

## MAPS OF WOMEN'S GOINGS AND STAYINGS



RELA MAZALI

**MAPS OF WOMEN'S  
GOINGS AND STAYINGS**

---

**RELA MAZALI**

Stanford University Press • *Stanford, California*

Stanford University Press  
Stanford, California

© 2001 by the Board of Trustees of the  
Leland Stanford Junior University

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free, archival-quality paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mazali, Rela.

Maps of women's goings and stayings / Rela Mazali.

p. cm. — (Contraversions)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8047-3292-2 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-8047-3293-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Women—Social conditions. 2. Spatial behavior. 3. Social mobility.
4. Women travelers. I. Title. II. Contraversions (Stanford, Calif.)

HQ1161 .M39 2002

305.42—dc21

2001042609

Original printing 2001

Last figure below indicates year of this printing:

10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01

Typeset by James P. Brommer in 10/14.5 Minion  
and Copperplate

Nostalgia Jewishness is a lullaby for old men  
gumming soaked white bread.

J. GLADSTEIN, *modernist Yiddish poet*

## CONTRAVERSIONS

### JEWS AND OTHER DIFFERENCES

---

DANIEL BOYARIN,  
CHANA KRONFELD, AND  
NAOMI SEIDMAN, EDITORS

The task of "The Science of Judaism"  
is to give Judaism a decent burial.

MORITZ STEINSCHNEIDER,

*founder of nineteenth-century*

*philological Jewish Studies*

*For all the builders  
of the talking house*

**MAPS OF WOMEN'S  
GOINGS AND STAYINGS**

---

## ITINERARY

FIRST VISIT:	The House and the Longing	1
SECOND VISIT:	Janie's Room with Zinnia	26
THIRD VISIT:	StoryTails	61
FOURTH VISIT:	The Princess in the Caravan	83
FIFTH VISIT:	The Princess in the Caravan Too	116
SIXTH VISIT:	The Indian in the Longing	158
SEVENTH VISIT:	The Mountains and the Hills and the Toilet	190
EIGHTH VISIT:	FearLedge	213
NINTH VISIT:	Bookmaps and Housebooks	244
TENTH VISIT:	Balls, Bats and Cars	287
ELEVENTH VISIT:	The Sea and the Desert	312
TWELFTH VISIT:	Gibraltar	350

For maps of visits 1 to 8 and 10, see the Ninth Visit.

Housekeys for all the visits are hanging behind the maps.

## FIRST VISIT: THE HOUSE AND THE LONGING

---

SOME OF US PREFER ALIASES. Many of us feel comfortable with our real names and identities. Almost all of us are actual people, all women, only a few of our stories imagined. We have been gathering over about five years now. On magnetic tape, in yellow spiral notepads, on the circuits and screen of the personal computer that I share with my daughter, most of us never having met and probably never to meet each other, gathering in text. Place us, though, as in a house in a warm climate. It's an inviting house. Used that is for inviting no less than for staying. You're invited too. It has a fruit full, semi-tended garden. It should stay simple, but furnish it with textures and smells that you only begin to guess at from books and movies and magazines. And from old stories you vaguely know of, that evaporate when you reach for the details. Just beyond the edge of the familiar, things unexperienced recollected, anciently retained, ancestral. Strangely known and sensuous.

We are coming as if into the house, each at her chosen times. We could be sitting down for a while somewhere in the cushion color combination, sipping something cool and subtly spiced that the neighbors taught one of us to mix and biting into a gaudy fruit. Or arriving from a long absence to hugs and happy calls of her name. Or newcoming making her place, learning to step over the floorboard just inside the doorway with the irritating creak. "I wish I knew what we were doing," Miriam says. I don't. Wish that is, or know for sure either. I'm content and excited to wait and see and listen. To one of



us rising at some point, collecting her loose, light garment, going out for an hour or good. Moving between cooking and sleeping places. Going to nap or swim or to bike to town. Coming back with bread and cooking oil and chick peas and tampons and a new job. Possibly to make enough money for the next stretch of her trip. One or two of us bringing her child for a stay. In fact Hannah's daughter, now grown, has already become one of us in her own right by now.

