

## INTRODUCTION

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In the Passover Hagaddah, we read each year that even Torah scholars, ostensibly familiar with the story of the Exodus from Egypt, are still responsible for retelling it around the table. Those who go further in their liturgical retellings, expanding and elaborating, are said to be worthy of praise. In a commentary on this familiar passage for a contemporary Haggadah, Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg notes that the telling and sharing of stories plays a potent role in liberation movements. It is in the space where stories are shared, she says, that “strategies for transformation” evolve.<sup>1</sup>

In this spirit, we continue the discussion of Jewish women’s spirituality begun in *Nashim* no. 9. If there is praise to be had for returning to a story as well known and essential as the Exodus, how much more is there praise to be had for dwelling upon the often hidden, suppressed, or silenced narratives of Jewish women’s spirituality.

Israeli and American scholars speak here from the vantage points of various disciplines and interdisciplinary fields. Anthropology has the loudest voice: Five of the scholars draw upon ethnographic analysis—field research—to consult the evidence of women’s spirituality. Those working in the contemporary period make sense of emergent forms of spiritual expression by listening to the spoken words of women reflecting upon their engagement. A lone historical anthropologist listens too, but to the voices of Jewish women emerging (perhaps) between the lines of sixteenth-century texts written by men.

Ethnographic research among professionally trained liberal Orthodox actresses in modern-day Israel who address spirituality and worship in their theatrical performances is presented by Reina Rutlinger-Reiner. This is a phenomenon perhaps unknown to American readers. The actresses she studies (mostly trained in university theater departments) discover that theatrical space, conventionally understood by the Orthodox as forbidden, subversive, and idolatrous, can become, for them, both a permissible sphere and a setting for their holy endeavors, *avodat kodesh*. Rutlinger-Reiner compares these

Orthodox actresses, who, in their courageous performances, lay bare the nakedness of mainstream Orthodoxy, to those women who have, in the last three decades, created and sustained women's prayer groups and institutes for advanced women's learning of Talmud. Quoting Tamar Ross, whose book is reviewed in this issue by Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, she claims that these enterprises represent "a break with dominant interpretive traditions of the past and a grass-root initiative of the women themselves in an effort to resolve dissatisfying aspects of their current situation."<sup>2</sup>

Irit Koren's essay, "The Bride's Voice," is also based on anthropological fieldwork among young Orthodox women in Israel. Koren investigates how religious, feminist Jerusalem women have managed simultaneously to participate in the rabbinic-mandated wedding ceremony and to challenge it through subtle moves. Addressing the passive role a woman plays in the traditional ceremony, they have forged strategies for introducing more balance and equality into the rite, and greater agency and visibility for the bride. These include reinterpreting the meanings of the ceremony for themselves and working with rabbis who would either accept or avert their eyes from modifications. Koren's informants have created parallel ritual acts, introduced ritual variations, refused to participate in certain customs, and engaged in legal resistance. Echoing Reiner's discussion of Orthodox feminist theater, Koren characterizes their actions as creating "a performance in which they are able to unite their identities as religious women and as feminists." Here, we see that when small groups of women on the margins perform old rituals in even slightly different ways, they can generate significant social change within a rather unyielding system.

"Meanings of Shekhinah in the 'Jewish Renewal' Movement" is part of Chava Weissler's larger study of the American Jewish Renewal movement, based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork at renewal services, retreats, and conferences. Portraying the Renewal movement as a "wellspring of women's energy,"<sup>3</sup> Weissler investigates the consequences of investing God language with feminist imagery. Shekhinah is the prime example, but other variations have evolved, including *Imenu Malkatenu* (our Mother, our Queen), *Rahamema* (Compassionate Wombmother) and *Elohatenu, Ruah ha'olam* (Goddess, Spirit of the World). New God language is imbued with social as well as theological significance, facilitating the empowerment of women. For some Renewal Jews (not all, as Weissler discovers), Shekhinah imagery provides

increasing access to the feminine aspect of divinity; it also affirms Renewal's preference for an experiential, mystical spirituality (one rooted in Kabbalah and a new Hasidism) over a cognitive one. Striking in Weissler's study is the connection she makes between the broad use by Renewal Jews of Shekhinah as a metaphor for divinity and the many artists who find that the movement fosters their spiritual experience.

