

Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 9

Fall 2009

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Recommended Citation

Gadon, Elinor W. (2009) "The Secular Israeli Woman," *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp/vol4/iss2/9>

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The Secular Israeli Woman

Elinor W. Gadon

A Transgressive and Heretical Spirit

It is impossible to go forward if one lacks the will to transgress.

-Bell Hooks, Art on My Mind: Visual Politics

My reflections on the transgressive and heretical spirit of secular Israeli woman are based on my experiences while teaching “Women and Spirituality” in the Graduate Women’s Studies Program at the Lesley University Extension in Israel, my intimate interactions with my students and documented comments taken from their papers. This required course was offered as an intensive over four 8-hour days. The women ranged in age from early thirties to mid-sixties. One class also included a twenty-six year old from the Expressive Arts Program who elected to join the cohort.

They were all self-selected feminists—trained and experienced professionals: lawyers, teachers, social workers, artists, writers—seeking to better understand the cultural dynamics of their society and searching for the tools of empowerment that would help them work for cultural change. They are busy claiming their own agency in a patriarchal militarist society captive to a religious orthodoxy. The five intensive days of the course provided a space for them to build community, speak their truth, heal old wounds and reclaim their souls.

The focus of the course was on embodied experience. My concern was the impact of three thousand years of suppression of the female body, sexuality and spirit that is inherent in monotheistic religion and male dominated societies. I have been writing, teaching, lecturing and conducting workshops on women’s spirituality for twenty years. I define women’s spirituality very broadly as women’s experience of the sacred, women’s ways of knowing, women’s psychological development, women’s bodies and sexuality, women’s health and healing, and women’s moral reasoning and ethics. I am well aware of the power of a paradigmatic shift in raising consciousness; but, my experience teaching in the Lesley Israeli Women’s Studies Program has been the most affirming of this theory. My students there, already worldly and wise because of the circumstances of their lives and their own personal motivation to create meaningful lives for themselves, are among the best I have ever had. I have learned much from them and am enlivened by their discourse. I view my role as a teacher in the Lesley Graduate Women’s Studies program as “engendering the spirit” and as an agent in promoting cultural change. I introduced a concept that was new and unfamiliar to most of the women, that of the ancient goddess as a symbol for the sacred female and

her re-emergence in the cultural mythology of the Western world in our time. That a woman's body and her sexuality were sacred was a revelation to most.

I now want to discuss their responses to the course more directly through thoughts gleaned from their papers. Israeli women rarely define their spirituality according to the religious model. Most of the students identified themselves as secular Jews, as they claim the majority do in Israel. They are highly critical of the God they know, who is perceived as male, and not always forgiving. In the name of God, their fathers and husbands conquered the land and people. According to His word, their bodies belong to men and their blood is considered impure. In this course, they write, they were exposed to a different train of thought and a new definition of the spiritual and the meaning of the sacred as distinct from that of the 'holy' of traditional Judaism.

Spirituality deals with the most essential and sacred matters of personal life. Family means sexual union and parenthood. Birth is a family issue. Sexuality and coupling are sacred issues. Giving birth is the most sacred moment in a woman's life. Any crisis in these aspects of life can be most painful. Spirituality is private, personal and eclectic, growing gradually out of experiences and the ongoing reciprocal activity of their objective and subjective worlds.

The highest spiritual value is the sacredness of life, the need to protect one's own life, as well as the lives of family and nation. This is influenced by the knowledge that the state of Israel was founded as a home for Jews after the mass murder and destruction committed by the Nazis, and the fact that danger still hovers over the Israeli individual and collective today. Therefore, Israelis must defend themselves in order to survive. This then is the paradox—the inevitable loss of individual lives in the effort to preserve the collective life.

A woman's spirituality does not include an external authority or 'divinity' that tells them what to do or how to behave but it does include an internal authority. In the past some believed in a big, strong external force that can be called God. Now they feel less tied to social norms and subjective spirituality is what directs behavior and actions. The women pass from reliance on an external high status figure to relying on an intuitive internal power—a passage from being passive to being active, from silence to rebellion, from a static ego to an active ego. The highest level of a woman's spirituality is the integration of internal and external voices, the integration between subjective and objective knowledge and the integration between intuitive, personal knowledge and the knowledge received from others. This stage includes waiving belief in a black and white world and developing an ability to live with conflicts, knowing how to maintain connections and responsibilities within the environment, and listening and respecting the body and feelings without shame.

