as the frontispiece for this book. Like all portraits, this is an idealized image. Its rich sepia tones smooth out the contours of her young face. She glows. I do not know much about this picture. I suspect it was her high school graduation portrait. Part of what I like about this picture of Mary is its plenitude and promise. This is a young Mary with full ruddy cheeks. She is not the gaunt older woman I remember. Instead, here Mary is young, pretty, and full of life. There is something perky, even a bit impish, about her smile. No one can tell how small she is by looking at this image. Here she easily conforms to the cultural norms that dictate what such portraits should look like. She is wonderfully ordinary. For me this is a dream image. It is Mary as I now imagine she would like to be seen.
She is normal, happy, healthy, and hopeful. She is so many of the things I always wanted her to be and feared she never had been.

This picture speaks to a truth I did not know as the child who feared for her fragile grandmother. It captures Mary’s optimism, her hopefulness. When she died, I did not know this part of Mary’s personality. But a few years ago, my mother shared with me some letters that Mary had sent to her after my parents announced their engagement. I had heard many stories about this time, about the clash between my mother’s parents and my parents, tensions around class and my maternal grandparents’ disappointment that my mother was not marrying a doctor or a man from a solidly middle class Jewish family. I knew that my maternal grandmother was scornful of my father’s parents and was not very discrete about her displeasure. What I had never known before was how Mary responded to any of this. I only knew what my mother had told me about her own parents. I knew about how ashamed and embarrassed she was about the way her mother had treated my father’s parents.

Mary’s letters were revelatory. For the first time I heard Mary’s own voice, strong and confident. These were joyous letters. Unlike my other grandmother, Mary enthusiastically welcomed my mother into her family. In these letters, Mary expressed how happy she was that her oldest son had finally found someone with whom he could share his life and start a family of his own. This was especially meaningful to Mary because my father was already in his thirties at the time of my parents’ engagement. She had been afraid that he might never marry, and she had not wanted him to be alone.

By the time I knew Mary, her health was already compromised. The vigor of this image, the strength echoed in the letters she sent to my mother, was not familiar to me as a child. These are parts of Mary that I could not have spoken about at the time of her funeral. It is only now that I have been able to catch a glimpse of this Mary, a strong and generous woman with plenty of love and energy to go around. The story of Mary did not end with her death.

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Jerusalem 1983: In Search of Authenticity

After graduating from college, I spent the 1982–83 academic year in Israel. I was enrolled in an intensive Jewish texts program sponsored by
the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). I went to Israel to learn about my Jewish heritage. I was going to make up for all that I had not learned growing up in my parents’ liberal Jewish house—Talmud, Mishnah, Midrash, and codes. I was not only going to learn to read Talmud, but I was also going to learn how to live a “real” Jewish life. In Israel that year I took on Jewish dietary practices and I also became Sabbath observant. For that entire year I neither wrote nor drove on the Sabbath.

In all of these ways I worked on becoming an educated, observant Jew in what I imagined to be the center of the Jewish world, Jerusalem. This Jerusalem was not only the capital of the modern Jewish nation-state but it was also at the center of an ancient and indeed sacred Jewish longing for authenticity and home. It was Zion, the land of promise if not the Promised Land. In Jerusalem I lived in the midst of many other observant Jews. I spoke Hebrew and studied Jewish texts. I was trying to place myself within what I wanted to believe to be a timeless, eternal Jewish tradition. Unfortunately, my efforts to take on this identity were more difficult than I had imagined they would be. While in the eternal city studying Torah, I often found myself distracted by more everyday things. My efforts to place myself in a more ethereal other-worldly realm were regularly interrupted and complicated by other Jewish legacies, practices, and traditions—the things I thought I was trying to overcome or perhaps escape: politics, gender, history, and memory.

Although I longed for a purer, more authentic version of Jewishness and turned to traditional Jewish study in Jerusalem to find it, my efforts came up short. I could not avoid the contingencies of my position. It was the late 20th century, and I was an American Jewish woman, a granddaughter of eastern European immigrants. I came to Jerusalem with little Jewish education and a degree in Religious Studies from Brown. I was trying to become a rabbinic Jew for the first time in my early twenties.

