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Towards a More Inclusive Judaism: A Creative Essay about a Feminist Judaism

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DATE COMPLETED 3/19/2005

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:
A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

Jennifer LeBlanc Gridley

**College Scholars – Emphasis in Microbiology, Romance Languages
(French and Spanish), and Judaic Studies**

Aug 2005

Chapter One

“Hello all.” Lilith placed herself in the only open chair at the table after situating her coffee mug. She surveyed her sisters. Miriam looked irritated at her late arrival. Ruth’s smiled warm and sincere. Her eyes lit up when she smiled and Lilith couldn’t help but grin back. Gabby picked at her nails, while staring off into space and trying to look as non-combative as possible. So, she’s annoyed too, Lilith noted.

“Well, the party can start,” Lilith joked. She had no concern at all about being late. After all, she was a busy person and she was lucky to even find the hour for coffee each week.

“Damn it Lilith! Can’t you get anywhere on time?!” Accusation not question, from Miriam the Punctual.

Lilith thought carefully about her response. “I’m on time to events... tons of them, all week long. Forgive me for trying to slow down the pace of life on the weekends. It is Shabbat after all,” she looked to Miriam with pleading eyes.

Miriam hated to be bested and she had been, again. Damn you Lilith. As a concept, Miriam held Shabbat to be the utmost holy... so to call it into play was essentially to win the argument. She loved Lilith, had since their childhood, but damn that woman could be annoying. Miriam answered with the only word left to her. “Fine.” She didn’t even sound annoyed; her voice was more that of a child who had lost a game.

Gabby smiled slightly. Confrontation successfully avoided. Her breathing had risen to high in her chest. She took a deep breath, willing her heart to slow down. Gabby was what one would call “high strung”; she always worried about something and upset

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

easily. She raised her left index finger to her mouth and touched the little drop of blood to her lips. She just knew *that* hangnail was going to bleed.

Ruth refolded her hands in her lap. She wrung them several times, and then placed them in her lap again. I'm so glad Lilith made it, she thought. So glad Miriam isn't yelling. Ruth found something to thank God for in the worst situation. And this situation was, at least, agreeable. The eternal optimist, she knew that all would work out for the best in the end. The corners of her mouth nudged their way up her face.

Lilith folded one leg beneath her. "Well, what's up with everybody?" she inquired. "I'm exhausted. This has been a long week."

"I know the feeling," Ruth replied. "My mother-in-law came in this last week. Gevalt!" When she explained, she looked as exhausted as she must have felt at the end of the stay. Ruth spoke in a very animated fashion. "I love her and everything, but it's just so much work to have house guests."

"Definitely," Miriam and Gabby chimed in unison. They all chuckled.

"How about you, Gab? What's new?" Lilith asked sipping her latte.

"Ah, same old same old. Miriam?" Gabby hated being the center of attention. She didn't want people looking to her. When asked she said always "Fine and how are you?" She picked at another hangnail.

"I'm starting a book club, sort of, with you guys. We're going to research how to make our Judaism more feminist, more inclusive. 'Feminism' isn't a bad word you know. 'I have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiates me from a

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

doormat.' Rebecca West said that... in 1913! And we still aren't included! It's very frustrating! Feminism is not a dirty word. It does not refer to militant lesbians. It is not about male bashing. It is about equality and our fight for it."

"Whoa, girl, slow down. What do you mean *we* exactly?"

"I mean we, the group of us here at this table."

"I don't recall voting on that."

Miriam sighed. "That's because we've been discussing it for the last half an hour... before you made it."

"Oh. Well, I guess I'm in then, eh?" Lilith smiled. A book club... what could be so bad about reading and discussing books after all.

"Yes, you are. This is a different book club. We each read different books and articles related to Jewish feminism. I'll give a topic every week and we'll each find sources about that topic and come back and discuss it the next week."

"I think it sounds fun," chimed Ruth. Ruth was always up for something new. She smiled brightly, slightly.

"All right, Madame Miriam, what is the topic?" asked Gabby looking away from her coffee momentarily. Gabby had always been a bit heavy in school. Even though she lost the weight in college, she often felt unsure of herself and always had a tendency to look down.

"Well, I thought we could start with changes related to *halachah*... you know, female rabbis, cantors, education leaders, *mikvah*, *minyans*. Stuff like that. What do you guys think?" Miriam was really interested in this. It was her pet project. Since the baby

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

had arrived, she hadn't had much time to herself. She could easily justify this small research project in the name of personal time.

"I like the topic. Good choice, Miriam. But might I suggest a topic for the next week? I really want to talk about new feminist rituals. You know, not just baby naming, but really *new* rituals." Ruth always wanted to learn more about the rituals her mom had told her about, including the one in which she participated long ago.

Miriam smiled. Of course we can. "This is our klatch, we can talk about anything we want to." Her tone of voice reflected the motherly feelings that she felt towards Ruth, towards all of her friends. "Okay, everyone get the idea? And the topic? Halakah and feminism." Miriam glanced at her watch. "Okay, hate to have to run, but the babysitter needs to be home in a half hour. Love you all dearly and see you next week." Miriam turned to leave. As she did, her friends called "goodbye" and "love you."

