

ICH BIN DI

# SITRA / ACHRA

(I Am the Other)

SHTERNA GOLDBLOOM

MARCH 4 - JULY 3, 2020 | HADASSAH-BRANDEIS INSTITUTE | KNIZNICK GALLERY



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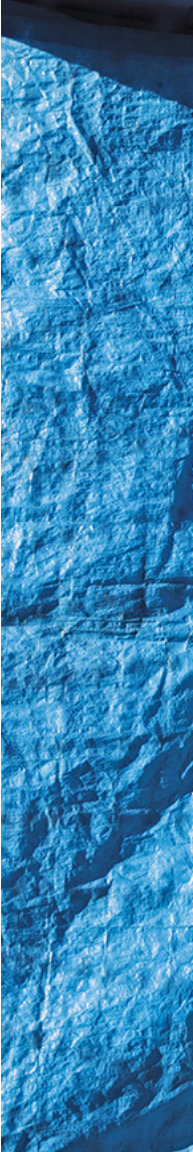
MARCH 4 - JULY 3, 2020 | HADASSAH-BRANDEIS INSTITUTE | KNIZNICK GALLERY

The Hadassah-Brandeis Institute is proud to present “Ich Bin Di Sitra Achra (I Am the Other)” by Shterna Goldbloom. Goldbloom’s wistful photographic self-portraits bridge memories and experiences of the artist’s own Hasidic upbringing, with historical and invented personae. As the artist transforms herself in each composed image through dress, posture and setting, her photographs come together to present a singular but complicated expression of self as a queer Jewish woman.

Goldbloom reinterprets the Hasidic term “Sitra Achra,” used to describe things considered to be on the “other side” of holiness — like queers and women who don’t fit traditional definitions of femininity. In “Ich Bin Di Sitra Achra (I Am the Other),” the artist presents the many faces that can exist between tradition and heresy. Her gesture before the camera makes these conflicting identities visible, giving agency to those who might otherwise be obscured.

**SUSAN METRICAN**

*Rosalie and Jim Shane Curator & Director of the Arts*







AIRING BEDIKAH CLOTHS, 2015





WIND GUSTS THROUGH KRAKOW, 2016

**OTHER  
SIDES** / **OTHER  
LIVES**  
AND

BY TOVA BENJAMIN



In the summer of 2016, I traveled with Shterna Goldbloom to Poland, where we were hoping to find the material traces of our ancestors who once lived there. I was writing, and Shterna was putting together photographs that drew lines between our religious upbringings and secular turns, and traced out her various longings for family, tradition and a synthesis of self. The photos spanned time and place, stretching from the neighborhood in West Rogers Park, Chicago, where we grew up, to medieval castles in Italy, and now, to the post-war roads of Poland. Tying these photos together was the ever-present image of Shterna's face and form, shape-shifting from biblical characters to shtetl girls, her sharp features at once dramatic, dreamy and demanding.

A wrong turn in Łódź brought us to an abandoned cemetery at the outskirts of the city, where Shterna immediately understood that she needed to photograph at sunrise. The resulting image, "Łódź, Poland, Jewish Cemetery, 4 a.m.," shows the evidence of war and neglect: a pile of broken tombstones lies to the left, and a pile of garbage is decaying on the right. At the center stands a perfectly preserved grave, a surreal remnant of the robust Jewish world that once was. Wearing an old-fashioned white blouse, Shterna sits at the corner of the grave, her head cocked to the side and shorn. The braid hanging from the tombstones brings the various themes of her work together. Looking at this image, we feel the pressure of the past weighing on the young girl crouched among the grasses with the sun rising behind her. Is her hair shorn for marriage, or

something more sinister? Is she abandoning her past, or embracing it? Here, Shterna imposes her personal path within the long view of Jewish history. Her work implicitly asks what it means to grow up in the post-war shtetl of Chicago; if the Jewish life that once was can be rebuilt. And, having abandoned the thickly traditional world of Hasidism, she asks what the future holds for her own ghosts.

