

The Creation of Liturgy for Jewish Women

by Paulana Layman

L'auteure examine le processus de transformation de la liturgie juive traditionnelle pour inclure les rituels des femmes.

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In March of 1994, four women met to compile the *Haggadah*, the liturgical prayerbook which recounts the story of the Jewish exodus from slavery in ancient Egypt, for recitation at a women's *seder* being held at Montreal's Hillel Centre for Students. Coming from different religious backgrounds, we had little in common except that we were all students interested in creating the liturgical foundation for a Jewish women's ritual that has been evolving for the past 20 years. The trailblazing efforts of the Seder Sisters in New York and the Women's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education in San Diego gave us the confidence and published precedents to create our own ritual.

This is not to say, however, that the path to our *seder* was a smooth one. Some men, well-meaning and not, approached us to ask why they were being excluded. Why was this so important to us? In her book, *Standing Again at Sinai*, a work which has set the standard for all future writings on Jewish feminism, Judith Plaskow describes the primacy of liturgy and ritual to us.

Historically, the primary vehicle for transmission of Jewish memory has been prayer and ritual, the liturgical reenactment and celebration of formative events. Midrash can instruct, amuse, edify, but the cycles of the week and year have been the most potent reminders of central Jewish experience and values.... Liturgy and ritual, therefore, have been particularly important areas for Jewish feminist inventiveness. (57)

The Women's *Seder*, then, was a formal and physical manifestation of the values that we, as members of the Jewish Women's Project, were interested in expressing.

We discovered, during the course of the compilation of our *Haggadah*, that several problems presented them-

selves. One of the main issues became the use of God language. On one hand, we wanted to maintain a relatively traditional feel to our *seder*. We wanted to avoid past criticisms of women's *seders* which contended that they lacked a Jewish spirit. If we maintained traditional references to a male gendered God, however, we were merely perpetuating the very inequity a women's *seder* was invented to remedy. On the other hand, wholesale replacement of traditional language for female pronouns and names had its own set of problems. As one member of our committee put it, when objecting to the use of the word *Shekhinah* (the alienated feminine portion of God), "It feels like we are invoking the Holy Ghost." We decided on the compromise of leaving half the prayers in a traditional format with the other half open to our creativity. Where the second cup of wine, then, was blessed with the prayer *Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu, melech ha-olam ...* ("Blessed are You, our God, King of the world ..."), the third cup prayer read *Brucha At Makar Hachayim, eema haolam ...* ("Blessed are You, Source of Life, Mother of the World...").

Other problems were not as neatly resolved. When it came to the ten plagues, for example, we could not reconcile whether to present those found in the *Haggadot* of our childhoods or those which described modern problems afflicting women such as lack of access to "traditional education." We decided on the option of presenting both lists side-by-side and making our dilemma the topic of discussion for the participants in the *seder*. This problem is not one exclusive to our group. In "Seeking a Feminist Judaism," Julie Greenberg explains:

Joanna Katz, reflecting on the same dilemma, suggests *sidorim* with the traditional prayers on one side of the page and with current versions on the other so that what we are actually teaching is the possibility of transformation. (199)

In order to reconcile their relationships with their fellow Jews, Jewish feminists have had to understand their relationship with God. We have been taught from the earliest age that the Jewish understanding of the Divine is a concept devoid of specific gender. It is therefore with great concern that girls encounter the world of prayer where God is referred to in Hebrew using only male pronouns. To be fair to the Hebrew language, neutral words do not exist. A noun has to be either feminine or masculine. Why, then, has the choice of words to describe God been almost exclusively male gendered?

Many Jewish feminists, in an attempt to remedy this situation, have suggested that a good compromise is to intersperse male pronouns with female ones—"God/He"

with "God/She." This practice, of course, runs the risk of leaving itself open to the criticism of praying to a variety of gods and goddesses. Ellen M. Umansky points out that the term *Elilah*, a term used by some to feminize the divine name, is also a feminine term for idol: "... although Jews may worship the Divine as *El*, *Elohim*, and *Elyon* (God on high), to worship the Divine as Goddess is tantamount to idolatry" (191). The foundation of Judaism lies in its outright rejection of polytheism. However, to understand God in feminine terms does not, necessarily, imply a worship of a different entity but rather a worship of a different aspect of one self-same entity. This concept of "pluralistic

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monotheism" is described by Norma Baumel Joseph:

... the concept of God ... has infinite sources within it. Once you say "infinite," it means that I can view God as my mother, as Shekhinah, imminent. All the aspects that a polytheist might have envisioned separately, I can see in holistic terms as sparks of the one God.... So I can say that I pray to God in female imagery and still believe that I am a monotheist ... the Bible is fighting against polytheism ... but it is open to pluralistic monotheism. (124)

In *The Women's Haggadah*, Esther Broner refers to the Divine presence as "Shekhinah" (3). In our *seder*, she became "Mother of the world" in some sections and "king" of the world in others. This appeased our sense of fair play. Letty Cottin Pogrebin writes about the desire to encompass traditional and modern references: "I want old cadences and new ideas, old rhymes and new rhythms; meter both feminist and *frum* (observant)" (78). The sense that using female gendered words to describe the Divine is rebellious is lessened as we get used to hearing them. A concept is only "exotic" or "foreign" when one has been sheltered from it out of fear. Rita Gross, in becoming accustomed to using female pronouns, feels that this is, "... the way things would be except for a massive skewing and programming of religious consciousness" (168). This act of inclusion allows Jewish women to infuse their understanding of the Divine with their own experiences and thoughts.