Within the confines of my yeshiva program, I found myself explicitly struggling for the first time with issues of gender. It was not so easy to find my place within rabbinic Judaism as a Jewish woman. On a regular basis I was confronted by gender inequities in a system I was committed to learning and enacting on its own terms. Thus, even as it excluded me from key aspects of its practice time and time again, I struggled to keep these realities from interrupting my studies. Even as I came to Israel to find a new, more authentic Jewish identity, I struggled to
figure out how to reconcile this version of Judaism with the liberal American Jewish identity I already had, my family’s less observant version of Judaism. I worried about how I would translate my life in Israel as an observant Jew into something that I could perform in my family’s home in America. How could I continue to honor my parents and grandparents if I rejected their Judaism? Was I going to stop eating in their homes? Was I going to continue to participate in their more liberal Jewish rituals?

All of these struggles posed challenges to my studies and efforts to reform myself into what I hoped would be a more “authentic” Jew. These are not things I could have articulated then, but over time, in different ways, they have contributed to my subsequent efforts to find other ways of claiming a less coherent, more contradictory Jewish identity.

I did not go to Israel to study in a yeshiva. I was on an academic program sponsored by the liberal Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), the academic arm of the Conservative movement, the movement in which I was raised. I had just graduated from Brown, and it had not occurred to me that there would be limits on my studies because I was a woman. But even in this liberal academic environment, I was confronted with gender inequities that made my learning and my observance different from and less significant than the learning and observance of my male peers. Although JTS and the Conservative movement, the sponsors of my study program, believed that women could and should study Talmud, they were not yet convinced that women could be rabbis or that observant Conservative Jews should even participate in egalitarian forms of communal worship. These policies were something I had not anticipated. So while I became kosher and Sabbath observant, as a woman I did not learn how to pray or how to read Torah.

Although the women in my program were at least as highly educated and dedicated to our studies as the men, because we were not obligated to do these things as women we were not taught how to do them. Being exempt from these obligations according to Jewish law meant that there were no structural mechanisms in place to teach us to lead services or to read Torah, and, as a result, few of us learned to do these things. To do so would have required studying outside of the contours of the regular curriculum. Just to participate in an egalitarian worship service once a month took great effort on the part of many men and women in the program.
I spent that year trying hard not to pay attention to the gender inequities that were shaping my Jewish education. I was enamored of the tradition, and I was determined to keep my focus on traditional Jewish learning. Despite this, I now realize that the inequities in my program profoundly shaped my efforts to become a traditional Jew and helped shape the Jewish feminist position I eventually embraced.

I ended my year of study in late May 1983. My parents asked me to plan on returning in time to attend my first cousin's bat mitzvah and, just after that, my brother's graduation from Dickinson College. Although these plans had been decided upon before I left for Israel, somehow the reality of leaving Israel and immediately jumping into my family's American Jewish versions of ritual observance haunted me. To attend these events, I would need to drive on Shabbat; this was not an issue in my extended family, but it was a newly acquired issue for me.

As I became increasingly more observant, I struggled to consider the implications of my new commitments as they differed from the forms of Jewish observance I had known growing up. Was it more important for me to remain involved in my family and its Jewish and familial practices, or was it better that I let go of these attachments in order to more authentically practice Jewish law? Before I went to Israel, I had known other young people who had become observant and had often been taken aback by the way many of them had distanced themselves from their families as they became more observant. I remember a couple in New York who refused to go to a seder at their parents' homes, believing that their parents' level of kashrut was not strict enough. Even then I found this decision painful.

I was never interested in alienating myself from my parents. I wanted to be able to continue to eat in their home and celebrate Jewish holidays and family celebrations with them. Even in my classes on Jewish practice I asked questions about the relative importance of the commandment to honor one's parents as opposed to keeping kosher, or not driving on Shabbat. For me these were always vital questions that remained unanswered. I knew what I wanted to do, but I had few role models for how to do this; no one in my extended family was observant, and all of these practices were foreign to my family. I struggled with how the new form of Jewishness I was taking on, however ancient and authoritative it might be, could take the place of the no less real Jewish way of life in which I had been raised.
Revelation

A revelation is a disclosure. It is often dramatic. Theologically it is considered a manifestation of divine will or truth. During the spring of 1983, while I was studying in Israel, I received a photocopy of a portrait of my paternal grandparents. It was the first image I had ever seen of my father’s mother, the woman I was named for, Lena Levitt. The receipt of this portrait of my long-lost grandmother was a revelation. It was just not the kind of revelation I thought I had gone to Israel to find.