"Hey, M?" Lilith called out. Miriam stopped and made a quarter turn towards her childhood friend. "Sorry about being late." Lilith grinned, showing her pearly teeth. Miriam smiled, shook her head and started walking again. Lilith was glad to sweep away the issue.

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

Chapter Two

Miriam had spent the week waiting to share her report on female spiritual leadership in Judaism. She had spent several hours researching it this week. With visions of rabbis and cantors and education leaders (oh my!) in her head, she swept the kitchen again. Rachel was such a handful. And Isaac worked so much lately that most of Miriam's time was taken up by the baby and the housework. Which was okay, since she could still read with Rachel around, but it made getting out to get to the library more of a hassle. Nonetheless, she had done so and taken home several books and articles related to the topic of women in Jewish leadership positions.

Baby in arms, Miriam headed out the door. She walked quickly the sidewalk and the drive of the house next door. The door opened just as her knuckles brushed it.

"Catherine, thank you again so much for agreeing to watch Rachel for me. I really appreciate it!" Miriam gushed, while shifting Rachel's weight to her blonde haired neighbor. Catherine had been over when Megan, the babysitter, called in sick. She had said that she adored Rachel and would be happy to watch her for the afternoon. Miriam felt lucky to have such great friends and neighbors.

"Oh, don't mention it," Catherine oozed with her slow Georgia tongue. "Now, you go have fun with the girls and we girls will have fun here." She turned her attention to Rachel who was picking at the buttons on Catherine's blouse. "Now honey, don't do that to Aunt Cathy's blouse."

Miriam kissed her daughter on the forehead. "Bye bye baby. Mommy'll be back soon." She turned to go. "Thank you again," she said. As she walked hurriedly to the

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

car, Miriam wondered at how she could never seem to get enough of Rachel. Though she was grateful for the change of pace, and for Catherine.

The Honda purred along the interstate. As she pulled onto the exit ramp, some crazy teenager went flying past her in the shoulder. Oy, someone was almost saying *kaddish* for me! she thought. *Meshuggah* teenagers! She arrived at the café without further incident.

Not that you could really call Abe's a café... but they liked the atmosphere. The paper placemats. The faded pictures in plain black plastic frames lined up along the walls. The dingy lighting that made it look perpetually overcast inside. But they had been coming here for years. Back when all the light bulbs worked. No one was married; no one had kids; no one had worries; no one had cares. Miriam sat down at the table in the corner. "Their" table. She was early as usual. They joked that Miriam was five minutes early to her own birth. She waited for her coffee to cool.

Gabby arrived about three minutes later, flustered as usual. She was upset about someone cutting her off in traffic and went on for a bit about it. About two minutes into the schpiel, Ruth sat down and Gabby had to start all over again, which agitated her even more. When Gabby finally settled down, they greeted each other. Of course Ruth had done research, she stated. Mikvah is what she had read about. Mikvah and *niddah*. Gabby had read about minyans. And Lilith had called Miriam with regrets.

Miriam reported first. Women have been important to Judaism since Eve. But had only been able to take part in it fully in the last century. Women have been largely overlooked in halachah. We are the spiritual leaders in the home, but were not found to

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

be worthy of being the spiritual leaders of the community. In 1968, with the founding of the Reconstructionist movement, women were allowed into the rabbinate. Sally Priesland became the first female rabbi ordained by the Reform movement in 1972. The Conservative movement followed suit in 1985. Even Orthodoxy is starting to take women's rights seriously. In February 1997, New York City hosted the first International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy. There is a program currently in development by the Union for Traditional Judaism to establish a "separate but equal" degree program for women. The degree would be equivalent to a rabbi.

Bullshit, Gabby interrupted. The Orthodox movement doesn't even count women in a minyan. They aren't going to give them a degree "equal" to that of a rabbi anytime soon. However, that mentality too is slowly changing. Women such as Orthodox feminist Blu Greenberg are organizing women's *tefillah* networks all over the country. "Women's tefillah networks are communities of [Orthodox] women who meet regularly, usually once or twice a month, to pray together" (Umansky, 1998, 357). While some in Orthodoxy still have issues with women's tefillah networks' very existence, they are gaining strength in numbers. An Orthodox women's tefillah network doesn't recite the community prayers, since they don't count women in a minyan. One Orthodox synagogue started to count women in a separate minyan, but abandoned the experiment after a brief trial (Telushkin 644). In the other branches of Judaism, however, women are counted in a minyan. While this was not a reason for the split with Orthodoxy, it is a major difference between Orthodoxy and the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements. Why should we care whether we are counted in a minyan? Because we

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

desire equality... even in obligations. Women are kept from being fully a part of Judaism if the 613 *mitzvot* do not apply to us equally. We do not wish to sidestep the halachah; we wish only to be included.