Debra Kaufman is a sociologist whose "feminist-interpretive methodology, developed from theoretical assumptions about grounding theory in the actual lives women lead, insists that we not limit the world to male images of women nor that we assume that the parameters of women's experiences are set by male exploitation alone." Relying on narratives—what she calls structured conversations—that allowed her respondents to focus on the experiences of Jewish identities that they defined as significant, she challenges the conventional definitions of what "counts" as a measure of Jewish religious or spiritual identity. Kaufman suggests that if Jewish women were only asked, they might offer distinctive, authentic ways of affirming and creating Jewish spirituality. I offer this example: By conventional standards, participating in a JCC fund-raising golf tournament for dentists now "counts" as a marker of Jewish identity, one measured by the surveys. Ignored are all those Jewish women who see their work of holding extended family together as a Jewish spiritual imperative. Ignored, too, are those women whose social action engagement in the secular world is a direct expression of "being a good Jew"—here, I am thinking of the many Jewish women who have been public school teachers in the inner city all their lives. Thus, if "attends religious services" merits Jewish identity points, why should women's weaving webs of familial attachment (with the dead as well as the living, I may add) and bringing more light to the world not "count?" When Kaufman questions "who has the power to authenticate Judaism," she moves us not only to redefine authentic Jewish practice but also to question how that very power is seized and transmitted.

J.H. Chajes, in "He said She Said," studies the gendered dimensions of Jewish spirit possession in the early modern period in Safed. He notes that when men were possessed by spirits, as many leading rabbis claimed they were, this was considered a highly praised and positive mystical state, one to be cultivated. Women's possession was more typically (but not always) considered an affliction, a negative state to be diagnosed and alleviated, exorcised even. As the resources for study of possessed women are generally male

accounts of women's experiences, Chajes draws upon the strategies developed in feminist scholarship for hearing and reconstructing genuine women's voices within texts written by Jewish men for other literate men, however deeply those voices may be "buried under layers of cultural bias and literary artifice." Still, he reflects: "To what extent are the voices of these women recoverable?" Refining the question even further, he asks: "Does their textual appearance mark a presence, or merely reinstate an absence?"

Nitza Keren's "In the Name of the Mother" draws on the insights of feminist scholars such as Luce Irigaray, Nancy Chodorow, and Julia Kristeva in her literary analysis of Michal Govrin's Hebrew novel *The Name*. Keren clarifies how this work models a newly articulated and subversive Jewish women's spiritual discourse, one that, in the narrator's testimony, "repairs" masculine canonical texts. One could say that Govrin's heroine, Amalia, as described by Keren, is the opposite of the Orthodox actresses described above. As she consciously reshapes her life, moving from secularity toward ultra-Orthodox piety, she inadvertently journeys into ever more subversive (and exalted, and tragic) realms.

In "The Matriarchs and the Torah of *Hesed* (Loving-kindness)," feminist theologian Einat Ramon accounts for the powerful spiritual and theological contributions made when the acts of loving-kindness attributed to the biblical matriarchs are invoked in the opening blessing of the *Amidah*. This practice, seen as radical, problematic, and divisive when it was first introduced, has become almost standard in all forms of egalitarian Judaism. Now, omitting the matriarchs can feel like a breach with tradition. Ramon reminds us that the spiritual inclinations of Jewish women have been present in sacred texts chronicling women speaking to God or to God's angelic messengers, or women hearing directly from God. They are present, too, in memory: recollections of women acting in Godly ways, sometimes as "high priestesses of everyday holiness," whose actions in the world express their learning.

Invoking the matriarchs within the context of daily prayer stirs us to remember and tell their stories. The liturgical tellings give rise to expansions and elaborations, in the lives of women and men and in the language of gender-aware scholarship. The cumulative effect, I believe, holds transformative potential, both communal and intellectual.

*Notes*

1. Sheila Peltz Weinberg, *A Night of Questions: A Passover Hagaddah* (Elkins Park, PA: The Reconstructionist Press, 2000), p. 46.
2. Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004), p. 73.
3. The phrase is attributed to Rabbi David Wolfe-Blanke.