

Jewish American Playmate: Is a Nude Jewish Centerfold Really a Watershed for American Judaism?

Interview by Jonathan Lowet

After publishing Shmuley Boteach's conversation with Lindsey Vuolo, Beliefnet sat down with Bradley Hirschfield, Vice President of CLAL - The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership and a modern orthodox rabbi, to hear what he had to say about the November issue of Playboy.

Q: I know you've had a chance to think about the issues surrounding Lindsey Vuolo's pictorial in Playboy and that you've read [Shmuley Boteach's conversation with her](#). What are your thoughts?

When I read about this woman who not only wants to tell the world that she's Jewish, but also wants to tell the world that Jewishness is so central to her personal story, and the obvious pride that she had in both her father's decision to convert and her mother's insistence on her father converting as the entrance price for this relationship -- because "to marry me is to participate in my Jewishness...and that's so important that you'd need to be Jewish also..." -- by the way, I'm not saying that's necessary -- it's interesting that she needs to do that.

In a [Jewish] culture obsessed with intermarriage, it's a funny thing. We spend all this time, money, and energy -- and I hate that I'm part of that "we" -- worrying about intermarriage, and yet here's this woman who only wants to tell how intermarriage for her is not an option, and she's vilified for "doing something that nice Jewish girls shouldn't do." That's a very strange thing. And then she goes on and tells this story about how she gets to Jerusalem and she weeps because she's so connected to Jerusalem.

We spend millions and millions of dollars giving free trips to middle class and upper middle class young people called "Birthright Israel" and they don't have ten percent of the experience that she has. She's a poster child for the single biggest philanthropic initiative in the American Jewish community and once again we say, "Bad Jew." That's weird. Something is fundamentally off. We're investing to create exactly what she embodies and yet, because she embodies it without her clothes on, she's somehow a failed Jew.

Q: How do you respond to Jews who say that posing nude for Playboy isn't a barrier that Jews should be seeking to break?

I want to be very clear. If Jews have a problem with this, it ought to be a problem with Playboy, not with her as a Jewish girl. That is, their discomfort should be

coming from the fact that a magazine is paying women to get naked for a camera.

If it only bothers them when Jewish girls do it, then they would have to admit that they really believe there's some kind of moral superiority that Jews possess. And we both know that's offensive. Because no community should propagate itself off of the premise that its members are morally superior simply because they've come from a certain gene pool.

Q: No "Chosen People" here...

No. You can be a Chosen People, but you'd have to really ask what that chosenness means. And if it means some kind of axiomatic or inherent superiority... That kind of chosenness, it's time to end. That kind of Chosen People doctrine emerged precisely because Jews were treated as less than human, because they were Jewish. The coping mechanism was to say back to the world, "You think we're less than human because we're Jewish? Screw you. We're actually more human because we're Jewish."

But now when you live in the world when hopefully we've grown past -- and certainly in America for Jews we have -- that kind of demonization, it's time to ask what does chosenness mean when you're fully equal.

Q: In 1945, Bess Myerson became the first--and only--Jew to be crowned Miss America. During her year as Miss America, Myerson encountered repeated instances of anti-Semitism. Then in 1969, Hollywood cast the non-Jewish Ali MacGraw to play the archetypical Jewish-American-Princess lead in the film adaptation of Phillip Roth's "Goodbye, Columbus." Does Lindsey Vuolo deserve to be a key event on this timeline?

No question that [the November Playboy issue] belongs on this timeline. Just look at the arc in the story it tells. In 1945, the central challenge did have to do with confronting anti-Semitism. And so that story is basically about being able to beat them at their own game. By 1969, we can begin to tell a story about a Jewish American who's beautiful. But she's only beautiful if you can cast a Gentile... which of course is not an accident. It's a Phillip Roth story. Because the whole Phillip Roth-Woody Allen syndrome was about Jewish boys who couldn't imagine Jewish girls who were so beautiful that they wanted to go to bed with them. And then by 2001, you finally have it set up -- it's a full corrective: you have Jewish men who will go home and they'll masturbate to a Jewish girl for a change.

Q: So this is a true watershed for American Judaism?

Absolutely. It forces us to put down all the weird self-loathing about Jewish bodies and all the Woody Allen-Phillip Roth routine about the fact that the Jewish

mind of Jewish men, of course, are superior...but it's hot gentile bodies that we want.

And, of course, part of what's important about getting past that is...is it's actually not just bad for what it says about what Jews feel about ourselves; it's also implicit there that Gentile women are essentially objects to be used.

That's the whole thing. I don't know whether you've ever heard this before, but growing up, like in Jewish camps and Jewish youth groups, it was always kind of a joke that "shiksas" were for practice. And in all honesty, I don't want to be part of a community that can think that way. And there is a direct line between saying, "Jewish girls shouldn't be in Playboy" -- subtext: it's okay for Gentile girls -- and raising a whole generation of Jewish men who think shiksas are for practice.

So in that way, yeah, I think it's a real step forward. When you can go to Yad Vashem [the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem,] and see [photos of] naked Jewish women who really were thought of as vermin and then you can open up Playboy and see a beautiful Jewish body that's actually being fantasized over by millions of men. I absolutely understand this is not the highest level to reach, but it is the next level in our development.

Q: Is it emblematic of the fact that Jews have finally reached mainstream sex appeal?

I think that's definitely a part of it. There's no question that it's a part of it. What's powerful about it here is that people who would recognize the normalcy in which Jews can be, you know, in sexy ads usually don't imagine that happening with Jews who are as traditionally grounded as this woman is. They don't usually imagine that with a woman who talks about going to synagogue and wanting to read Hebrew and being very concerned about marrying a Jewish guy.

Q: Shouldn't Jews be concerned that, right now, when average Americans are asked to think of a Jewish woman today, they're likely to think of Monica Lewinsky...or Lindsey Vuolo? That Jews are not offering up better women role models to the media?

We do have a whole variety of other women up. There are Jewish women doing all kinds of things. But we're more interested right now in [Vuolo] because she got naked and we have a culture that has some very weird ideas about sex.

The biggest problem with the Playboy centerfold for me, you know from the Jewish perspective, is with the staples. By which I mean that a picture of someone that you clip into something and stare at should never be the thing you aspire to. What you aspire to are real face-to-face encounters in which people connect intellectually, spiritually, and physically.

It's not backing away from the sexuality. But it's making a claim that sexuality in the context of a relationship ought to be richer than sexuality without the context of relationships. That's not just true for Jews. That's why I think I got so upset about this. In the end, none of these so-called Jewish leaders were ever concerned about what Playboy means when you're trying to raise sexually healthy people in American culture. They got upset because a Jewish girl did it. And that's what's off here.

What we need is a Jewish take on human sexuality that would be a resource to all people. Not people using Jewish tradition to beat up on a Jewish woman who, in every other way, fulfills so much of what the organized Jewish community wants.