Gathering and scattering in the pulse of our running, extended exchange, we can stretch out legs, sometimes massaging each others' cracked soles with a light possibly scented local oil, sometimes staying carefully polite and apart. Place us cross legged on the floor or on the rather unique kind of seats used in this faraway part of the world. Slicing and thinking around the kitchen table or raking and clipping and discussing in the yard. Cutting each other's hair with onionsmell singing from the pan with the improvised handle. Each sweeping up her own. Trying our best but not always able not to judge each other. Murmuring into the nights, peaking frequently into loud, shared laughing. Sometimes into anger and estrangement. On occasion stomach pits dropping into fear at mid-morning despite the lucid light.

We are here examining, each in her own way, her ability to move. Physically, geographically. Her chin or arm through air. Her steps across a floor or a continent. Her bike cross country. A car, not necessarily although preferably hers. To propel her self on her own of her own volition. So simple, so basic, so evasive. "Moving the body means life," says Nawal el Sa'adawi, whose account of jumping up and down in prison and moving her legs and arms every single morning there has taught me to exercise every day in my large third-floor bedroom. She is a doctor and a healer and a writer with a good working knowledge of life, and this part is on page 83 of her *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, translated into English by Marilyn Booth and published by the Women's Press Limited in 1986. But every place is the women's prison. Free, uninflicted and unrestricted moving which by this sound knowledge is living, has been scaled down for women. Rationed. Limited not by oceans and mountains but minds, by the culture of our containment. We are meeting in this house in comparison. It is a talking house, made that is of and for our talking, which I am prompting and recording and retelling as faithfully as I can. Yours too if you want. To come in. Or at least as much to go out.

It won't confine us. It's walls are moving. Shifted like a pregnancy from

secret inner places, imperceptibly growing tissue, life accommodating. Mapping us moving. Tortoise-shared, wherever we go it goes. And some of us have moved her self enormous distances, literally wandered the earth. Some of us intend to. Some of us intended to. Some of us won't or don't dare drive a car. She may still cover a lot of ground driven there by others though. One of us was actually doing the driving when it was her father who was taking her thousands of kilometers away.

This inviting talking house of ours may well be the one, or near the one, at Caux on the mountain above Montreux. The one, that is, that June kept for Count Bernard du Plessis van Maesdyck and his parents in 1957 and '58. She cleaned it and helped rebuild it and did the cooking and the washing between trips to Tunisia and southern Italy with Bernard, who finally took along a gun for self defense, when he made a second run to India in the camping van. All this was before she happened onto what was in the closet, which we will certainly have cleaned out and aired by now if this is the house we are gathering in, when June still thought she could bring her son and daughter there to live with her. She stopped planning on that after she'd seen what was in the closet. How could she bring her children into that? A typist, retired by the time we've started our talking, once a Shakespearean scholar and performer, delegate to the United Nations and the World Health Organization concerning the rights of mental patients, seventy-three when I first met her, a Quaker (lately non-Christian) since age twenty-nine, mother of four children of four fathers, living on her own in Geneva, June says, "I thought, but that's the house I've been drawing all these years. It's a three-hundred year old chalet which was sliding down the ravine and he rebuilt it when his Dutch family were trapped in the war in Holland there." She's referring to the second world war. And to the Count du Plessis van Maesdyck. "He was working on the house and getting food for his family because their income was blocked from Indonesia and so on. It was above Montreux. Montreux is near Lausanne, you know, in Switzerland, at the end of the lake. And I saw a slide of this house and since I was a tiny little girl and also in... waiting for... in telephone booths or something... I always draw the same house on a certain hill with white flowers sticking up from the mountain and the sun coming. I sort of fiddle with that. Well this was exactly it. So I thought, 'well my goodness, what's this?'"

