

Clearly, Waskow considers feminism to be a movement of great importance for the renewal of Judaism. Yet he also contends that Judaism is important for feminists, because "there is powerful truth in the tradition's resistance to power, in the multi-level poetry of its rituals, in its sardonic view of the transitory idols of convention, in its commitment to the creation of counter-institutions reaching toward equality and community."

Underlying Lynn Gottlieb's prose-poems are several arguments central to a feminist theology of Judaism. She looks both to the spoken and unspoken voices of Jewish women of the past, recovering forgotten traditions and trying to articulate what they could not: "How would they have spoken of their own religious experiences if they had been given a space to record their stories?" she asks. Next, she borrows from known traditions of Jewish history, giving them new meaning based on the experiences of contemporary Jewish women. The Marranos, Jews of medieval Spain and Portugal who hid behind the pretense of being Christian, identified with the predicament of Queen Esther, who was also forced to keep her Jewish identity a secret. While Esther was eventually able to reveal her Jewish identity, the Marranos kept their secret to themselves. Women of the current generation, like those of generations past, also have been forced to conceal their religious strivings behind rigid roles that exclude them from full expression of their religiosity. But women today, Gottlieb suggests, "by transmitting the hidden voices of the past, pray with messianic fervor for that time when we can unite the oral and written tradition of our mothers with the oral and written tradition of our fathers."

Her second poem draws from the cleaning labors in preparation for Passover that have devolved primarily upon women during the centuries. This cleaning, which is traditionally understood as a symbolic spiritual cleansing, includes the search for and setting aside of *hametz*, any food or vessel not kosher for Passover. Here, Gottlieb interprets this removal of *hametz* in terms of feminists' inner struggles. The bitterness of Egyptian enslavement must be rooted out. Liberation requires cleansing not only of the house of Judaism, but of each Jew, "for the last crumbs grown stale inside us, for the last darkness still in our hearts."

## The Right Question Is Theological

by Judith Plaskow

IN an article on the situation of Jewish women, Cynthia Ozick offers fourteen "meditations" pointing to the sociological status of the woman question in Judaism.<sup>1</sup> The subordination of women, she argues, is not deeply rooted in Torah but is the result of historical custom and practice, which can be halakhically repaired. Only in her last meditation does she raise the great "what if?": what if the Otherness of women is not simply a matter of Jewish incorporation of surrounding social attitudes but is in part created and sustained by Torah itself? What if the subordination of women in Judaism is rooted in theology, in the very foundations of the Jewish tradition?

The fact that Ozick postpones this question to the end of her paper, that she is reluctant to explore the theological underpinnings of women's status, places her in the mainstream of Jewish feminism. The Jewish women's movement of the past decade has been and remains a civil-rights movement rather than a movement for "women's liberation."<sup>2</sup> It has been a movement concerned with the images and status of women in Jewish religious and communal life, and with halakhic and institutional change. It has been less concerned with analysis of the origins and bases of women's oppression that render change necessary. It has focused on getting women a piece of the Jewish pie; it has not wanted to bake a new one!

There are undoubtedly many reasons for Jewish feminism's practical bent; absence of a strong Jewish theological tradition;

the minority status of Jews in American culture; the existence of laws (e.g., divorce) that have the power to destroy women's lives and thus require immediate remedy. But such emphasis is no less dangerous for being comprehensible. If the Jewish women's movement addresses itself only to the fruits but not the bases of discrimination, it is apt to settle for too little in the way of change. It may find that the full participation of women in Jewish life—should it come—will only bring to light deeper contradictions in Jewish imagery and symbolism. And most likely, far-reaching change will not come until these contradictions are examined and exorcised. It is time, therefore, to confront the full extent of our disablement as Jewish women in order that we may understand the full implications of our struggle.