These concessionary acts, however, do not come without their share of criticism from within the Jewish feminist community. As women become more familiar with the liturgical make-up of prayer, they also become more aware of uncomfortable aspects of the content of Jewish texts.

This process of confrontation involves a more thorough delving into that which the religion holds dear. In her article "Beyond Egalitarianism," Judith Plaskow explains how, as Jewish women gain greater access to synagogue life and prayer, they encounter this difficult situation.

These new opportunities, however, have brought women up against the content of the tradition, and in doing so, have pointed to the need for changes far deeper and more frightening than the process of simply making available to women what all in the community acknowledge to be of value. (272)

One specific critique lies in the fact that God is often portrayed in Jewish prayer as an entity which dominates and rules. Plaskow purports that a dominating God reflects the social position of human males. She explains that, "... the use of gender neutral or even female language does not itself guarantee that images of dominance have been addressed" (1991, 128). Marcia Falk adds that, "... a feminized patriarchal image is still patriarchal, though now in transvestite masquerade" (129).

Jewish women have begun to create new metaphors for God altogether. Several books are now being published on the manner in which women can and are creating new blessings and prayers. Falk puts it succinctly when she writes, "In the end, it comes down to this: what I would like to see, I must bring into being" (130). Falk illustrates the process she undertook to reconstruct the Sabbath blessing over the bread. What is interesting to note is that the second half of the prayer—*ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz* ("who brings forth bread from the earth") appealed to her sensibilities. Her discomfort lay with the first half of the blessing which refers to God as *melekh ha-olam* or "king of the world." She envisions, moreover, a divine presence who is a nurturer who provides food. She, therefore, invokes the feminine noun *eyn* meaning "fountain" or "well" as a divine image, making a feminine conjugation of its accompanying verb necessary. Furthermore, instead of the gender specific *baruch ata* she uses the term *n'varekh* which is gender inclusive. Her prayer therefore reads *N'varekh et eyn ha-hayyim/ha-motziah lehem min ha-aretz* ("Let us bless the source of life/that brings forth bread from the earth") (Falk 133). While a completely new image has been created to represent the divine concept, the prayer is not so far from the words one is used to hearing as to render it unrecognizable. It would appear that this form of inventiveness represents a more complete compromise reflecting newer values while adhering to the spirit of the more traditional prayer. In the words of Letty Cottin Pogrebin, it is a "Judaism of compromise but not of complacency" (81).

From words to action

One cannot discuss liturgy in isolation from the rituals they are meant to accompany. It is difficult to ascertain

which problem was the impetus for the other: was it lack of ritual that led to the creation of prayer or vice versa? Either way, the cupboards were very bare for Jewish women. The paucity of ritual for Jewish women was especially glaring to all those who chose to look for its absence. Esther Broner, an author who is especially adept at perceiving what many do not, notes that:

There was nothing that marked women. There was no parade to mark the daily heroic. There are changes we see: noticing that your daughter has started to bleed and that her life is forever different. Nothing

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happens to honour that at home or in the house of worship. It is noticing, at the other end, when you have stopped bleeding ... and nobody comes by and touches you and says, "I name you a crone." (20)

It was necessary to fill in the gaps. As with liturgy, there were a number of ways in which this could be accomplished. For brevity's sake, only two of these perspectives will be highlighted. Drorah O'Donnell Setel refers to the first as "liberal Jewish feminism." This, she states, is a, "... model of equality in which women seek access to existing (male) institutions" (79). This not only allows women equal participation in such aspects as being counted in the ten man quorum necessary for traditional public prayer but also allows rituals parallel to men's such as the bat mitzvah. Bat mitzvah ceremonies, which acknowledge a young woman's coming of age, mirror the bar mitzvah for young men. It is a good example of a ritual which has been integrated into institutionalized North American Judaism in an almost universal manner. As Rabbi Deborah Brin points out, with reference to the first bat mitzvah of Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, in 1922:

At that time, it was perceived as a radical shocking event, but now seventy years later, the bat mitzvah ceremony for girls is an integral part of how Judaism is practised in North America. (71)

As with parallel substitution in liturgy, this type of ritual creates a problem: the non-critical acceptance of these rites. In O'Donnell Setel's esteem, despite the fact that liberal Judaism has accomplished much, it "... has done little to address or critique the male orientation of the institutions and practices to which it has admitted women" (79).