"This man was giving a showing of slides of Mount Athos and India. He brought these slides with him on the New Amsterdam boat because his father

was head or director of the company. And he'd shown them on the boat and he'd been showing them all over the United States at universities and so on.

"I saw this marvelous slide of an Indian woman with her sari flowing back and the sunrise obviously just touching her. I turned around, looked at this man and he had the face of a... " She didn't say of a what. And I admit I didn't make a point of asking. "What he needed desperately was someone to arrange for him to give the showing of his slides, 'cause he was living off of this really, while travelling in America. And someone had said that I could do this for him very helpfully you see. So I actually went to bed, wrote twenty-eight letters to people I knew at different universities and so on and he made a very good living in the West Coast of the United States like this." I understand her literally. That is, that bed was where she wrote the letters. I can picture the crumpled sheets and a growing pile of pages in a careful well formed script that she took care not to crumple before she folded them and addressed the envelopes. It goes without saying, *her* saying I mean, that she didn't ask a percentage of this very good living she helped him make.

"I was by that time absolutely determined to get to India and China. To get to India to meet Gandhians and then since Richard Nixon wasn't doing much about it, I was going into China to make friends and influence *people*, you see. As an individual and eventually take my children. But I had to get there first, I hadn't a single penny. So I asked him when he was going next and he said, 'Well, this winter.' I said, 'Do you mind if I come with you?' He said, 'Well that should be all right.' And my poor little daughter was in the car. And she said, 'But Mother, India's so far away!' And I said very soberly, I remember, I said, 'Well honey, you *know* I have to go to India. And anyway, I can always fly home in two days.'" As it turned out it took ten years. That is, to meet her daughter again. "She was ten years old." June says, "She knew all this Ghandi business and all, I mean she had to live through quite a lot of it.

"It's a very exciting thing," she's saying later, "Some of my grandchildren have got it too. The excitement of... the feeling of responsibility. And it keeps us so involved and busy, you see, that there's no way you can get old or go through adolescence in a funny way or anything else. It's a very thrilling thing. It must be at least as thrilling as war, I should suppose, and it's in many cases as dangerous. I had the feeling that this was what I was meant to do, see." June's deep brief laugh is very slightly self-deprecating, apologetic. She is speaking English with a vaguely southern apparently Northern California accent. "Getting out to find the cause—now you'll really laugh—cause and

cure of human violence. I really wanted to be with Ghandians and study non-violence as best I could. And then go on in and teach Shakespeare and whatnot in China. So I asked him if I could go and he said, 'well all right.'

This was soon after Divorce when she says, "Mother and Daddy were not paying my way back to university. I knew that I couldn't continue working in this ten cent store and the whole thing was too much for me. I sold everything I had. First of all I had somebody come in and look at what I had. Just furniture and my big radio and the car... no, my husband had the car. We didn't even have a house anymore. We didn't... I didn't really have anything. And when Mother saw how little this man was going to give me for all these things, after my daughter was supposed to choose what she wanted to keep, she said well she would buy it all. And believe it or not it was some incredible small sum and I had enough to pay for the boat going across and he said that living with his parents and with him I would more than earn my keep by taking care of the old people, doing the washing and all the rest of it." She is talking very fast and getting a little hoarse. We stop and drink peach juice for one or two quiet minutes. She's sitting on the bed with her back against the wall. She needs to put her feet up for awhile—they tend to get swollen in the middle eastern heat. I'm in a wicker chair and the little tape recorder is between us near the edge of the bed.

"I left San Francisco and drove across the continent with him and got on the Holland-America line—New Amsterdam—he was up in first class and I was down in whatever class with two ladies in the same room. And I got over there," to the house at Caux, whose surrounding mountains were thickly populated, June explains, with princesses and dukes and earls, fled to Switzerland for the duration of the war, "and indeed started canning cherries and preparing the meals for his family, doing all kinds of things and was offered two excellent jobs in two very good schools there but I wanted to go to India." Which she never did.