Of the issues that present themselves for our attention, *halakhah* has been at the center of feminist agitation for religious change, and it is to *halakhah* that Ozick turns in the hope of altering women's situation. But while this issue has been considered and debated frequently in the last ten years, it is specific *halakhot* that have been questioned and not the fundamental presuppositions of the legal system. The fact that women are not counted in a *minyan*, that we are not called to the Torah, that we are silent in the marriage ceremony and shackled when it comes to divorce—these disabilities have been recognized, deplored, and in non-Orthodox Judaism, somewhat alleviated. The *implications* of such laws, their essentially nonarbitrary character, has received less attention, however. Underlying specific *halakhot*, and *outlasting their amelioration or rejection*, is an assumption of women's Otherness far more basic than the laws in which it finds expression. If women are not part of the congregation, if we stand passively under the *huppah*, if, even in the Reform movement, we have become rabbis only in the last ten years, this is because men—and not women with them—define Jewish humanity. Men are the actors in religious and communal life because they are the normative Jews. Women are “other than” the norm; we are less than fully human.<sup>3</sup>

This Otherness of women as a presupposition of Jewish law in its most central formulations. In the last section of her article on Jewish women, finally turning to the sacral nature of women's

status, Ozick points out that the biblical passion for justice does not extend to women. Women's position in biblical law as “part of the web of ownership” is taken as simply the way things are; it is not perceived as or named “injustice.” One great “Thou shalt not”—“Thou shalt not lessen the humanity of women”—is absent from the Torah.<sup>4</sup> The Otherness of women basic to the written law also underlies the Mishnaic treatment of women. Jacob Neusner points out that the Mishnah's Division of Women deals with women in states of transition, whose uncertain status threatens the stasis of the community. The woman who is about to enter into a marriage or who has just left one requires close attention. The law must regularize her irregularity, facilitate her transition to the normal state of wife and motherhood, at which point she no longer poses a problem.<sup>5</sup> The concerns of the Division, and even the fact of its existence, assume a view of women as “abnormal” or “irregular” and therefore requiring special sanctification. While the mechanisms of sanctification are elaborated extensively, the need for it is never questioned. It is simply presupposed by the text.

That women have a “special” status, one that is taken for granted by the tradition, is underlined by another factor: all reasons given for women's legal disabilities—e.g., they are exempt from positive time-bound commandments because of household responsibilities; they are closer to God and therefore do not need as many commands—presuppose the sex-role division they seek to explain.<sup>6</sup> But while the origins of this division are thus hidden from us—they remain part of the broader historical question of the roots of female subordination—the division itself is imaged and elaborated in clear and specific terms. As in the Christian tradition, in which the Otherness of women is expressed in the language of mind/body dualism, Judaism tenders a similar distinction between *ruhniut* [spirituality] and *gashmiut* [physicality], men and women.<sup>7</sup> The need to regulate women is articulated not as a general problem but as the need to control their unruly female sexuality because of its threat to the spirituality of men.

This fear of women as sexual beings finds expression in both halakhic and aggadic sources. Neusner suggests that it lies just under the surface of the Mishnah's whole treatment of women.

Even where a text's explicit topic is the economics of property transfer, it is the anomaly of female sexuality, with its "dreadful threat of uncontrolled shifts in personal status and material possession," that is the motive of legislation.<sup>8</sup> But rabbinic concern with female sexuality need not always be deduced from discussion of other matters. The rabbinic laws concerning modesty, with their one-sided emphasis on the modesty of women, make clear that it is women who endanger public morality through their ability to tempt men. These careful regulations of dress and exposure lack any sense of reciprocity, any sense that men tempt women and may therefore also be defined as tempters. Woman may be a bag of filth; "it [may be] better to walk behind a lion than behind a woman,"<sup>9</sup> but apparently men are different since there is no danger in a woman's walking behind a man!