The school of thought which addresses the areas of life where women have traditionally been neglected is, as termed by O'Donnell Setel, the "separatist perspective." This perspective puts forward the belief that women and men have distinct spiritualities and should have separate rituals which reflect this. It is out of this philosophy that birth ceremonies for girls have emanated. As with bat mitzvot, simchat bat or brit chayim present an example of celebrations which are now standardly accepted in many Jewish denominations (O'Donnell Setel). These rituals range from a synagogue-based prayer for the daughter to a home-based ceremony incorporating traditional and newly-created prayers.

What is especially interesting about the separatist perspective is that it unites Jewish women who otherwise would have very little in common. O'Donnell Setel explains:

Within Judaism, separatist feminism brings together women who are otherwise at the two furthest ends of the religious spectrum: extremely Orthodox women and extremely radical separatist women. (78)

Regarding our women's *seder*, this played itself out in very real terms. Those of our group who labelled themselves "liberal feminists" came face to face with those calling themselves "Orthodox feminists" and made for an interesting blend. The "liberal feminists" brought new imagery and symbols to the *seder* while the "Orthodox feminists" brought their fluency in traditional prayer. An example of this was found when, dissatisfied with the abridged version of *Birkat Ha-Mazon* ("Grace after Meal"), Orthodox women led us in a joyous rendition of the unedited version from their own prayer books.

The importance of the women's *seder*

Passover remains the most important ritual for Jewish feminists. Jack Wertheimer lists some of the reasons why this is so:

... it is the most widely celebrated of all Jewish holidays; it is thematically focused on liberation; it has traditionally been a time when women shoulder the burden of preparation; and the Exodus narrative itself draws attention to the roles of women—Yocheved and Miriam, Shifra and Puah. (73)

His mention of the slavery to liberation theme is an especially important one. Jewish women find that Passover provides a traditional model of a people who, like themselves, were oppressed and triumphed to escape their slavery. While they do not feel they have reached their goal yet, their hope lies in the success story of the ancient Israelites. As Letty Cottin Pogrebin explains, "Women's Exodus is not complete. Our Sinai is still to come" (127). To represent the enslavement that Jewish women feel,

several parts of the traditional service are re-worked. The bitter herbs now represent the suffering of our foremothers. The plagues have been transformed to include women's miseries such as "discrimination" and "invisibility." These parts of the *seder* fall into the category of liberal feminism where women are demanding equal access to historical symbols. Other parts are results of imaginative innovation created specifically for this occasion.

In our *seder*, we asked each woman to come prepared with an example of their personal pharaoh (the women were asked what oppression in their daily lives paralleled the Israelite oppression under ancient Egyptian rule). This is a physical symbol of that which personally oppresses the individual and which must be overcome in order to achieve liberation. One woman brought a rape whistle which she carries with her constantly. She, like many of the women present, felt oppressed by the fact that women cannot walk home alone in safety. While this is not specifically a Jewish woman's problem, it was expressed in a sacred setting using the symbol of historical Jewish oppression.

Besides using the tools of Passover to express our suffering, there is another crucial aspect to the women's *seder*—reclaiming the Jewish heroines who have been largely neglected in the *Haggadah*. Foremost in this restoration of the lost half of our history is the story of Miriam. This is the woman who saved Moses, arranged for their birth mother to act as his wet nurse, and led the Hebrew women through the Red Sea with songs and music. She is one of the few women who is dubbed "prophetess" in sacred literature. Yet she dies after suffering the divine wrath of leprosy. Women's *seders* have chosen her as the central figure whose story must be told both through available traditional writings and by creating new *midrashim* where the blanks must be filled. In her introduction to *The Women's Haggadah*, Esther Broner explains why Miriam holds such importance:

Although Miriam is the parentheses of Exodus, beginning it by peering at the baby Moses and ending it singing at the Reed Sea, she is a structure, a construct. What had been omitted from her history was also omitted from our mythic past. It was clearly time for a new Telling. (5)

Miriam not only becomes the central figure of the stories in the *seder* but the honoured "prophetess" to whom we pray. Mirroring the dues given the prophet Elijah, our *seder* opened the door for her entrance, set aside a glass of wine for her, and sang her praises. While she is not the only woman brought to memory for the ritual, she is the cornerstone. She allows us to comprehend that the Hebrew Bible has acknowledged the powers of women despite the fact that their stories are partial ones. The laconic nature of these traditional stories, however, gives them their strength. It allows each generation to interpret and elaborate upon them making them relevant for each era.

Conclusion

The women's *seder* at Hillel provides a microcosm of larger dilemmas facing the Jewish feminist community at large. In the area of God language, women are rectifying years of inequity both by inserting female pronouns alongside male ones and by inventing a whole set of new descriptive images.

Liturgy, however, is never written without the larger goal of having it accompany specific rituals. These rituals have ranged from the concessionary liberal bat mitzvah to the separatist simcha bat. Both are examples of ceremonies which for their time were daring but now are incorporated into the bulk of mainstream North American religion.

As for the infiltration of the women's *seder* into mainstream celebrations: last year, for the first time, my family welcomed both Elijah and Miriam to our *seder*, in alternating verses!

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