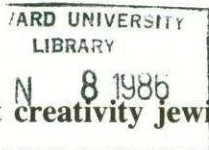


Sh'ma

a journal of Jewish responsibility

16/305, JANUARY 10, 1986

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Keeping feminist creativity Jewish

Arthur Green

Over the past few years Jewish feminists of the more radical order have sought to bring about a major revolution in the liturgical life of the Jewish community. As is typical in the dynamic of movements for change that do not work within clearly defined bounds, each new formulation is quickly dismissed as too "conservative" or "timid" by those who wish to press ever forward. Thus the elimination of "their wives" from the blessing for the community (for are not the women, and not only wives, members of the community in their own right?) gives way to the inclusion of the matriarchs in the *amidah*. This then leads to each reference to "our forefathers" being emended to "our parents," *horenu* unfortunately being a word devoid of any classical associations. Thence the quantum leap to the feminization of divinity itself, beginning with *berukhah at* and ending, at least thus far, with an attempt to reclaim the ancient goddesses of Canaan and a romanticized "new-age" witchcraft.

Some of this is now justified, at least by the more sophisticated spokespersons of the movement, in the name of Jewish mystical theology. If God is ultimately unknowable, so goes the argument, and all metaphors and symbols are but inadequate human representations of the divine, why not goddess as well as God? Once we are less than "Orthodox" in theological terms, is it anything other than bias that places limits on even the most radical forms of innovation?

Since an essay I wrote (published in S. Heschel's *On Being a Jewish Feminist*) is sometimes used as a basis for such a position, I feel that some clarifi-

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cation is in order. I do believe there are limits, though here, as in other matters of practice, determining them is never easy.

As a neo-Kabbalist of sorts I find myself quite sympathetic with the notion that the true mystery of the Godhead lies far beyond all our human attempts at both metaphor and abstract conceptualization. Jews do not need Paul Tillich to teach us (though his reminder helps) that God and "God" are not the same, and that the confusion of the two, or the taking of metaphor as literal truth, can lead to idolatry. *Eyn Sof*, the limitless mystery, remains impenetrable even to the symbolic universe of the *sefirot* (the Supernal "Spheres"). Even "those above," according to the *Zohar*, cannot know it, much less we mere mortals with our needed, but ultimately inadequate, projected images.

The *Zohar* reminds us that the generic Hebrew term for Deity, ELOHIM, is consonantly composed of the two words MI ("Who?") and ELEH ("These"). "These" stands for the totality of images through which we seek to apprehend divinity. Beyond them all there stands an impenetrable mystery, designated as "Who?," one that can be approached only in the interrogative, a question never answered. Recall the words of the prophet, the mystic tells us: "Who created these" (Is. 40:26)—images are called forth by our need to respond to the mystery. Only those who worshipped the Golden Calf proclaimed ELEH ELOHEKHA YISRA'EL ("These are your gods, O Israel!," taking the images for God while ignoring the mystery beyond.

The more Metaphors the less Concretion

The Kabbalist knows well that metaphors can become idolatrous. Surely this is the reason why our mystics' writings are filled with such a great and ever-changing wealth of images. The God who in one moment was seen as light quickly turns into water, then into Temple, Moon, Father, Daughter, Mother, Sabbath, Jubilee, Covenant, Land, Sea, and a host of others. The worlds of both Judaism and nature serve as sources for this seemingly infinite flow of symbolic speech: at times it feels as though there is hardly a noun anywhere in the text of Torah that cannot serve as part of the many symbol-clusters that make up the Kabbalistic picture of divinity. So long as metaphors are kept flowing, the mystics tell us, none of them will be frozen into dogmatic literalism; an image of divinity kept in sustained dynamic motion cannot be defined by any single formulation and cannot stagnate into any single picture.