Only three of the 613 laws actually apply to women, Ruth chimed in. Lighting candles, taking *challah* and the observance of the niddah laws. Rabbinic tradition doesn't even regard these ordinances as mitzvot. These precepts are said to be eternal punishment for woman because of Eve's role in Adam's death, and thus all of human mortality. Niddah, still observed by the Orthodox, is seen as a period of being ritually unclean. A woman may not touch her husband as this uncleanliness can pass to him. The laws governing niddah are known as *taharat hamishpachah*. In practical application of these laws, this means that one party has to set an item down in order for the other to pick it up. There is no cuddling on the couch, no sleeping in the same bed. Blu Greenberg explains it in [How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household](#):

I have used the term "whites," [for post menses days] a literal translation of the Talmudic *levanim*, rather than the more commonly used term "clean," as in "seven clean days," because clean implies unclean. I would like to get away from categories of unclean. Menstruation is natural and healthy. At worst, it is a nuisance, but it is not unclean and impure. In Temple times, those words were appropriate. They meant ritually impure and unclean, that is, unfit for Temple access. Today, however, they summon up negative associations of "not clean" or "dirty," which the term "whites" does not. I, for one, don't consider my body impure just because I am niddah. I might feel *more* pure after immersion in the

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

mikvah, but I didn't feel unclean or impure before it. It's a shade of difference, but it matters. (123)

It matters a lot. Though Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist observe other Levitical laws to varying degrees, taharat hamishpachah is largely not maintained. (Greenberg, 121). But then even among the Orthodox, Greenberg admits, taharat hamishpachah is not always followed. Since the decision is between a woman and her husband, only they know if the taharat hamishpachah is maintained. For many women, it is either too much of a burden, or perhaps, subconsciously, too much of a reminder that Orthodox Judaism considers us "unclean." Conflict between the law and feminism such as this one inspired Judith Plaskow to comment, "If feminism is hardly alone in asserting the human character of halakhah, the depth of its critique of the law demands a more imaginative and wide-ranging transformation of halakhah than has thus far been undertaken by any group that takes the law seriously" (71). Isn't that a great quote, Ruth gushed.

"Read it again," Gabby requested. Ruth reread the quote. "Nice. I like it too. True indeed." Then Gabby's attention went back to her fascination with the swirls of cream in her coffee. "Nice report, Ruth. I didn't know anything about taharat hamishpachah before." The swirl broke apart and the strands made their own spirals.

"I liked yours too, Gab. I didn't realize that an Orthodox synagogue had actually tried to count women in a minyan. Eh, so, it didn't work out. It will one day and it is the first step. How wonderful!" Ruth's hair bounced about as she spoke. She turned to Miriam. "Yours was cool too. My mom met Sally Priesland at a conference one time in

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

D.C. She was soooo excited about it! I really didn't understand why at the time." Ruth's mother was ten times as animated a character as Ruth, so to see her get "soooo excited" would have been something.

"Well, I'm going to read the closing statement that I've worked on all week and head out, because Catherine is being kind enough to watch Rachel for me. Megan's sick," Miriam explained. "A feminist Judaism necessitates a new, fresh and modern reinterpretation of the law. If it cannot evolve with the times, Judaism will stagnate. We need the prodding of feminism to maintain a religion that continues to be valid and contributory in today's world. The Jewish feminist reminds her religion that it must roll with the tides or drown in them."

"Nice," stated Gabby, who had finally gotten around to drinking her mostly cold coffee. Don't need the caffeine anyway, she told herself. She looked up and Miriam was giving her the eye. "No, I meant that sincerely. It was good."

"Hey, before you leave... don't forget that next week is liturgy and rituals," Ruth interjected. She was excited about next week's topic. She had already started her research. The others nodded to confirm and the group slowly broke apart.

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

Chapter Three

Ruth stared at the ceiling and counted the holes in the acoustic tile. She couldn't sleep. Her mind was racing with all the information she had learned about new rituals. She loved the spirit behind the creation, loved the women who were bold enough to say that something deserves a ritual. Her spirit soared at the thought of sharing this precious information. But her heart ached for her mother and the ritual a decade ago.

Ruth stood in the center of the circle, the skin on her right warmed by the fire and her left side chilled from the night air. The mothers were singing a niggun... cheerful then making a slow descent towards soft and slow and light. The other girls giggled anxiously. Her blood pumped vigorously from her nerves as well as the hike earlier. She rolled the pinecone between her hands. It is unfolding, just as I am. Spreading its shells and declaring itself. That is what tonight is, she thought. It is about declaring myself a woman.

Her Mother stood, her image blurred through the smoke and the glow of the fire. She became clearer as she came closer. She was so young then, before the cancer ravaged her. There were tears in Mother's eyes. She bent and held Ruth in a warm embrace. Ruth so at peace in that moment. It felt like it would never end. Mother eventually stepped back and smiled through her tears. She held Ruth's hands in hers as recited the lines she had written for the occasion.