"Women in the former British colonies of the West Indies often live out their lives in quasi-communal domestic units," says Lydia. So you can just as easily fit our house into the Eastern Caribbean islands she's writing about. None of us lives out her life here. Still, this house is clearly related to the women-owned homes on the islands, apparently known as 'yards' or 'houseyards'. "The houseyard as a social institution is grounded in the slavery era." Lydia M. Pulsipher is saying in: 'He Won't Let She Stretch She Foot': Gender relations in traditional West Indian houseyards. This is her contribution to a

book called: *Full Circles Geographies of women over the life course*, which was edited by Cindi Katz and Janice Monk and published in 1993 by Routledge. Between page 107 and page 110 Lydia gives a description of, “the domestic spaces of slaves and freedmen,” which were, “clusters of houses and outbuildings around central activity areas, interspersed with economic plants and animals and inhabited by people linked through kinship and friendship.” And often, “two houses will be joined to create more interior space,” and, “the yard will contain other structures such as detached kitchens, ovens, tool sheds, animal pens, work benches, showers, privies and laundry facilities; and the entire complex will be arrayed with a variety of useful plants: coconut and fruit trees, vegetables, ornamentals, medicinals.”

Visitors at this house—all of us are, in fact—usually take our time to start finding the way around. I take my time to start piecing together a fairly coherent sense, not to say portrait, of whichever woman or women I’m talking to. Or to find out who’s staying over at the moment. You can take your time too, to attach names to voices or life-stories or faces. Or to make out the maze of bags and knapsacks and beds, or to check out behind the shed whether someone finally fixed the rake. You might feel lost when you first come in or when you get back from an absence. It won’t be like you left it. With all of us moving, it moves too—the house. Whenever it is you’re arriving, some of us, inevitably, have already left. And might still be back, which remains to be seen, but in any case have usually left behind some stuff and echoes. And some—recently arrived—haven’t had a chance to meet you yet. And those who have actually been here all the time, might not recognize you, not at first. Or you might not recognize them. Trying to place the women you’re reading, you place yourself—in bewildering but somehow familiar surroundings. Realizing you’re lost is how you realize you’re moving. It’s acceptable, your bewilderment, your bewilderness. You can accept it. At least for a while. Stay disoriented. You’ll find it familiar too—the bewilderment and the house—structured in ingrained ways you’ll find you know how to make sense of, almost instinctively. Take your time, you’ll find bearings.

Build it, this house as a place made and administered by individual women. None of us come here as standard, officially acknowledged families, like the ones that lived in the houseyard of the Jewish-Yemenite family I married into at twenty-one. Still, in many ways ours could be a lot like that one was, before it got sold off bit by bit. Now torn down, it was just off the Tel-Aviv beach, between the cracking minaret of Hassan Beq Mosque and the

sensual overload of the large Carmel Market. My mother-in-law, one of seven sisters and step sisters and one brother, had spent her young adulthood in the first of the five one-room wood structures built for married siblings and their families, around the two-story, two-roomed house owned and occupied by her mother and stepfather, who was the neighborhood iceman and summer watermelon vendor. A wooden chute along the side of the ground floor ice shed, used for sliding out the uncut blocks, served as clandestine slide for the toddler grandsons and maybe at least the boldest of the granddaughters. The married siblings and their children shared several outhouses between them as well as the dirt and tiled yard space which was sub-divided by rows of canned white-jasmine plants, mint, coriander and basil. Cooking with the last, called scent, was unthinkable. Sprigs of it were picked, kept on hand for hours and sniffed, especially by the elderly. The youngest of the children were baby-sat by their still unmarried aunts and older cousins, under Savta's supervision and the threat of punitive confinement in Saba's ice shed, while their mothers washed floors and toilets in richer houses and most of their fathers molded, loaded and laid bricks, outside of the houseyard.