Theirs is an embodied spirituality. The sacred has also to do with thankfulness, that most basic of religious impulses—thankfulness for being alive, for the wonder of our bodies. The woman's body is a sacred thing. A woman's control of her body and her control of decisions about her body are essential. When women begin to love themselves, their body becomes sacred to them. The sacred body is no longer connected to the soul. Their body is no longer a lump of skin and bones that is supposed to fill someone else's wishes and desires. Their body is now synchronized with their emotions. When women hurt inside, their bodies show it, and do not attempt to hide those feelings. It is okay to cry, to shed a tear, to admit that things are difficult. Not only is it okay, it gives them strength. Spirituality is the ability to give meaning and value to life. Women's spirituality enables creativity and independence, facilitating the use of moral judgment to decipher right from wrong and to act accordingly. Spirituality is the engine and force of motivation to contribute to society, and to become a better person.

In order for a woman to grow, it is important for her to have something to believe in. It is important for her to find her own spiritual being. However, this is something unique for each woman. For one, spirituality can be feeling the earth beneath her feet every morning, touching that earth, and knowing that she is alive. For another, it can be her child, knowing that she created a human being, and she must now take responsibility for her creation. She must take responsibility for her powers. Her power to create must be followed by her power to maintain and nurture that creation.

These Women's Studies students are feminists, highly critical of the patriarchal Israeli culture where there is no separation between church and state. Women are often hurt and abused by the institutions of religion. In the past spirituality for them meant religion, but now they know it is something else. They talk about their new understanding and how to change the social consequences of the patriarchal way. One woman, a mediator in the court system, writes of her deep frustration with the Israeli courts where there is no real justice. The language in the court and among the attorneys is power, oppression and conflict with the other.

They write of the difference between Israeli men's war versus Israeli women's war. Israeli men fight a physical war, while Israeli women fight a different type of war, one not less important or difficult, a spiritual war.

Their relationship to nature is sacred. Their experience of the sea—the noise, the smell, the waves that come and go, and crash—is often a focus for drawing out fears, dreams, feelings. There is a deep connection with the sea, a mythological connection. The sea is a motif in their dreams as the great mother, the sea of feelings. The forces of nature as a whole inspire with deep feelings of cosmic connection, of connection with basic existence; the view from the mountains is uplifting, giving strength.

As the American Feminist philosopher Carol Christ so succinctly puts it, “the real importance of the symbol of the Goddess is that it breaks the power of the patriarchal symbol of God as male over the psyche” (1987, p. 155).

So the women ask: “How come we have not been aware of those wonderful forms in a country so taken with archaeology?” During the course they were introduced to the goddess. They learned to understand that the concept of the goddess today, though being nurtured from the ancient concept of the female deity, relates to feminine power and energy. The belief in a goddess motivates a process of the intensification of forces in women, and allows self-realization and self-fulfillment, as well as the ability of women to have social influence.

They view the Goddess, the Great Mother, as a symbol of fertility and wisdom, the symbol of life and love. She smells of the earth. She loves the blood. She knows them intimately and is beautiful in their eyes. They have no God, no Goddess, but they like this image. She will certainly appear in their dreams. They feel her. They also feel her symbolic importance to society. To their culture this is a significant change—a meaningful, a cultural root canal. They do not relate to religion, nor do they relate to the holy word; they relate to the Great Mother. She is theirs, their feminist Mother, the sane and fertile Mother.

Each year a small percentage of women in my class report they are living with their male partners, raising children with them, but have chosen never to marry because the only way to do so legally in Israel is in an orthodox ritual. In Israel orthodox rabbis hold a monopoly on marriage and divorce.

All women in the cohorts have been biological mothers, so discussions about motherhood have been especially rich. Government policy in Israel encourages and supports motherhood. For some who have had difficulty becoming pregnant and have undergone extensive fertility treatments, the miracle of creating new life is the most wonderful experience of all.

The socialization of sons, however, is problematic for many. The boys will join the army at eighteen and their mothers are torn between love of their country, the knowledge that it must be defended by the continual reinforcement of its military strength, and the threat of danger that serving in a combat unit poses for their sons. One woman, whose soldier son was killed in action, talked about the military mode of socialization for boys. In a reality where most of the combat roles are saddled on men, and in the battlefield the determining factors are survival, the stereotypical male qualities are cool-headedness, rigidity and the like. So once again the dilemma comes up of being a society under siege, subject to ongoing war—sons in the military and

their mother's worry and grief. Another woman, remembering that during her childhood her mother used to say to her brother that when he grew up there would be no more wars, examines the foundations on which an entire mythical culture of sacrifice, bravery and bereavement was built in the modern Israeli society. The sacrifice of Abraham, Jephthath and Hannah were connected to the land. She is seeking a new cultural climate that above all values the sacredness of life.