In posing such a complex and multifaceted notion of divinity, the Kabbalists surely set out to oppose those tendencies in the post-rabbinic world that sought either to define God in Aristotelian categories or chose to depict the deity through the single metaphor of Father/King. Indeed, the images of God as young lover and warrior, fully a part of the Midrashic worldview, had lost much of their currency by medieval times, and only the Kabbalists were able to recover them. Their belief in a dynamic flow of *sefirot* within divinity allowed them to go much further, permitting especially images of the feminine, including both direct female references (Mother, Bride) as well as classic feminine archetypes (Moon, Sea) to enter the domain of Jewish sacred expression. By viewing the Song of Songs as a love-poem expressing a process *within* the divine realm, they were able to greatly expand their own—and our—spiritual horizons.

Achieving Authenticity While Innovating

The success of the Kabbalists in penetrating and transforming the religious imagination of Jewry was truly remarkable, especially given the seemingly heretical character of their message. They succeeded in gaining acceptance largely because their stock of images, as well as their way of applying them, was so deeply and authentically Jewish. They played with Biblical verses, interpreted the commandments, commented on holy books, adorned the festivals, and so forth. However much their conceptualizations may have been influenced by sources extraneous to Judaism (and the matter is in fact still a question of scholarly debate), their *language* was entirely that of the tradition, even if used in startlingly new ways. Ultimately Jews saw that Kabbalists were encouraging their disciples to become “better” Jews, praying and observing with a new fervor, deepening and enriching the language of tradition as it was to be passed on to future generations.

Living as they did in Catholic Spain, Kabbalists even flirted occasionally with images reminiscent of Christianity. There is a “son” figure within the Kabbalistic universe, though the Zohar quickly adds, so as to avoid confusion, that there is a divine “daughter” as well. Never did they turn outside of Judaism for their religious language; clearly a Kabbalist who spoke of Jesus as personified in one of the *sefirot* would have stepped outside the clearly defined bounds of the Jewish symbol system, and would have been duly anathematized.

Identity is, in Part, who we are not

In this sense, I would submit, the boundaries of Judaism have not changed, nor should they. Ours

is a religion inhospitable to syncretism. We may recognize a close spiritual kinship with some worshippers of God in Jesus, or even with the more culturally distant devotee of Krishna or Vishnu. Surely we have much in common with these spiritual cousins as we together seek the spiritual renewal of a desacralized universe.

But we know they are not Jewish, that they are not part of our own faith-community, one that has an ongoing duty to both preserve and renew its own particular religious language. The same is true, perhaps even more so, of any attempt to resurrect the deities of ancient Canaan against which the religion of Israel stood so firmly. Both gods and goddesses, be they Baal or Marduk, Ashoret or “Elilah” (a newly discovered seeming generic for “goddess”) have always been anathema to the Jewish religious consciousness, and so they will remain.

Like any symbol system that has existed in history, Judaism has been defined over against those cultural systems with which it has come into contact, and the clock of history cannot be turned back:

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Production Weinglas Graphic Services, Inc.

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Sh'ma welcomes articles from diverse points of view. Hence, the opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the editors. Donations to Sh'ma Inc. are tax-deductible. Sh'ma is available in microform from University Microfilms Internat'l., Ann Arbor, Mi.

Long book reviews appear quarterly; shorter ones regularly. Unsigned reviews are by the Editor.

Address all correspondence, subscriptions and change of address notices to Box 567, Port Washington, N.Y. 11050.

Sh'ma (ISSN 0049-0385) is published bi-weekly except June, July and August, by Sh'ma Inc., 735 Port Washington Blvd., Port Washington, N.Y. 11050. Subscriptions \$22 for two years in U.S. and Canada; \$12 a year overseas. Ten or more to one address, \$6 each year. Retired or handicapped persons of restricted means may subscribe at half price.

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POSTMASTER: Please forward Form 3579 to Box 567, Port Washington, N.Y. 11050.

Second class postage paid at Port Washington, N.Y. and at additional entry Bethpage, N.Y.

JANUARY 10, 1986

Christ is not Allah, rabbi is not magus, fowl is not fish. This has nothing to do with our recognition that there is indeed but one God, underlying both our inadequate symbol systems and those of our neighbors.

