

## INTRODUCTION

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For years, I have been studying the spiritual journey as a literary genre. The Jewish spiritual journey, female or male, fictional or autobiographical, is typically distinct from the Christian one, which is so much more familiar that it is often mistaken to be generic. The Jewish spiritual journey, by comparison, is rarely a story about being lost and then found. It is not a story about a hero who leaves home and family behind, travels courageously, fights obstacles in order to reach a high place where illumination is granted, and then returns home. It is not a story of sinning and waywardness relinquished for once and for all by means of penance, goodness, and rectitude. It is not a story of being banished from God, or being oblivious to God's presence, followed by a warm and mutual embrace.

Jewish spiritual journeys, as Steven Kepnes once described in the context of Martin Buber's reflections, are more typically about a series of sacred encounters, "turnings" actually, between the self and God; the self and others; the self and the community; and the self and Torah, understood as both text and as evolving transgenerational conversation. Some encounters "take," so to speak; others are bungled. Rather than following a clear path toward enlightenment, the Jewish spiritual journey commences afresh each day with opportunities for sacred encounter. Unlike the hero who sallies forth alone into the future, the Jewish journeyer sallies back and forth and in cycles, shuttling between mythic and historical time, wandering—with and towards God—in the company of ancestors, neighbors, family, and people. The Jewish journey is often about what one actually does, as opposed to what one believes, commits to, or understands.

The spiritual journey engages me because I am riveted by the messy practice of living a life according to sacred beliefs, rituals, and texts. I am intrigued by the ways that individuals, communities, and sub-communities negotiate with the legacies and constraints of inherited religious traditions and go about establishing new facts on the ground in both public and private spheres. I want

to know about religious life as it really is, and not how it ought to be, or how it was in the mythic past.

Scholarship in religions has generally emphasized formal articulation of tenets of faith, guidelines for ideal practice, and venerated readings of the canon. Because of my own interests, I am heartened that the lived creative struggle to arrange life—one's own, or that of others, inside and around an inherited religious tradition, done artfully or artlessly, done continuously or in fits and starts—is slowly finding its way, more often, into scholarly discourse. (In Judaism, it is the work of anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff that has led the way; in Catholicism, it is Robert Orsi; Princeton University Press now publishes a series of texts that emphasize what they call religion “in practice.”) I believe it is scholarship in women's studies that has given us both the tools and the permission to engage in studies that privilege how religions are actually lived, sustained, tweaked, and transformed, as opposed to studies that concern themselves with how religions are lived theoretically, according to some ideal, and what they ought really to mean.

In most faiths, while one's spiritual journey may be guided or legislated by inherited tradition and clergy, it is ultimately experienced privately or in small groups. The intimate spiritual experiences of Jewish men have long been accessible to us, as they have been transmitted through written interpretations of sacred texts, written debates about Jewish communal religious practice, and liturgies and rituals created, codified, and disseminated by men. Of male spirituality, we have evidence aplenty.

In this issue of *Nashim* we are privileged to engage in the work of deeply discerning a broad range of spiritual experiences of Jewish women. Because of the large and excellent response to our call for papers, it is the first of two issues to be devoted to Jewish women's spirituality.

Our contributors, both American and Israeli, study the spirituality of Jewish women as it has emerged in history and in the contemporary period, and as it has appeared in practice. They reflect in expansive and nuanced ways, through the lenses of diverse disciplines, and in distinctive voices. In their work, we see that women's spiritual experience is not observed only in the personal, familial, private, and affective spheres. It is equally observed in the public sphere, in styles of liturgical and communal leadership, in new readings and interpretations of sacred text, in enacted and published ritual and liturgical innovations, and in the generation of both feminist theologies and feminist ritual objects.

In this issue, which I have been privileged to work on alongside Renée Levine Melamed and Deborah Greniman, our contributors consider these particular areas of Jewish women's spirituality: women's contemporary liturgical compositions (Yael Levine and Chava Weissler); syncretic folk practices (Jill Hammer); the charismatic, messianic piety among *conversas* in post-expulsion Spain (Sharon Koren); "countertraditional" feminist readings of sacred texts (Wendy Zierler), ritual innovation linked to feminism and women's bodily experiences, along with the impact of feminist spiritual resources that are available for democratic access and interaction in cyberspace (Lori Lefkowitz and Rona Shapiro), what some of the first women who sought to function as rabbis conceived as "a life in the presence of God," (Pamela Nadell), material objects that facilitate women's spiritual agency and communal healing (Vanessa Ochs), and spiritual reflections by Jewish women artists upon their work (Judith Margolis).