Women's bodies are seen as polluting and intrinsically immodest. *Mikveh* is a purificatory ritual bath used by women in conjunction with menstrual and childbirth bleeding. By engaging in the intimate corporeal drills of the *niddah-mikveh* ritual sequence, Jewish Israeli women reenact or re-embody events, values, stories and symbols of cultural significance; thus drawing themselves into, or being drawn into, collective narratives of gender and purity that have their roots in Leviticus. According to the Talmud, the source of all water is the river flowing from the Garden of Eden, and therefore, by bathing in the *mikveh*, the bride returns to the wholeness, the perfection, of the Garden of Eden. But is it merely a religious experience?

Secular women want to experience the ritual bath, but they want to create their own special rituals that are compatible with their worldview that is not religious, a way that is personal and liberatory. For them bathing in nature is a spiritual experience. Water symbolizes the womb of creation, renewal and resurrection. Today, many secular women seek to create moments of sanctity, mainly before, after and during their wedding day, by returning to Jewish tradition, but on their own terms.

Before her wedding, one woman chose to drive to the beach with ten friends. They all entered the water by moonlight singing songs of love and forming a circle around the bride, who then recited the traditional blessings and immersed herself in the water three times. Afterwards, each of her friends blessed her with words of love and hope. Together they sang prayers of thanksgiving to God for having allowed them to reach this moment. After the ceremony, the women drank champagne on the beach. For the bride, the ceremony was part of her spiritual preparation for entering the state of matrimony. Women are also investigating the roots of the traditional ceremonies of *nida*, the process of woman's purification after the menstrual cycle and childbirth. Understanding the symbolism of water throughout the Bible is for secular women a basis for the creation of new ceremonies of purification by bathing in the *mikveh*.

It is not possible for a woman to openly express the fullness of her sexuality in a patriarchal monotheistic culture. She must integrate the saint with the slut. There is a long heritage to this bifurcation of women's sexuality. In the alphabet of Ben Sira, a midrash written between 600 and 1000 CE, Lilith is identified as the first Eve and created at the same time as Adam, out of the earth just like him. In the later Kabbalah,

Shekinah, the disembodied feminine is the wife and Lilith, the sexual one, the mistress.

Quoting Audre Lorde's (1978) description of the power of the erotic as shared intimacy with someone, the sharing of joy, feelings, thoughts and the physical, they view the erotic as a seed within them which rises and swells and paints life with an energy that enhances experience. Not only do they touch their most profoundly creative source, they do what which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist patriarchal and anti-erotic society. However, as Lorde maintains, eroticism operates in several ways, one of them is to supply the strength that stems from profound sharing with another person, a sharing in physical and intellectual joy, thereby forming a bridge—as a basis for understanding. Another important way is the open ability, without fear of being happy, of stretching the body to sounds of music, building a bookcase, writing a poem, or examining an idea. A relationship with self, when expressed, is a measure of the happiness of knowing how to sense and feel, a reminder of the ability to feel.

This course created an environment of trust and empathy that enhanced the bonding already established in the cohort. One woman tells of learning to trust other women. It was with women that she remembered a certain feeling of alienation. She had difficulty in establishing a close relationship with them. Now women interest her and intimacy with them does not threaten her. She feels a closeness and identification with women, a feeling of coming home. Another writes of the comfort she found during the workshop in the experience of “togetherness.” What is unique to all women is the ability to share and participate in feelings of anxiety, anger, despair, worry, strength and hope. The presence of an Arab woman in the cohort promised the hope that feminine dialogue could one day facilitate a solution to the ongoing conflict.

Making a real, powerful and significant connection and relationship with other women was a practical dimension of the theoretical term ‘womanhood.’ The group's experience of Edna's story was such an especially powerful one. She seemed so strong and powerful like the “Earth Mother of Willendorf,” with her pendulous breasts, protruding abdomen, massive hips and clearly defined pubic triangle. Of course, unlike the sculpture, Edna had a face and remarkable eyes that they will not ever forget; but the image she projected as a whole did remind them of the Great Mother of the Earth, as old as time and as young as eternity. She was the Earth Mother of the group.

They became aware of the role she played for them through a dramatic experience on the last day of the course. Edna volunteered to participate. She had been telling them that how hard it was for her to deal with the coming of Yom Hashoa, the Memorial Day of the Holocaust, as well as the Memorial Day of Israeli soldiers. The session was over when suddenly she stood in front of a wall in the room made of stones we had

collected, which had come to look to them like the Kotel Hamaaraivi, the West Wall, the surviving fragment of the Jerusalem temple, and shouted several times: "Itamar, Itamar, Itamar," the name of her dead soldier son. For all it was a sacred moment, as if time stood still. Almost all of the class was in shock. It showed on their faces and there was a harsh quiet. After a moment almost everyone started crying and we came near to Edna in a circle and hugged her. It was a moment where the women could feel the great spiritual connection that they shared with one another, a moment that everybody shared with Edna's great pain, and at the same time became connected to their own sorrow.