Although I taped the copy of the photograph of my grandparents up over my bed in my dorm room along with art postcards and snapshots of friends and family, I did not really consider the implications of this discovery. I was too busy searching for other forms of Jewish revelation and enlightenment. Like so many other American Jews of my generation, I had gone to Israel to try to take on what I thought would be a more “authentic” version of Jewishness, yet my efforts to place myself
squarely within an authorized version of rabbinic Judaism did not work. All these years later, I realize how much this more humble revelation that came to me unexpectedly in Israel has taught me about my Jewish identity. The portrait offered me an early first clue into the very different version of Jewish identity that would eventually shape my work in the field of Jewish Studies. At the time, I did not yet know that mine would be a messier, more partial familial and feminist Jewish position.

During the winter of 1983 George Leavitt, an estranged relative from Florida, my father’s first cousin, had put the sepia-toned studio portrait of my father’s parents into an envelope with a note to my father and sent it to him in Delaware. I learned about this photograph from my father. It was something he excitedly described to me during one of our weekly overseas phone calls. A few weeks later I received my photocopy of the picture. My father was eager for me to see it for myself even through the distortions of a photocopy. As I have already explained, this was the first image I had ever seen of my father’s mother, the woman who had given birth to him and to his siblings. Until that moment, Lena had been a faceless specter. She had been a woman I barely knew existed. Seeing this photograph and thinking about the other grandmother I had known and lost marked the beginning of my efforts to unravel the tale of my father and his two mothers, my twenty-five-year fascination with Lena Levitt, and my growing need to reconcile her story with that of my other grandmother, Mary Levitt. In my urgent desire to piece together the story of Lena, I did not want to lose sight of Mary. I did not want to substitute the legacy of one of these grandmothers for the other. I needed to find a way to honor them both.

No one in my father’s family remembered having ever seen the portrait of my grandparents. My father and his brother and sister insist that before this picture surfaced, they had not even known that any images of their mother existed. Because of this, the portrait became a kind of revelation. An image of my father’s long-dead mother had come to light, and in coming to light, it revived her, forcing her to become a part of the family’s memory once again. It was miraculous.

With the receipt of this image, my father began to talk about his mother. Having not seen her for so long, he had forgotten what she had looked like. The picture brought her back to him.

Almost fifty years after her death, what seemed to fascinate my father most was the resemblance between his long-lost mother and me, his daughter. This is the first thing my father told me about the photograph.
For him, it was thrilling to see the resemblance across a generation. This was part of why he was so eager to share her image with me in whatever form he could. When I finally received my copy of the portrait, I got to share in the revelation.16

What strikes me even now as I remember first seeing the copy of the photograph is the resemblance between my father and his mother. I did not see myself as much as I saw my father in this woman’s face. Oddly, given my obsession with Lena, I have often forgotten that my grandfather was also in the portrait, that he, too, links all of us together. Nevertheless, for all of us, the salient figure in the picture was Lena.

For my father, the photograph was a crucial link between us. He saw me and he saw his mother. And although he did not see himself in her face, he made the connection to her through me. Perhaps it was easier for him to link his mother to me than to focus on his own resemblance to her. In a similar way, my own desire to see him in his mother’s likeness has made it hard for me to appreciate how much I look like Lena. And yet, all of these resemblances are not only apparent in the photograph, but they are also clearly a part of how we have all come to live with this image and what it has revealed to us about Lena.

As I write these words and retell this story, a seemingly obvious point, a point that I had somehow missed at the time, comes to mind. When the portrait arrived in my father’s hands, now over twenty years ago, my grandfather was still alive, and yet I do not recall any of us discussing or looking at the photograph with him. I remember asking him to tell me stories about his first wife, but not in relation to the picture. I no longer recall when I had these conversations with him. What I do remember is a romantic tale, a narrative about a beautiful woman, a shared ice cream, and falling in love. But in truth, I am no longer sure about where any of these stories actually came from. They are stories I have already come to embellish and remake into tales of my own; I can no longer remember who first told them to me. I find myself thwarted and frustrated by my own inability to remember. This is a humbling experience, a reminder of how much harder all of this must be for my father, the little boy who lost his mother.