Gone are the days of childish play. You are no longer carefree. You are no longer a little girl. Now you are a woman. You are Ruth daughter of Leah daughter of Rachel. You are my flesh, my blood. One day that blood

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

will run in another's veins as well. And she will call you Mother. And your heart will sing and your soul will rejoice and you will know a joy and a love that no words can describe. And you will become alive like you never have before. It is a milestone if your life takes you that way. And you have reached the first milestone on your path of life. Your body cycles as the moon and you are reminded of G-d and Her infinite glories. As your body readies for child each month, so the moon grows. As you release your egg so She releases her full glory. As she wanes, so does your body prepare to rest. As she disappears in the sky, so this menses will come. It is a reminder that you are a woman, Shekhinah be praised. It is the opportunity to decide if you are ready to be a Mother. It is a realization that you are a creator, truly made in the image of Shekhinah. Blessed be Shekhinah for this awesome gift. Blessed be Shekhinah for creating me a woman.

Ruth watched her Mother as she recited the prayer. The sweet tears that fell down her cheeks so much like her own. The rosiness in her cheeks. The curve of her lips just like her daughter's. Her strong hands tremble as she wrung them. And Ruth realized that her Mother was the most beautiful being on Earth just then. That Shekhinah was present in this place. Her heart overflowed as her eyes when Mother presented her gift, a ring of moonstone and garnet which she had designed. Mother held her tightly and she could feel the tears fall on her scalp. Never had she been more present, more alive.

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

She said a mental thank you. To Shekhinah, to Mother, to her Mother, to the ForeMothers. To every woman who had ever lived for joining her in this Sisterhood of Love. She sat between Mother's legs that evening while watching the rest of the girls be welcomed into the Sisterhood. And Mother stroked Ruth's hair as she watched the full moon cross the sky.

When Ruth awoke, her eyes were still wet. She thanked Shekhinah for letting her see her Mother so beautiful and so clear as she went about starting her day. The excitement built within her until they were finally all gathered and settled in.

“Ladies,” she said. “Time to get down to business. Who wants to go first?” She could barely contain her excitement but didn't want to be rude.

“I will.” Miriam couldn't stand to be anything other than first. “I found some information on Rosh Chodesh.” She rose as she took out her neatly typed report.

“We are reclaiming holidays like *Rosh Chodesh*. Rosh Chodesh is literally the first day of the new month. It falls upon the new moon. (The Jewish calendar is a lunar one.) Rosh Chodesh has traditionally been a women's holiday. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin writes, “Early in Jewish history, for unknown reasons, Rosh Khodesh became associated with women, who were exempt from working on Rosh Khodesh. The holiday became a day of leisure for them. Unfortunately, at least for women, this custom is no longer observed” (598). (Funny that if it's a “men” holiday, its observance is everyone's issue; but since Rosh Chodesh is a women's holy day, then it is only a women's issue.) Several reasons have been suggested for the inception of Rosh Chodesh as a women's holiday.

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

The first story that I have heard harkens back to the golden calf in Exodus 32. The people of Israel wanted a god they could see. So Aaron molded for them a golden calf out of their jewelry. He commanded the Israelites to bring to him all of their gold jewelry. However, tradition says that the women refused to offer up their jewelry and turn from G-d. For this, the Lord rewarded us with Rosh Chodesh, according to midrash, Pirke DeRabbi Eliezer chapter 45 (Jewish Virtual Library).

The second possibility is more directly tied to women and the lunar cycles. A woman's menstrual cycles follow the same 28 – 30 day cycle as the moon. It is possible that Rosh Chodesh was chosen as a day of rest due to some connection with the women's cycles and the recognition of the tie to the lunar calendar. This scenario is unlikely, I feel, as it would be surprising if our forefathers noticed that women's cycles correspond to the lunar cycles, much less the significance of other cycles in our lives." Miriam sat down and took a sip of her coffee waiting for a sign of approval.

"That actually goes right into what I was going to talk about!" Ruth gushed. "Traditional ritual in Judaism doesn't address many of the cycles in a woman's life. This leads to a feeling of being the "Other." This Otherness starts at birth. A woman is "unclean" twice as long after the birth of a baby girl than a baby boy. Baby girls aren't welcomed into the community like a boy is at his *bris*. Traditionally, there is no ceremony to celebrate a woman reaching menarche or menopause. There is no acknowledgement, ritually, of the pain and need for healing associated with miscarriage or sexual abuse or assault. All of this confirms our feelings as Other in our own religion. Important occurrences in women's lives are too often overlooked in Judaism.

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

Feminists have created new rituals and liturgies to recognize and sanctify these major life events. Penina V. Adelman explains the impetus behind the creation of her ritual of loss. Rituals for the loss of many things, including a fetus, do not exist within Judaism. She states, "For my own spiritual survival, I had to dip into *Miriam's Well* to create one – based on the story of Hannah in the Bible, in the First Book of Samuel" (251). Adelman's ritual makes a Jewish time in space, something all rituals are designed to do. It is a beautifully designed mourning ritual, appropriate for any other forms of mourning not recognized in traditional Judaism.