The time may indeed have come when Jewish feminists will need to create a religious language that speaks to their own needs and addresses their own reality. This can be done with recourse to that which educated Jews, sensitive to religious language, will not consider abomination. *Shekhinah* (God's "Presence") is a good Jewish word, having behind it many centuries of female association. Alternating blessings between *barukh ha-elohim* ("Blessed is God") and *berukhah ha-elohut* ("Blessed is divinity") may be helpful to some who prefer the language of religious abstraction. References to God as *malkat ha-'olam* ("queen of the universe") or the parody-like quality of *immenu malkatenu* ("Our Mother, our Queen") may in fact backfire in their purpose.

The truth is that the God of Israel, though described chiefly by masculine nouns and verbs, is a relatively genderless male deity; Jews simply do not think, to put it bluntly, of God as a being with a male sex organ (*pace* the Kabbalists). By dividing the liturgy in half by use of grammar and image, the maleness of traditional language seems inevitably to be exaggerated.

We live in times of terribly frightening potential division among the Jewish people. Already Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews cannot pray together, a situation that should cause us all more distress than it does. Let us not create a time when, even within the heterodox Jewish communities, men and women will have to pray separately as well.

If there be a need for women's liturgical innovation, let it be done with sensitivity to the nuances of what is Jewish, with taste, and with a moderation that will allow us liturgical traditionalists not to be utterly alienated. Above all, let Jewish feminism clearly proclaim itself as spiritually and linguistically Jewish, cutting itself off clearly from any attempt at new-paganism or the revival of witchcraft, however wrapped it may be in quasi-Jewish garb. □

Making jewish creativity feminist

Ronnie Levin

Jewish tradition did not spring fully formed at Sinai. Although Art Green posits a clearly defined

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"Jewish religious consciousness," actually, in no period of Jewish history has there been a singularity or uniformity of approach, opinion, or practice. Just read a page of the Talmud, listen to the vehement attacks of the early geonim upon the Palestinian traditions, or observe the inclemency of the Mitnagged denouncement of the Hasidim: Jews have always held (usually strongly) divergent, often conflicting, views.

Jewish tradition is characterized by its resilience, as was evident after the destruction of the First Temple, when without priest, Temple, and sacrifice, the Judaeans became Jews and Israelite religion birthed Judaism. Needless to say, over the course of the millenia Judaism has absorbed many internally inconsistent and conflicting ideas, dwarfing the difference between most modern Jews who believe in egalitarian services and those who don't.

Tefillah is Organic

Tefillah (Jewish prayer) is the most obvious manifestation of Judaism's adaptability. Only the advent of the printing press fixed the etiquette of Jewish prayer, doing so as no halachic dictum ever could: what was in was In, and "everyone" used the identical text.

Our *siddur* (prayer book) is not an organized compendium of tightly tuned spiritual songs. Rather, it is an anthology, never canonized, that has accompanied the Jewish people, dogging our steps, one that now mirrors the trials and tribulations as well as the spiritual inspiration of 3,000 years of Jewish history. It is as inappropriate to try to keep modern Judaism out of the *siddur* as it is dishonest to describe *tefillah* as inhospitable to outside influence. In this, it is so-called "orthodox" Jews who have broken with the past and set themselves outside Jewish tradition.

This is not to say that change has occurred smoothly. But it has occurred. Indeed, many venerated and loved liturgical traditions are comparatively recent; for instance, the mourner's *kaddish* (apparently first used for mourning in the 13th century during a period of severe persecutions under the Crusaders); the *yizkor*—memorial—service (the inclusion of a memorial service on the festivals and *Yom Kippur* was opposed officially as late as Hai Gaon, circa 1000, and was not popularly recited until the 17th century); and the *Kabbalat*—welcoming—*Shabbat* service (which was largely created by 16th century mystics). This means that we *didn't* have these ceremonies longer than we *have* had them, and that most of them were unknown to Rashi and the Rambam. But none of this impugns the credibility or the efficacy