Part of what I have come to understand over these many years is that instead of finding an affirming story, a rich and whole tradition to fit myself into, my efforts to come to terms with my various Jewish identities since that year in Israel have been anything but neat, clean, and simple. My experiences in Israel and since then have been marked by a dif-
fertent kind of reckoning. Sometimes this has been disappointing and frustrating. But it has also been satisfying in other ways. I have discovered time and time again that for me, the Jewish past, present, and future are all marked by contradictions and discontinuities—losses large and small. And yet these same contradictions have offered me room to grow and explore other ways of claiming my Jewishness in its complexity. The closer I get to my family’s stories, the more I have come to appreciate the tensions between very different kinds of Jewish narratives—stories from home and grand Jewish historical narratives—not only how these stories coexist, but also how they touch one another.

These are elusive engagements. Our reckonings are always partial and incomplete. Even so, I hope to show how this kind of emotional and intellectual labor is both relevant and important, how the personal is critical, and how the critical can be personally meaningful. Through close and compassionate readings of family stories alongside artistic and literary works about aspects of a more recent Jewish past, I want to show what a new kind of intimate writerly and engaged scholarship can look like.

Making Connections

In what follows, I attend to the story of my two grandmothers, an ordinary tale of loss within my own American Jewish family as it has come back to me in the context of facing the legacy of the Holocaust. By engaging with works that address this more authorized legacy of Jewish loss, commemoration and memory alongside my more ordinary story, I have been able to see some of the more subtle and elusive ways these narratives are connected. Although there are no simple ways of bringing together the everyday and the extraordinary, the ordinary and the grand, thinking about these legacies next to each other allows us to see our place in the broad span of Jewish history, however discontinuous that might be.

For me, family stories have most immediately informed my connection to a Jewish past. That said, I have rarely experienced these connections outside my work with other Jewish texts and practices, works that initially seemed quite distant from my family. The story of my father and his two mothers in some ways haunted my efforts to claim the legacy of the Rabbis that year in Israel even though they appeared to have
little to do with each other. It has also continued to shape the contours of my scholarship, especially my desires to claim a feminist and an American Jewish position. As I will demonstrate in the pages that follow, I am increasingly convinced that attending to those ghosts closest to home is essential to understanding what it means to identify as a Jew in the present and lay claim to various Jewish pasts.

It seems to me that for a long time, many American Jews like me have failed to reflect upon, or even value, our ordinary family stories. In the face of either the promise of an ancient and enduring Jewish tradition, or absorption with a more recent history—the urgency of the Holocaust and with it, a redemptive faith in the establishment of a Jewish nation-state in Israel—many of us have let go of these more intimate tales of specific Jewish pasts and the losses that mark us so profoundly. The need to affirm and secure Jewish life in larger-than-life terms seems to have taken precedence as a way of addressing an uncertain future. But part of what I have come to learn in raveling and unraveling my family story in relation to these larger Jewish histories is that this uncertain future has often been an excuse not to attend to the seemingly mundane and ordinary legacies closest to home.

The relative smallness of these tales, especially the tales of ordinary losses, have all too often been overshadowed and rendered inconsequential in the face of the Holocaust or in our focusing on timeless forms of Jewish practice. Family stories of intimate loss have appeared trivial and somehow unworthy of our best critical thinking. After all, there is so much important work that has yet to be done in Holocaust studies. In this respect, my efforts might appear to be counterintuitive, but I believe that if we take everyday stories of loss more seriously and if we pay attention to how they brush up against and interact with these larger Holocaust narratives, we might be better able to understand the past and imagine a different future.

Although I generally follow the practice in feminist and critical studies that resists using the “we” in scholarly work because of how it has been used to force the reader into a grand collective, in this case I am making an exception. The “we” in this book is decidedly not grand. It is offered as a gesture of inclusion allowing me to connect to my readers, especially those I do not know but who will learn a great deal about me in these pages. This “we”—and sometimes “you”—is an experimental pact between me and my readers; it is a way of acknowledging the intimacy of this scholarly treatment of loss.