"Society regularly marks the death of a human being, but not necessarily the end of a period of grief. The end of a marriage in divorce, the death of an unborn child, the abortion of a fetus, and the loss of a lover – all require a period of mourning. These events are seldom ritualized. We believe time must be set aside for this." (251)

By recognizing these losses, we validate our feelings of grief. Too often women's feelings, our losses, even our joys are not recognized in traditional Judaism. Feminist Judaism seeks to change that. Many of these new rituals are performed in a community, if not a minyan, of women. We need to have these celebrations with other women, our understanding sisters. Judaism is a communal religion, yet women have been barred from the community for so long, we are making our own.

We need to feel that validation from our religion. We need to be able to mark the cycles of our lives. Umansky discusses this need:

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

what does seem to be a common thread running through the spiritual visions of many contemporary U.S. Jewish women is a willingness to share their own experiences, what [Reform Rabbi Laura] Geller calls the “Torah of our lives as well as the Torah that was written down.” From deeply personal sermons written by Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative rabbis, to poems and prayers reflecting on such life passages as menstruation, pregnancy, miscarriage, giving birth, adopting a child, menopause, and widowhood, to newly created rituals and ceremonies for the birth of a daughter, weaning, aging, infertility, coming out as a lesbian, and separation from one’s spouse, these varied spiritual expressions reveal a sense of spirituality that is to a great extent gender based. (1998, 356)

Women’s spirituality comes through in our everyday lives. We bless and make holy each moment of our days. That is what Umansky is referring to in a gender-based spiritualism. We do not need to wait until Yom Kippur, or even Shabbat, in order to make Jewish time in our lives. But, we will continue to be the Other as long as the major events in our lives go unmarked. We seek only the recognition of rituals based around the cycles of our lives. We want the Jewish community to validate our spirituality. Liturgy is an evolving thing. And feminism is finding ways to make Judaism more responsive and valid to women’s spiritual needs.”

“Well, one way in which we validate our spirituality is by reclaiming my namesake,” Lilith broke in. “Lilith has always been vilified. She is known as the Queen of the Night, Mother of Demons. Legend says that Lilith was Adam’s first wife who was cast out of Eden because she would not be submissive to him. As such, she is certainly

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

an appropriate mascot for the Jewish feminist movement. This quote from Louis Ginzberg's The Legends of the Jews, was reprinted in Lilith's Daughters:

To banish his loneliness, Lilith was first given to Adam as wife. Like him, she had been created out of the dust of the ground. But she remained with him only a short time, because she insisted upon enjoying full equality with her husband. She derived her rights from their identical origin. With the help of the ineffable Name, which she pronounced, Lilith flew away from Adam, and vanished into air. According to this legend then, Lilith was the first feminist. But for so long, she was a force of which every woman should be wary. Persecuted as she was, Lilith soon became the nameless evil of nightmares. Amulets were made to protect women in childbirth from Lilith and her demons. However, the new Lilith represents full equality with Jewish men, something of which we should no longer be afraid. We need this equality in order to fully embrace our Judaism. Without it, we are left in the margins again, and we are tired of waiting patiently there. Here's something to think about. Ellen Umansky, in Feminism and World Religions quotes a Paula Hyman essay:

By exempting women from time-bound positive *mitzvot* [commandments]... and denying them legal independence, Judaism has relegated women to a second-class status. Within the family, the women may have had a necessary and noble task to fulfill. But the heart and soul of traditional Judaism remained communal prayer and study. And prayer and study were the pursuits almost exclusively of men.”
(Umansky, 1999, 188)

Lilith sat down slowly arching her back. It had been giving her a hard time lately.

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

“Oh absolutely,” said Ruth. She stood again. “Where I grew up, we had a women’s group. They would all go hiking together. Shopping. They were buddies. And they had a ceremony for we daughters when we had started our menses. It was beautiful and magical. I just dreamt about it last night, actually. I thank Shekhinah for that wonderful welcoming to the Sisterhood.

That’s another concept reclaimed by feminism – Shekhinah. Shekhinah is rarely mentioned in liturgy, however it was she who stood beside us in the desert, guiding us. Shekhinah had pity on the Israelites and stayed with them to comfort them. Israelite women worshiped a being like Shekhinah long ago. However, since this being was seen as being separate from the masculine Hebrew G-d, and obviously a god couldn’t have feminine characteristics, its worship was trampled out by history. But female spirituality existed during the time of the creation of the Bible. Says Susan Ackerman:

... the women of Judah and Israel had a rich religious tradition. The women of early sixth-century Judah, for example, devoted themselves to the worship of a goddess called the Queen of Heaven. Indeed, although the prophet Jeremiah makes the women of Judah and Jerusalem the object of his special scorn due to their devotion to the Queen of Heaven, the women are steadfast in their worship of the goddess: baking cakes “in her image” as offerings and pouring out libations and burning incense to her. (Paper, 40)

