

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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JUDITH PLASKOW teaches religious studies at Manhattan College.

SIMCHA BUNAM  
"WHY WAS ONCE ASKED...  
IN THE SAINTED FOOTSTEPS  
OF YOUR FATHER?"

"I do," he said, "I do.  
My father didn't follow in his father's footsteps  
And I don't follow in my father's."



or a young man, a man of war or a man of wisdom, but never a woman.

This unyielding maleness of the dominant Jewish image of God is not the end of the feminist critique of God-language, but it is its beginning. The absence of female metaphors for God witnesses to and perpetuates the devaluation of femaleness in the Jewish tradition. The God-language of a religious community is drawn from the qualities and roles the community most values, and exclusively male imagery exalts and upholds maleness as the human standard. It belies the biblical insight that God created human beings, male and female, in God's image. It denigrates women's lives and experiences as resources for knowing the sacred.

#### Transforming Meaning not just Old Terms

As this language has become increasingly alienating to large numbers of women, those committed to shaping a living Jewish spirituality and theology have looked for ways to change it. They have sought a richer and wider range of images for speaking about and to the sacred. The *Pesikta Rab-bati* passage seems to suggest that of those who saw God on Sinai "face after face," it was only the men who recorded and passed down their experiences. Feminists have taken on the task of recovering and forging a female language for God—female not simply in its metaphors but in its mode of religious apprehension and expression.

But if feminist attempts to find a new vocabulary for God began in the concern with gender, they have not resulted in a uniform response to the oppressiveness of traditional language. Rather feminist explorations of God-language have gradually opened up deeper dimensions of the problem of God. Early feminist efforts to make God a mother and give her a womb, to praise her as birthgiver

and nourisher, performed important functions. They validated women's sexuality and power as part of the sacred. They pressed worshippers to confront the maleness of a supposedly sex-neutral liturgy. Yet at the same time, these efforts often left intact images of dominance and power that were still deeply troubling. If the hand that drowned the Egyptians in the Red Sea was a female hand, did that make it any more a hand feminists wanted to worship?

The issue of the maleness of God-language has thus ineluctably moved to the question of the nature of the God feminists want to pray to. Where do Jewish women find God in our experience, and what do we find there? What images most powerfully evoke and express the reality of God in our lives?

#### The Guises of the Empowering Other

While these questions lend themselves to unanimity even less than the issue of gender, there is a theme that seems to sound strongly through a range of feminist discussions of God-language: the need to articulate a new understanding of divine power. If the traditional God is a deity outside and above humanity, exercising power over us, women's coming to power in community has generated a counter-image of the power of God as empowerment. Many Jewish feminist arguments about and experiments with God-language can be understood to revolve around the issue of how to express this new image and experience of power in a way that is Jewishly/feministly authentic.

For some Jewish feminists, for example, it is non-personal imagery for God that most effectively captures a conception of divine power as that which moves through everything. Metaphors for God as source and fountain of life evoke the deity

that is wellspring of our action without tying us to gendered language that channels and confines. For other feminists, the question of divine power lends new interest to the continuing debate about the viability of the image of *Shekhinah* in a feminist Judaism. This image, which at first seemed to promise such a clear Jewish way to incorporate female language into theology and liturgy, also has been resisted by many feminists as part of a system that links femaleness to immanence, physicality and evil. In the context of the quest for new metaphors for power, however, this image of deity provides an interesting resource for feminist thinking about a God who dwells in the world and in the power of human relation. For still other feminists, it is incorporation of the names of goddesses into feminist liturgy that best conveys multiple images of female power, images that may have had power to our foremothers and that thus connect us in community to them. Use of these images does not constitute polytheism any more than do the multiple images of *Pesikta Rabbati*. Rather, these images fill out the traditional record, exploring and recovering faces of God that have been forgotten or expunged.

#### The Old/New Search for the Ineffable

These forays into new imagery are experimental and tentative, and there are many Jews for whom some or all of them will seem shocking or foreign. Yet if we attend to the roots and intention of these lively experiments, we can find in feminist experience a potentially powerful resource for the revivification of Jewish religious language. The feminist experience is one of finding in community both a sense of personal identity and power and the power and knowledge of God. This experience may not be so different from that of the early Israelites who found together in community both a new national identity and connection with the God who gave it. From a feminist perspective, the

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ANN ZAIMAN draws and calligraphs in inks and watercolors in Baltimore, Maryland.

problem with traditional Jewish God-language is that the initial experience of empowered community found expression in images that established hierarchy within the Jewish community and that marginalized or excluded half of its members. The challenge to women as we seek to name the God we have experienced "face after face," is to find language that carries through the experience of divine power in community and that evokes the living presence of God in the whole Jewish people. □

#### What? purim the 10th of shevat? 2/9/87/?

NO! says the Jewish calendar—but *Sh'ma's* calendar says we need your humor, satire and other inspired nonsense by *Monday, Feb. 9* (please, in 1987) if the Postal Service—may they live for many good years—is again to drive you to Purim-dik drink.

Surely there's enough human and Jewish idiocy to induce high creative hysteria—or use your imagination, if you can think up wilder plots, killing any sacred cow you wish.

Or contribute a brief paragraph to our "*History of Inside Information in Judaism.*" Listen, since the days God spoke to Moses as one to a neighbor, Jews have survived by insider trading. You think maybe Joseph cornered the Egyptian corn market by psychoanalyzing dreams? And Esther? Or Moses de Leon? And what were Pollard and Vanunu really selling, or is keeping Nakash from extradition? Nu? Box 567, Pt. Wash., NY 11050.

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SEASONS OF OUR JOY. Arthur Waskow. Summit. \$16.95.

The master ethicist-midrashist here turns his exegetic-activist talents to the history and observance of Jewish festivals, making the old new ways that few have suggested and fewer still have had the ingenuity to apply to the great social issues of our time.