Ellen Umansky and Diane Ashton laid solid groundwork for studies of Jewish women's spirituality in their *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality*. As we peruse the writings published here, and as we pursue future scholarly research into Jewish women's spirituality, we ask and will continue to ask some critical old questions. Broadly, we ask what "counts" as spiritual and who, in each era, makes that determination. We ponder what causes spirituality and religion to be regarded, in different times, as synonymous, complementary, or antithetical. We struggle with two provocative questions posed here by Lefkowitz and Shapiro. The first: Does the study of women's spirituality "betray an old-fashioned willingness to countenance deep, socially harmful prejudices: that there is a spirit distinct from the body; that this spirit is somehow gendered; that women's humanity is somehow essentially distinct from that of men"? The second (which is even more complex): If one decides that women ought to resist adopting and adapting male practices (as that would reinforce the presumption that male practice is normative) and, instead, choose to "reinforce female distinctiveness" by inventing, authenticating, and normalizing "distinctive women's ritual expressions," how precisely is that done?

We also ask new questions of a general nature: How might our familiarity with the current popular, grassroots, and consumer-driven take on spirituality, motivated by a search to affirm one's distinctive individuality, to achieve personal happiness, fulfillment, and calm, and to articulate one's own set of meanings, offer us relevant insights when we look back at those near-mythic times before self-conscious spiritual questing and before the cult of the individual?

Speaking specifically to Jewish experience, we consider when women's spirituality has been seen as natural, gentle, and comforting (as in "women are simply more spiritual by nature") and when it has been seen as threatening ("all the daughters of Israel practice witchcraft"). We reflect upon how terminology legitimates or denigrates sacred experience: Is a Jew, male or female, who observes halakhah and performs mitzvot, by definition a spiritual Jew? We ask if Jewish spirituality can exist in the absence of recognizable Jewish practices. How does the spirituality of Jewish women reflect agency, or lack thereof?

Much of our inquiry is fueled by the process of how women's spiritual innovation comes about, how it is reflected upon, and how it is appropriated by both women and men. How do the spiritual practices coined and enacted by women acquire the patina of authenticity (*minhag*)? We are interested in how changes in Jewish law or practice that expand women's ritual agency into the public sphere have impacted upon the spiritual life of different Jewish communities. Are those changes reflected in how we formally teach and informally transmit what it means to think about and enact Jewish piety?

Some of our questions are about agency and equity: Liberal rabbis' manuals have been redesigned to include new ceremonies that mark women's previously unmarked bodily experiences, such as infertility and miscarriage, and to revise old ceremonies, such as the wedding, to reflect more gender equity. What is the impact of these changes on women's spiritual lives? How, historically, have patriarchal definitions of female spirituality served as means of social constraint; and how, in spiritual engagement, have women eluded male control? How will feminist readings restore those dimensions of Jewish women's spirituality that we struggle to know about, because they have been recorded only enigmatically and fragmentally in sacred texts? How are women's ways of loving and being loved, caring and being cared for, knowing and being known, being appropriated as metaphors for Divine and human interactions?

When I was in graduate school, taking an oral comprehensive exam in Jewish feminist spirituality, my examiners, both Christian feminist scholars, posed a question that I, who had overprepared, was not prepared to answer. They asked me to summarize the spirituality of Jewish women.

This issue of *Nashim* should demonstrate that the more we study the spirituality of Jewish women, the more it will resist our attempts to summarize, characterize, and categorize. Facile definition of Jewish women's spirituality

is impossible, and that, I believe, is all for the good. This is not only because new historical, literary, biblical, and anthropological studies will reveal yet-to-be contemplated ways in which Jewish women have lived as spiritual beings and reflected upon their spiritual lives (encompassing, to be sure, how they experience and transmit the sacred; how they imagine and experience God and live in the divine image). It is also because scholarship in women's studies has brought our attention to matters of embodiment, gendering, boundaries, agency, power relations, and women's ways of knowing. Through these many new lenses, we are reframing what it means to talk about Jewish spirituality — in Jewish memory and in Jewish practice, in any and every context.

*Notes*

1. See Barbara G. Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: Touchstone, 1978); Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); and the Readings in Religions series published by Princeton University Press.