"I just could not stay in this lovely house with its lawns and everything. I had all this money and a lovely, adoring, sexy husband who just loved me and we had our radio program on Shakespeare for schools, half an hour a week, and I had a huge vegetable garden," June says. She's just finished her peach juice and put down the glass. "This was just after the war. I had everything under the sun but I did not have my independence." Only in my notes, apparently between tapes, she says that after her first marriage she made a vow to herself never to marry again, and back on tape she explains, "I'm too independent. It seems that I just function best and feel best, feel most myself, when I'm *by myself*." Towards the end of her marriage, she says, "I needed to be alone a great deal more. A *great* deal more. I was stifling insaneness."

"I looked at these people and I felt strangled, suffocated. Physically as well as emotionally. To spend the rest of my life with these individuals I had known since I was ten years old? Growing up in Capetown, which was a very suffocating, incestuous, golden ghetto Jewish community. I told my mother," Miriam says, "There's so many things I've got to do, I've got to travel, I've got to see, I've got to do! All you want me to do Ma is to get married and live next door to you.' And she said, 'Yes, what's wrong with that?' and I said 'hnnuuunnnhhh,'" Miriam gasps for air for long seconds, "No, no, no, I can't!

"The womenfolk, my mother and her cousins were all brought up in the

same house that I was brought up in. The men used to come twice a year on an oxcart. It used to take them a week to come from the Kalahari Desert to Capetown." Capetown, off the Kalahari Desert, in the new free surging South Africa. *There's a site for our inviting house.* "Pesach and Rosh Hashana," Miriam says, calling the Jewish holidays by the Israeli Hebrew names that have been her acquired language for many years now. Her grandfather and grand uncles were Polish Jewish wool farmers in the Kalahari Desert. One of the brothers' winning lottery ticket had sailed them from Lodz, Poland, to the Kalahari and to their first heads of sheep. Her grandfather had started what for many years after was the only blanket factory in Capetown, whose woolsmell, bales jumped on up and down, clacking looms, Miriam remembers with all her senses. Much like I remember the leathersmell smooth touch dusty light echoing footfalls of my uncle's leather warehouse in Chicago. Or the assorted newsmells of cotton undershirts and socks and sturdy leather shoes piled meticulously into the open, partitioned wood display cases of my grandfather's dry goods store in a Kansas City slum. All these smells are distinctly discernible in our house.

Miriam says, "In my family there are no outsiders. This sort of brother and sister marry brother and sister my grandfather married his niece. My mother was like a tribal chief, you know." When we start our talking Miriam is sixty-three, fighting an immobilizing and long-term illness that has so far resisted diagnosis. Adapting her travelling style to the new constraints, she is still on the travels she began, almost always on her own, over forty years ago at age twenty-one. She and her sister, Doreen, jointly own, operate, and do the buying for, what is nowadays called an ethnic shop. For many years the only one in Israel, where they live, it existed independently of category, classification and competition to which it too has had to adjust in recent years. Miriam is speaking a mixture of English and Hebrew, both with a British South African accent. The mini-tape batteries get progressively weaker while we talk into the night and a lot of added background noise is caused by the strong November breeze blowing off the Mediterranean onto her rooftop veranda.

Her apartment, a short walk from the shop, is on a little quiet street just off the beach, in a sixty-year-old deteriorating and constantly renovating section of mid-Tel-Aviv. Much like you might imagine the talking house, except that you should probably try to place it in a somewhat noisier, less distinguished area. The concrete building is unexceptional and squarish, constructed on concrete stilts over tarmac so that cars can park underneath.

Leaving no garden. And we don't have a rooftop veranda. In the kitchen, the spice cupboard and garbage pail are chronically overfull. But you may get used to their joint slightly offensive odor even when it gets stronger in the heat. The living room is on the north side of the building so it's cooler. There's no air conditioner, which is rare in Israel, even in this neighborhood. Maybe it's because of a certain degree of neglect which accumulates where people keep leaving. The pile of sticky dishes in the sink seems like a permanent fixture even though most of us do our share. The two or three whose attention it always somehow accidentally slips are enough to tip the balance towards some hurtful arguments and a usually dirty sink. Not picturesque. Not even dramatically grimy. A regular dirty sink. Lots of houses have got them. This one too. Miriam's childhood home might not have though.