We need to feel a connection to our deity. All people need this connection. Women were subsequently shut out of their spirituality by being told we needed to worship a very masculine Hebrew G-d. The feminine characteristics of a god were all but forgotten. Is

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

it that the men refuse to admit any feminine aspect of deity unless they absolutely must, starving and lost in the desert? Regardless, any deity who is everything must therefore also have female aspects as well as masculine ones. Feminists have embraced this female aspect of G-d, this Shekhinah, as an entity to which we can more easily relate. Is it really that surprising that women would have an easier time relating to the Shekhinah than to other, more masculine, aspects of G-d? Just as women will stand their children no matter what, so G-d went into exile in the desert with the Jews as Shekhinah. It was Shekhinah who walked with us during the Holocaust. It is Shekhinah who will not leave us. The truth is that we imagine G-d in our own image. And for too long, this image has been exclusively male. We are tired of being shut out by this lack of equality, even to our deity. It is time for Judaism to reclaim the Shekhinah as feminism already has. It is time for Judaism to recognize its women and their unique spirituality.

If G-d is everything, then G-d is both male and female equally. G-d, then, is a perfect balance of every polarity. How then can Judaism claim to worship the One true god if we are only paying heed to half of it. The Jewish feminist seeks to remind Judaism of G-d's other side. Our side.”

Ruth breathed in deeply. Her soul felt lighter having shared her research with her friends. She closed her eyes and thanked Shekhinah again for her dream. She looked to her right. “So, Gabby, what did you find?”

Gabby shifted her weight uncomfortably in her chair and lowered her hands from her mouth. “Um, I was really busy this week. I’m sorry; I just didn’t get a chance to get any research done. I know this was your topic Ruth and I’m so sorry...”

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

“Don’t worry about it, Dear.” Ruth placed her hand comfortingly on her friend’s shoulder and smiled warmly at her. Gabby smiled back, though was still worried that she had hurt Ruth’s feelings.

The group slowly broke apart, with Lilith the first to go. She said that her back was bothering her again and that she needed to go lay down. Gabby felt bad for poor Lilith. That car accident had really taken its toll on her friend. Miriam left next. She was looking forward to taking Rachel to the park since it was so nice out. Ruth stayed and talked with her friend while Gabby finished her cold coffee.

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

Chapter Four

Gabby stared into her eyes in the mirror. When was the last good night's sleep I got, she wondered. Two weeks? A month? She closed her eyes and pressed gently on the lids with her fingertips. She saw Maria again in her mind.

Maria had come to her scared and alone. She had just extracted herself from a psychologically abusive relationship. She and her son had no place to go. They wound up at the shelter as they were walking through the neighborhood on their way to the food pantry. They'd been living in a roach motel up the road. And Maria was down to her last \$50. She had been waitressing, but they hadn't been able to make ends meet she said. She cried at the desk and called upon some saint to help her.

I wonder what happened to Maria. That was the problem with that job, she only saw the first step of the journey, never where it wound up. She poured the coffee worked on fixing it up just the way she liked. With the cinnamon creamer.

Gabby sat down at the table and lit a cigarette. She leaned her head to the left and placed her forehead in her palm. A large yawn poured from her parted lips. She sipped the coffee.

Holy god that's hot! Gabby was used to cold coffee as she never sat down long enough to down the cup before it was. The price of helping others, she thought. That and the toll on my body and spirit. She sighed again and finished her coffee.

She stood in front of the full-length mirror and surveyed herself. She always felt sick looking at herself in the mirror. All she saw was the overweight girl she was in college. The one who tried to sink into her chair to keep from being noticed. She was

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

always nervous that someone was watching her. Staring at her like one does a whale tossed up onto the beach. It's something that is out of its element. It doesn't belong. And neither do I, she thought. She went through school without making many friends until her senior year. During her sophomore year, Gabby had decided to start exercising. At first she could only walk, then eventually walk briskly. Now she ran two miles every morning during the week. But she still saw her eighteen-year-old self in the mirror. She quickly ran to the scale to confirm her weight.

By the time Gabby reached the café, the other ladies were waiting, except for Lilith. She felt guilty as this was her day to choose the topic and here she was late. Besides thinking about her clients and worrying about her weight, she had also gotten stuck behind an accident on the interstate. Her nerves were frayed.

“Okay, so the topic is social activism. Who's starting?” she asked sitting down. The others sat in silence staring at her. It was her worst nightmare, so Gabby started to talk nervously.

“Jewish feminists have a strong feeling of responsibility and a draw towards social activism. We take *tikkun olam* very seriously as our duty to the world. “Judaism believes that the purpose of Jewish existence is nothing less than “to perfect the world under the rule of G-d” The principle of ethical monotheism, the obligation to try “to perfect the world under the rule of G-d,” is reiterated three times a day in the Aleinu prayer, which closes the morning, afternoon, and evening prayer services” (Telushkin, 599). A Judaism more rooted in values, such as feminist Judaism, would have to find itself concerned with the environment and with the less fortunate. “Jewish feminists have

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

described women's liberation as an aspect of tikkun, an ingredient in the repair and transformation of the world that is part of its redemption" (Plaskow, 1993, 1). We are all oppressed as long as one of us remains so. And so, we seek to finish creation, as G-d wanted us to do.