The exhibition title, "Ich Bin Di Sitra Achra (I Am the Other)" borrows from the mystical concepts of the Tanya, the central text for Chabad Hasidim, which expounds a theory of good and evil that governs human behavior. In Hasidic theology, the Sitra Achra (literally, "the other side") is the antithesis to holiness, the depths of impurity from which nothing, and no one, can be redeemed. In the series' titular image, "Ich Bin Di Sitra Achra," (I am the other side), Shterna literalizes the concepts of holiness and impurity, all the while forcing us to consider the idea that they might not be extreme opposites of one another after all. Her two selves — one dressed in black and boldly staring into the distance wearing a kasket, the other dressed like a traditional Jewish housewife and holding a challah, the dough kneaded and separated by Jewish women alone — are united by veiny red threads. The Shterna to the left has her palm outstretched, where she is receiving the life force handed to her by the woman on her right. Rather than simply ask, "Who am I?" the photo challenges the viewer to consider how identities — gender, religious or otherwise — are made by their opposites, rendering the holy and the unholy interdependent. Behind the two Shterna

characters lies expansive, open space, mountains cut by threads of snow, the same fairy-tale-like quality that surrounds many of the images in the series.

Taken together, the contemplative, dreamy setting of these photos creates an imaginary world of Shterna's own, where the fallen figure of "Blood Line" — eerily ensconced in the stone of the mountain, which wraps around the silent Shterna like a womb — folds neatly into the tattooed, pregnant woman of "Chava," clad in jeans and a sports bra, the threat of suffering and manifestation of sin coiled and hissing behind her. The Shterna wearing a head covering and holding a chicken in "Kaporos" — shadowed by the overlapping blue-green shades of a backyard shed — mirrors the red and white figure airing her stained garments near a countryside home, sheet billowing, in "Airing Bedikah Cloths." In the world Shterna has fashioned out of wigs, open fields and stiff black dresses, her multiple selves collide, her various realities exist at once. At times, it seems Shterna is offering a vision for a future where the queered pregnant self exists on the same plane as the Shterna in a long skirt, having her hair brushed beside classical murals in "Rashi's Daughter." With "Rashi's Daughter," we see a nod to the precedents of troubled Jewish femininity explored in these images (Rashi's daughters famously wore tefillin, a ritual object that women were historically forbidden to engage with). "Who are the exceptions?," the wandering expression in "Rashi's Daughter" seems to wonder. "How did they come to be so?"



BLOOD LINE, 2015

Other times, one isn't sure if the multiple Shternas are offering a vision for the future as much as Shterna the artist is snipping off her various selves one by one, challenging the viewer to let go of these women in headscarves and dresses. Images like "The Shechting" straddle this in-between space, where a hand from outside the photo leans in and snips at Shterna's hair while she bends back as if she is holding a breath, waiting. "Shechting," the Yiddish word for slaughter, is the act that makes the animal clean for consumption. Here, the figure in "The Shechting" must be destroyed in some way to be made kosher, to lose herself in order to become. But still other times, the viewer is left holding their own breath, as the photos lie suspended in time. In "West Rogers Park," the least disguised Shterna stares out the window, ironing materials — those quintessential domestic signposts — forgotten beside her. The photo is awash in the rainy pastels of a silent afternoon, the kind of quiet that feels private. Three windows lie before the Shterna here, two draped over and falling into the shadows, the final window with a trace of her own reflection. The tepid stillness of the photo belies certainty. If "Ich Bin Di Sitra Achra" asks about the long history of Jewish life and traditions, the role of women and gender inside it, and the complications of religiosity in each generation, here we have a glimpse at an answer: one that wants to soak in childhood, in what's known, for a little bit longer, even as it looks out the window, longing for something unseen.



