



### Feminist prayer

*Marcia Falk*

Feminist prayer: it began as a "women's issue." God was always a male, and that didn't seem right—or should I say accurate?—to those of us who weren't. After all, we too had been told that we were created in God's image. When we raised this objection, the defenders of the tradition explained that He wasn't really a "he," and chided us for our literal-mindedness. Still, they steadfastly refused to pray to God as female, even once in a while. So we started experimenting on our own. Instead of *barukh atah adonay* (blessed are you, Lord) Jewish women in various places began saying *b'rukhhah at shekhinah* (blessed are you, *Shekhinah*). Almost immediately the reaction rang out (from those same defenders of the faith): "*B'rukhhah at? Do you mean 'goddess'? This is paganism!*" But, we protested *Shekhinah* is a good Jewish word, a traditional Jewish name for Divinity. Yes, they agreed, *Shekhinah* was *kosher*, so long as we remembered that she wasn't really God, she was just an *aspect* of Him. The real God was *Adonay*. We seemed to be taking the name for God too seriously, as though it were as legitimate as theirs. Or as though theirs was only a name—a metaphor, that is—just like ours; as though they didn't really mean "he" when they said "He"; as though they believed what they were telling us when they warned against literal-mindedness.

MARCIA FALK's book of translations from the poet *Zelda*, *Strange Plant*, is forthcoming from the Jewish Publication Society. \*New blessing copyright 1986 by Marcia Falk.

### Knowing, Discovering, Unknowing

That was the first stage, and I wish we could say that it was over. But, although feminist Jews have gone beyond merely substituting female counterparts for the male images in our prayers, we still find ourselves in the often annoying position of having to explain why it is necessary to change the prayers at all. Meanwhile, on our own, when our energy is not drained from explaining and defending what we are doing, we have been delving into the deeper issues that have arisen out of our initial concerns. For example, in objecting to God the King, we found that God the Queen was not a satisfactory alternative. Because, we discovered, Divinity means more to us than a principle of transcendent rule; even power can be imagined as something other than "power-over." So instead we began to talk about empowerment, about Divinity as that which enables us to be our individual selves, and as that which bonds us when we unite as a community.

And more than this—as we have been talking, meeting, praying together, feminist Jews have come to realize that we are many, even as we are part of the One. Our diversity characterizes us as much as anything else, and that is why it is so hard for us to choose a single set of words to represent us, so hard for any one of us to speak for all of us—as articles such as this one sometimes seem to do. What do feminist Jews think about prayer? Almost everything you can think of. And so our prayers, our God-language, must be diverse enough to include and affirm us all. In this sense, perhaps the most crucial feminist insight into prayer-talk has been the realization that one name

does not equal one Divinity. The monotheistic vision can *only* be realized through a multiplicity of names and images, a diversity broad enough to include, and thus unite, all of creation.

### **We Seek the Inclusive One**

Inclusivity. This has been a focus of our feminist vision. And unity, a focus of our feminist-Jewish theology. But we are also conscious of our particular story, our journey as part of the community of Israel, as the unwritten half of Jewish history. As feminist Jews, most of us yearn deeply for historical and communal Jewish connections. And so we try, when writing new prayers and creating new ceremonies, to weave them out of Jewish material: the Jewish themes that have nurtured us, the Jewish principles that have guided us, the Jewish structures that have become familiar to us and have made us feel at home.

Contrary to the perception held by some who see us only at the greatest distance—a distance which is most often self-imposed—the truth is that feminist Jews want *in, into the tradition*, not out. As women—the half of humanity most often viewed as “other” in tradition—we have learned that denial of one’s identity is a fruitless and suicidal act. We have learned to take the externally-imposed view of ourselves as “other” and replace it with a self-embracing self. So as feminist Jews, we do not reject Jewish tradition, for we recognize that we come from it; we *are* it. Instead, we claim our right to the tradition, our right not just to participate in it as we receive it but to create the terms of participation. Our right not just to have our foremothers included in the prayers but to have their images, *our* images, reflected in the God to whom (or to which) we pray. Our right not just to own Judaism, but to *make it our own*.

And so feminist-Jewish prayer takes many forms, and our words have been varied and various; tentative, courageous, experimental, poetic, prosaic, moving, moving on. My own efforts to create prayer have emerged out of a conjunction of personal desire and community support. I have needed new prayers and I have felt needed. So I write.

### **Words, Names, Souls, Truths**

Recently I was asked to create a blessing for the sixtieth birthday of a Jewish woman who wanted to affirm her stage of life in a Jewish context. She chose to take on a new name—as Abram and Sarai had received new names when they entered a new phase of their lives—a name to signify a new passage, a new aspect of her identity. So I began thinking about names, about how important they have been in Jewish tradition; how we remember

our foregoers by their names; how a soul without a name is forgotten; how the many names of Divinity have been repressed, just as women’s identities have been repressed and erased from our collective memory. And I decided to celebrate the Divinity in all our names, in all our holy namings. To bless, to sing with human breath, the heart, the soul of all names. For in Hebrew, the soul (*n’shamah*) is connected to breathing (*n’shimah*). And in Hebrew liturgical tradition, the soul of every living being (*nishmat kol hay*) blesses God. Yes, and the relationship is reciprocal: Divinity inheres in—and thus blesses—the soul of all living things, the soul in every name and the names of all our beings. And as Divinity blesses us with the power of naming, so we sing:

*Nashir l’nishmat kol shem ul’shem kol n’shamah.*

Let us sing the soul in every name and the names of every soul.\*

May Jewish women’s prayers continue to abound and increase, and may they increase the power of naming, of claiming identity, for us and for all of Israel. □

### **God: some feminist questions**

#### *Judith Plaskow*

An extraordinary passage in *Pesikta Rabbati* (21.6) describes the many guises in which the one God has appeared to the children of Israel. God spoke to the Israelites on Mount Sinai not “face to face” (Deut. 5:4) but “face after face.” “To one he appeared standing, and to one seated; to one as a young man and to one as an old man.” Showing them a plurality of aspects, each appropriate to some part of the divine message, God revealed a threatening face and a severe face, an angry face and a joyous face, a laughing face and a friendly face.

This midrash at once points the way out of the feminist dilemma of God-language and simultaneously illustrates its most trying aspect. It acknowledges the legitimacy, indeed the necessity, of plural ways of perceiving and speaking about the one God. It asserts that multiple images of God are not contradictions of monotheism but ways in which limited human beings apprehend and respond to the all-embracing divine reality. And yet while the passage authorizes theological and liturgical inventiveness, the many faces of God it describes are only male ones. God is an old man

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