



## The Front Porch

LISA D. GRANT

I've lived in six different houses in four towns over the past 25 years. My favorites of these houses were the two that had front porches. Now, there was a lot about the interior of the houses that I liked as well, but the front porch was what I loved the best.

The front porch is a liminal space — both public and private. It faces the street, making it far more open to the world than a secluded back deck. It also invites visitors into the front hall — the most public of spaces inside the home. Like the *chuppah*, the porch is covered from above and open on the sides; it protects and welcomes.

**The front porch is where public and private Judaism intersect. It welcomes others in, yet protects the home's private space.**


I live in the Northeast where the front porch is a seasonal space. When spring arrives, the neighborhood comes alive. Streets with houses that have front porches are friendlier places, for children as well as adults. If a neighbor sees someone on their porch, they linger for a few minutes to check in and catch up on news. As the days grow longer and warmer, the porch becomes a gathering place, the public square for social interaction where spontaneous conversation may turn into substantive dialogue and debate.

It's unlikely that the late 19th-century Russian Jewish thinker Yehuda Leib Gordon had a front porch. And if he did, I doubt that he would have thought about it as a space that bridges public and private life. Gordon coined what might be called the motto of the Enlightenment: "Be a Jew in your home and a man on the street." He was saying that for Jews to make our way in the world, we must keep our Jewish identity private, secluded, in the confines of our homes or the privacy of our backyard. For my grandparents and immigrants like them, to make it in America, they cast off their Jewish observances in exchange for material and social success. Jewish practices that they kept were relegated to the seclusion of private spaces, or the synagogue, JCC, or federation.

Gordon's notion of a bifurcated identity is less pertinent today where we are blessed with the privilege of living in a pluralistic and open so-

ciety. Politicians, artists, business people, and others are more public as Jews in their professional lives and on the street. Ironically, many are less Jewish at home in a world that allows and even celebrates multiple, partial, and constructed identities. On the street, they can label their actions "Jewish" as a positive and public expression of identity, whether or not their private lives are enriched with Jewish learning and practice.

Perhaps the most obvious place where the blurring of boundaries between public and private occur is in the domain of social activism. Today, we have a Jewish environmental movement; Jews for social and economic justice; Jewish service-learning projects; we even have *Sh'ma*, a journal of Jewish responsibility. And a multitude of Jewish causes exist on Facebook and other social networking sites.

For Jews who have blurred these public-private lines, being Jewish is integrated into all aspects of life. In a metaphoric sense, the home's front porch is anchored to a structure and foundation of Jewish teaching and tradition, but is also open and facing outward to the life of the street. As a liminal space, this metaphoric front porch is where public and private Judaism intersect. It's a way of living as a Jew at home and on the street at the same time. It welcomes others in, yet protects the home's private space. Unlike a back deck that hides from the world, the front porch looks out, offering opportunities to engage in social interaction and meaningful discourse. As a place of safety, comfort, and traditional warmth, it helps us frame life as a Jew and connect our beliefs and behaviors to the work of making a cleaner, safer, more hospitable, and comfortable neighborhood where all can live with dignity, decency, and mutual support. 

### Discussion Guide

*Bringing together myriad voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:*

1. What makes a home Jewish?
2. What books are essential to a Jewish home?
3. When you travel, what Jewish things do you bring with you from home?

Lisa D. Grant, a *Sh'ma* Advisory Board member, is associate professor of Jewish education at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York. Her research and teaching interests include adult Jewish learning, the professional development of Jewish educators, and the role Israel plays in American Jewish life.

June 2009/Sivan 5769  
To subscribe:  
877-568-SHMA  
www.shma.com