There are wind chimes clanging in the tangle of plants on her veranda while she's saying, "Age twelve, belonged to a Jewish club or something like that and then it was youth movements, Habonim, Shomer Hatzair. They used to meet in our house. We had this old house, we had an old hayloft." Her voice drops and the recording blurs here, "over where the horses were. But we used to meet below. Everything happened in our house. It had a huge wall around it," now another blur; she is speaking very fast, "built by the slaves," she says only barely audibly, "and a huge big gate."

Imagine us at our talking house coming and going through a huge gate somewhere near the foot of Table Mountain and up and down a tree-lined, gracious driveway. And then like as not bypassing the large main house and striding on towards the slaves' quarters. Ours. Strikingly similar in many ways to the house where Bashan lived with her mother and seven sisters and brothers in the 1950's on the outskirts of Gary, Indiana, USA, even though her ancestors had long been freed from slavery. "We had like a pot-belly stove and this is back in uh the late uh fifties! You know, we didn't have plumbing. We had to use the pump where you go outside and pump the water up and in the winter time it'll freeze. And it just it never was enough to eat in the house, you know." She is even taller than June and strikingly graceful. The Wednesday my daughter was born she found the boys, my two sons, home alone when she came to give the apartment we rented in Tel-Aviv its weekly cleaning. Now Bashan easily swings the eight-year-old up her full height and hugs her when she comes to our house to give me her words.

Possibly filling one of the shacks, in Capetown or in Gary, some of us seated outside on the steps or on the chairs and seats we've constructed and



collected, one of us may be reading aloud in a clear voice to whoever else is there and interested at the moment. All of those who come to the talking house understand and speak English. No coincidence; it's the most commonly used worldmap, almost obligatory for travel. For a few of us, though, it's an acquired medium. In any case, think of a text in Hebrew, translated from, and by the same token commenting on, an original in medieval Venetian. The oral rendering is decipherable to some of us and guttural, often staccato incantation to others. Readings from-and-on the Book of Balkacz, unpublished manuscript in medieval mercantile Italian, researched, translated, and discussed in modern Hebrew. The translation is in the process of being re-translated to English. But for our talkings, running for at least five years now, imagine recitals from the Hebrew. Intermittently, one of us might interpret for anyone who is interested and speaks none. For instance, at the end of a paragraph. The Hebrew translation has them, even though the original doesn't, tentatively surmised from the flow of rarely punctuated mercantile Italian words. We might pause after reading this one on page sixty-eight of the translated manuscript, again about a house, one more possible configuration of our talking inviting one. "Such was the way he described it. His home, easy to depart. To merge from straight into the dense growth and then, invisible by the wiles of wanderers, to move from through the vast forest lands and beyond, either climbing steadily on along the northern mountain ridge or descending back down the rift valley. It would have been very difficult, he said, had anyone so wished, to follow his progress. As such, then, his was an inverted home. A place mainly left and returned to only to re-leave, whose content was located not in but outside of and stretching from it. An interval."

Or someone might ask to interpret another paragraph, a little further down the page, about Balkacz, the male traveller, "An enquiring merchant might be told, 'Balkacz, he can act as guide-man if you don't mind a bit finger-taps-temple. Cain we call him. He knows how to go where he wants. A lot he goes.' But of course, in no way would his informants be committed to his—the merchant's—safety, of which fact he—the merchant—would be well aware. He would realize the need for caution, the danger of placing his body, his goods, his fates in the care of this finger-taps-temple guide-man. Nevertheless, he would at the same time appreciate that Balkacz was unknown to the authorities. Unregistered by the dynasty and its tax collectors. By the governors of travel permits. To the villagers—the merchant would be