Another woman concluded by quoting the feminist philosopher Susan Griffin (1978): "This strength in each other, all that we have lost, all that we have suffered, all that we know. . .we are stunned by this beauty. . .and we do not forget" (p. 219).

The women write of the relationship between spirituality and politics. While considering women's access to power and their uses of it, they realized that through action some of the most difficult situations could be resolved. When doing this it is not only the performer who is progressing but her whole environment. This is real power. They work for equal rights for men and women. In a state that fosters the values of war and heroism in relation to what distinguishes men from women, women's rights are shunted aside and become marginal in importance. Awareness of this neglect of dignity of women in national values is important with regard to the issue of equal rights and status of women. The Yellow Star was placed on men and women equally. The Palestinian terrorist does not seek any defined target of man or woman.

Women must find the power to change society within themselves, to build a bridge between women within who think like us and those who think differently in Israeli society. Such a bridge cannot be built on the basis of ideology or philosophy. Such a bridge can be built unmediated by the same spirituality that connects women, something internal, emotional, that may be directed to the internal goddess in us all. The hope is perhaps that it is possible to change, and the hope is for the future of peace and sanity. That is my way of surviving in a world in which I have no control of the way it transpires.

Society controls women by controlling their bodies. This society contains denial, repression and extinction of feminine powers and women's ability to be independent, to be leaders. While working with women, individually and for the main part on a group basis, the most important part stems from a belief that once women are given a stage upon which to express their power, to express their experience and belief, the expression of their inner voices will bring about change and personal growth. To allow women to tell the story of their lives is to shed light on the powers that are revealed through the stories, powers which society has abandoned to the darkness.

This understanding comes from both personal experience and belief in an inner force, as well as meeting other women through the common experience of life: the paradox between a patriarchal masculine religion and worldview of God, the Father on one hand, and on the other hand, the feminine experience, beliefs, symbolism, women as goddesses, what women think and experience within themselves and about themselves. Furthermore, women's circles can be used to bring about social change, to protest about the events taking place around us in which our lives are dominated by men. Calling out with a different voice, declaring new insights into intractable situations such as the Arab/Israeli conflict through feminine experience and vision can bring significant change in the political climate of the country in which we live.

The closing ritual, designed and created by the women themselves is an example of using ritual to break the pervasive spell of patriarchy. In their performance of "The Descent to the Underworld" (Perera, 1988), the students address an issue most relevant to women's psychological development. This mythic narrative, the centerpiece of the week-long intensive is about the Goddess Inanna who was continuously worshipped for thousands of years in the ancient Near East. Her names were many—Istar, Astarte, Anahita, Ma, Asherah—but she was first known as Inanna, the beloved and deity of Sumer, revered as the Queen of Heaven and Earth.

Inanna's descent is a shamanic journey, a venturing into the void, the unknown, into the dark womb of the inner Earth for the wisdom it hold. In this symbolic narrative, she hangs on a peg, a rotting course, but gains essential insight and experience into the full cycle of existence. No longer the commanding Queen, she can accept her vulnerability. Upon her miraculous return from the dead, in the wisdom of her newfound maturity, Inanna acknowledges the duality of life, dying into life and death leading into life.

Psychoanalyst Sylvia Perera (1988) believes that all contemporary women must undergo a descent into a period of sadness, depression, even madness, in order to become whole. The closing ritual as a group event included both personal experience and sharing with the group as they entered into the myth. The narrative itself forced them to deal in an uncompromising way with the other half of Inanna, her sister Erishkegal, who is her opposite and who is also the other half of themselves. In Israeli culture, the underworld is a forbidden place, a place that is distant and closed off. They must cope with the subject of death daily without having the appropriate tools. In the Jewish religion which sanctifies life, death is at the end of a linear path. They grew up studying the Bible. The myth of Inanna unified for me the missing godly symbols of earth and fertility with the existing godliness of the heavens.

In conclusion, I want to briefly recount some of the important themes in their papers:

1. Awareness of what it is to be a woman
2. Femaleness not understood, not celebrated in their society
3. Breaking the stranglehold of patriarchy
4. Need for new models of gender roles
5. Need for male/female dialogue
6. A women's spirituality that is grounded in her inner voice, not in an external authority

My reflection on my students' thoughts suggests that even under the negative impact of a patriarchal, militarist society some women move beyond the imposed cultural limitations to create positive and meaningful lives for themselves when they possess what the feminists have named as agency, the capacity to act out of their embodied gendered knowing. A woman's spirituality can serve as a powerful catalyst in the claiming of her agency.

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