CHAVA, 2016

TOVA BENJAMIN was born and raised in West Rogers Park, Chicago. She was a regular contributor to *Rookie Magazine* from 2014-17. Her writing has also appeared in *The Hairpin*, *Nylon* and the *Rookie* print anthologies, as well as *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*, where she currently sits on the editorial board. Her poetry has appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Poetry Magazine*, *BOAAT* and *Puerto Del Sol*. In 2018, she received *Hunger Mountain's Frank Mosher Short Fiction Prize*. Benjamin is a PhD student at *New York University*, specializing in Russian history, Jewish history and the history of modern criminal justice systems.



WEST ROGERS PARK, 2014



IN BED, 2015

RASHI'S DAUGHTER, 2016





THE SHECHTING, 2016

Shterna Goldbloom received an MFA from Rhode Island School of Design in 2019. Her photography has been exhibited at EXPO Chicago, the RISD Museum, ClampArt Gallery, the Mint Museum and in the Fotovakschool in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. She is the grateful recipient of many prizes, including the Dorner Prize, the Hahnemühle Award, Creators of Culture Grant and scholarships from Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Columbia College Chicago and Rhode Island School of Design. Her work can be seen in *Lilith Magazine*, *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*, v.1, *Vaybertaytsh* and *Judisk Krönika*. Goldbloom is also an award-winning teacher of visual arts and was the double recipient of a Yetzirah Fellowship.



ŁÓDŹ, POLAND, JEWISH CEMETERY, 4 AM, 2016





## SPECIAL THANKS

### KNIZNICK GALLERY

This exhibition and programs are made possible thanks to the generous support of Arnee and Walter Winshall and Suzanne Priebatsch.

*Thank you to HBI Arts Advisory Committee:* Gannit Ankori, Dalya Luttwak, Andi Arnovitz, Caron Tabb, Lara Silberklang, Sivan Shtang; *Friends of the HBI Artist Program:* Judith Batalion, Rita Blitt, Rachel Braun, Tamar Paley, Liliane Targownik, Wendy Wolfe Fine, Barbara Vinick; *Brandeis students:* Jewish Feminist Association of Brandeis (JFAB), Qiang Hu; *Fine Arts:* Sonia Almeida, Sheida Soleimani, Christine Dunant Kahn, Tory Fair, Peter Kalb, Susan Lichtman, Nancy Scott, Jennifer Stern, Aida Wong, Ariel Friedberg; *Division of Creative Arts:* Ingrid Schorr, Ingrid Pabon; *Integrated Design, Communications:* Jessica Quirk, Deborah Wieder, Claudia Herman, Anna Spool, Jessica Tanny; *Facilities:* Ryan Donahue, Milagro Lopez; *AND* J. Hung, Jean Downey, Sean Downey

### SHTERNA GOLDBLOOM

The artist would like to thank Tova Benjamin, Goldie Goldbloom, Kelli Connell, Diana Clarke, Shana and Robert ParkeHarrison, Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Mendel Goldbloom, Steve Smith, Lara Silberklang, Marcel Gallegos and Isabel Mattia

### CREDITS

All photographs are archival pigment prints

**COVER:** Ich Bin Di Sitra Achra, 2015

**INSIDE FRONT COVER:** Ghetto Vecchio, 2016

**INSIDE BACK COVER:** Sara, 2016

### HADASSAH-BRANDEIS INSTITUTE

The Hadassah-Brandeis Institute (HBI) develops fresh ways of thinking about Jews and gender worldwide by producing and promoting scholarly research, artistic projects and public engagement.

One of the only academic centers of its kind, the HBI provides research, resources and programs for scholars, students and the public. The institute publishes books and a journal, convenes international conferences and local programming, and offers competitive awards, residential fellowship and internship programs.

The HBI Artist Program provides an artist the opportunity to have a solo exhibition for 12 weeks at the Kniznick Gallery at Brandeis University. We invite proposals each fall that relate to HBI's mission of developing fresh ideas about Jews and gender.

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