Feminism in general is quite concerned with the damage we are doing to our environment. Jews in particular, having been commanded to repair the world, feel a special responsibility to do so. There is a name for this movement, Ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism recognizes this bond between the environment and us. Genesis 2:15 states, "The Eternal placed the Human Being in the Garden of Eden to till it and to tend it" (Torah, 5). We have a divine responsibility to the earth we inhabit. Ecofeminism recognizes and embraces this responsibility.

In 1992, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, COEJL, was founded. According to their founding statement, COEJL grows out of the responsibility of tikkun olam. "We, American Jews of every denomination, from diverse organizations and differing political perspectives, are united in deep concern that the quality of human life and the earth we inhabit are in danger, afflicted by rapidly increasing ecological threats." This statement was signed in Washington, DC on March 10, 1992 by three U.S. Senators, the leaders of all of the denominations, the president of United Jewish Appeal, and the chairperson of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations. It is of utmost importance that the environment and its rehabilitation and protection come to the forefront of every Jewish mind. Judaism sees the challenge ahead of us, to save the world, and accepts it. Feminism in particular feels a kinship to the earth as she is used

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

and mistreated. The goal of equality is only matched by the goal of tikkun, to the ecofeminist. She sees the inequalities and oppression of all and seeks to alleviate it. We must join the ecofeminist and help repair our world before it is too late.”

“Well,” said Miriam, “that is what Hadassah is all about too... tikkun olam. That’s the founding idea behind the creation of Hadassah by Henrietta Szold. I know you guys have heard me talk about Hadassah a lot, but bear with me, because this is my social cause. Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem is known as the foremost hospital in the Middle East. Szold insisted that the most up-to-date medical equipment and techniques be used by the hospital. Services were extended to the Arabs of Palestine as well. Hadassah Hospital had a major part in the decline of infant mortality rate among these Arabs. Szold also involved Hadassah in the “Youth Aliyah” program, which saved an estimated 22,000 Jewish children from the concentration camps during *HaShoah*. Hadassah is presently the largest Zionist Women’s Jewish organization in the United States (Telushkin, 411). A belief in the power of a group of women and in our responsibility to the world is central to this organization.”

“But,” interjected Ruth, “Our social activism does not stop in Israel. One of the issues at the forefront of Orthodox life is the problem of the *agunah*. She is anchored to a marriage that no longer exists, but is unable to be released from the marriage without a *get*. Sometimes her husband is missing and she cannot prove his death and is thus trapped, chained to a ghost. Other husbands will sometimes withhold a *get* so in order to hurt the woman. There is much social activism surrounding this issue.

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

Divorce is spoken about in only one verse from the Torah. Deuteronomy 24:1 states, in typical sexist fashion, “A man takes a wife and possesses her. She fails to please him because he finds something obnoxious about her, and he writes her a bill of divorcement, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house.” Because of this verse, traditionally, only the husband can initiate a divorce in Judaism. This leaves the wife at the mercy of a malicious husband. But feminists are trying to alleviate the plight of the agunah as well. “In recent years, Jewish women’s groups have picketed in front of the offices and stores of men who refuse to issue their wives a get. These groups have often been successful in coercing recalcitrant husbands to issue a get” (Telushkin 623). Feminists will take any steps they can to try to remedy this awful situation. Maimonides actually states in the Mishneh Torah, “Laws of Divorce,” 2:20 that the husband should be whipped until he will issue the get. If the husband does not issue the get, he should be whipped until dead, then the woman can remarry as a widow (Telushkin 623). We even have a sage on our side, and yet the problem persists. Incredible. A feminist Judaism must exist in order to correct this problem.” Ruth shifted her weight and took a long slow sip of her coffee.

Miriam stood. “I’m sorry Lilith couldn’t be here today. Her back went out on Thursday and she’s to stay in bed all weekend. So, you can imagine the mood she’s in!” Gabby and Ruth laughed. Lilith was the outdoorsiest person they all knew. It must’ve killed her to be bedridden for four whole days. “But I want to thank you for all of your research so far.”

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

“The Jewish feminist is an energetic social activist. She is concerned for the environment and our poor stewardship of the planet. She is a contributing member of Hadassah, helping to provide the highest quality medical care to the Middle East. She runs a letter writing campaign to generate support for the agunot and their terrible plight. She is an integral part of Judaism because she reminds us that while we do not have to complete creation, we may not cease trying.

Every movement within Judaism is trying to assimilate feminism in its own way. The Reform movement ordains many female rabbis, yet few make it to influential leadership positions. Women have, for the most part, equal rights and obligations as men in this movement. The Conservatives movement is in virtually the same place as the Reform currently. Conservative Judaism hasn't ordained the numbers of female rabbis that Reform has, but the number is still growing. Reconstructionism was founded with equality in mind and therefore has not had the problems the other movements are encountering trying to integrate feminism. The International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy and the investigation by the Union of Traditional Judaism of the establishment of a women's degree program speaks volumes about how this movement is finally starting to incorporate feminism. Each movement is progressing at its own pace, but each has been inoculated with a feminism it cannot seem to shake.

So, why is Jewish feminism necessary to a vital and dynamic Judaism? Growth cannot occur without change. Feminism is calling for change, in order to institute growth. We need to reinterpret our halachah to reflect women's spiritual equality. Feminism is creative... forming new rituals from old concepts. We must celebrate the

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

times of our lives. We must make our spirituality a constant state of our existence. Feminism reminds us of the inequalities in the world. We need to increase our social activism. We must go above and beyond what we do now... perhaps above and beyond what we think prudent... to help heal the world.

But the most important role of the Jewish feminist is to transform Judaism into a dynamic, vital, healthy religion of equality and accessibility for all.” Ruth stood up.

“Amen. And might I suggest a next project... creating rituals for ourselves and our daughters. We could put together our own little booklet.” Ruth beamed. She couldn’t wait to put to paper the beautiful ceremony in her head and her heart.

“That’s a great idea!” Gabby chimed in. She would write a healing ritual for Maria and her sisters at the shelter. She wanted to have a poem, a glimmer of inspiration, to give to them, to help them make it a little longer on hope and prayer.

Miriam thought for a moment. Little Rachel would be starting school in a year or two... the first of a series of separations. She could write a ritual to deal with the anxiety of letting her little girl grow up. “I’m in,” she stated.

“Excellent. Well, for next week, just come with an idea about a milestone that you want to make Jewish. Bring paper and we’ll brainstorm!” Ruth was bubbling over. They talked about the new project for a while before slowly breaking up and going their separate ways, excitement pulsing in their veins.

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

Glossary of Terms

Agunah – a married woman trapped in her marriage by halachah. She seeks a divorce, but (usually) her husband will not grant her one. Literally “anchored,” she is bound to a husband with whom she no longer lives. A married woman is an agunah as well if her husband is missing for whatever reason.

Aleinu – one of the central prayers of the Jewish liturgy. Aleinu blesses G-d as well as speaking of tikkun olam.

Bat mitzvah – literally “daughter of the commandments.” Bar mitzvah is the term for boys. At the age of 12 for a girl, 13 for a boy, an individual is now seen as an adult as far as being able to count in a minyan. All of the responsibilities of being Jewish are now incumbent on the new bat mitzvah.

Note: An individual becomes bat/bar mitzvah regardless of whether there is any celebration. The celebration after the service, which is commonly called the “bat/bar mitzvah” is actually a celebration of the individual reaching this age.

Brit milah – the ritual surrounding the covenant of circumcision. Aka – Bris, brit.

Challah – an offering to G-d from the Sabbath bread. Also, this bread.

Halachah – Jewish law. Halachah is followed strictly according to the Torah and Talmud by the Orthodox. The Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative movements practice halachah in varying degrees.

HaShoah – literally “the annihilation.” Refers to the Holocaust.

Kaddish – prayer of praise to G-d said to honor the dead.

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

Lilith – according to tradition, the first woman. There are two creation stories in Genesis.

Some say the first describes the creation of Lilith and the second the creation of Eve. Lilith has traditionally been demonized for her unwillingness to be subservient to Adam. According to tradition, Lilith was cast out of Eden at Adam's request whereupon she associated with the demons.

Maimonides – a twelfth century Jewish sage. He wrote the Mishneh Torah.

Meshuggah – Yiddish, crazy.

Mikvah – ritual immersion. Required once the period of niddah is complete. Also required of a bride. Feminists have written their own rituals involving the mikvah.

Minyan – a prayer group of ten. Certain prayers in Judaism are communal prayers and can only be recited when there is a minyan present.

Miriam's Well – it is said that there was a well from G-d that sprang up in the desert because of Miriam. It followed her around and helped keep the Jewish people alive.

Mishneh Torah – one of the books of Jewish law.

Mitzvah – literally “commandment” though often misinterpreted as good deed. There are 613 commandments in Jewish law. Plural, mitzvot.

Niddah – the period of ritual “uncleanliness” surrounding menses.

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

Rosh Chodesh – literally “the head of the month.” Traditionally a women’s holiday observed by refraining from work on this day.

Shekhinah – G-d on Earth. The Shekhinah is said to be the part of G-d that walked with the Jews through the desert for 40 years during the exodus. Shekhinah is traditionally seen as a more nurturing, feminine aspect of G-d.

Taharat hamishpachah – the laws of family purity. This includes niddah and subsequent mikvah.

Tefillah – literally, prayer.

Tikkun olam – repair of the world. This is the idea that it is our job to go about completing and perfecting creation... hence why G-d rested on the seventh day. In Judaism, this is the central purpose of your existence... essentially to make the world a better place than when you came into it.

Towards A More Inclusive Judaism:

A Creative Essay About A Feminist Judaism

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