The concepts of woman as Other and as temptress are certainly not new to Jewish feminism. They were articulated by Rachel Adler in her classic essay on women and *halakhah*, elaborated by others, and recently reiterated by Ozick.<sup>10</sup> These writers seem not to have fully understood the implications of their own categories, however, for they tend to assume that the Otherness of women will disappear if only the community is flexible enough to rectify halakhic injustices.<sup>11</sup> Would this were true! But the issue is far deeper than is suggested by this assumption.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the situation of the Jewish woman might well be compared to the situation of the Jew in non-Jewish culture. The Gentile projection of the Jew as Other—the stranger, the demon, the human non-quite-human—<sup>13</sup>is repeated in—or should one say partly *modelled on?*—the Jewish understanding of the Jewish woman. She too is the stranger whose life is lived parallel to man's, the demoness who stirs him, the partner whose humanity is different from his own. And just as legal changes have ameliorated the situation of the Jews without ever lifting the suspicion of our humanity, so legal change will not restore the full humanity of the Jewish woman. Our legal disabilities are a *symptom* of a pattern of projection that lies deep in Jewish thinking. They express and reflect a fundamental stance toward women that must be confronted, addressed and rooted out at its core. While it is Jewish to hope that changes in *halakhah* might bring about

changes in underlying attitudes, it is folly to think that justice for women can be achieved simply through halakhic mechanisms when women's plight is not primarily a product of *halakhah*.

But this is just one issue. The Otherness of women is also given dramatic expression in our language about God. Here, we confront a great scandal: the God who supposedly transcends sexuality, who is presumably one and whole, is known to us through language that is highly selective and partial. The images we use to describe God, the qualities we attribute to God, draw on male pronouns and male experience and convey a sense of power and authority that is clearly male in character. The God at the surface of Jewish consciousness is a God with a voice of thunder, a God who as Lord and King rules his people and leads them into battle, a God who forgives like a father when we turn to him. The female images that exist in the Bible and (particularly the mystical) tradition form an underground stream that reminds us of the inadequacy of our imagery without, however, transforming its overwhelmingly male nature. The hand that takes us out of Egypt is a male hand—both in the Bible and in our contemporary imaginations.

Perceiving the predominance of male language is not the same as understanding its importance, however. Ozick, for instance, begins her article with the question of God and dismisses it quickly. She does not deny the dominance of male imagery, but argues that reflection on the absence of female anthropomorphisms "can only take us to quibbles about the incompetence of pronouns."<sup>14</sup> If the Jewish-woman question is unrelated to theology, theological questions can only lead to dead ends. But as with Ozick's treatment of *halakhah*, this position seriously underestimates the depth of the issue. Religious symbols are significant and powerful communications. Since through them, a community expresses its sense and experience of the world, it cannot allow missing pronouns to determine its sense of reality.<sup>15</sup> The maleness of God is not arbitrary—nor is it simply a matter of pronouns. It leads us to the central question, the question of the Otherness of women, just as the Otherness of women leads to the maleness of God.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz offers us important insights into

the function of religious language. In an essay on "Religion as a Cultural System," Geertz argues that religious symbols express both the sensibility and moral character of a people and the way in which it understands and structures the world. Symbols are simultaneously *models of* a community's sense of ultimate reality and *models for* human behavior and the social order. The Sabbath, for example, as a model of God's action in creating the world, is also a model for the Jewish community which, like God, rests on the seventh day. The double reference of symbols, up and down, enforces a community's sense of its symbols' factuality and appropriateness.<sup>16</sup> If God rested on the seventh day, can we fail to do so, and how can our doing so not bring us closer to God?

If we apply Geertz's analysis to the issue of male God-language, it is clear that such language also functions as a model-of and model-for. This language both tells us about God's nature (it is, after all, the only way we know God) and justifies a human community which reserves power and authority to men. When Mortimer Ostow used the maleness of God as an argument against the ordination of women rabbis, he made the connection between language and authority painfully clear.<sup>17</sup> But we do not need Ostow's honesty to grasp the implications of our language; language speaks for itself. If God is male, and we are in God's image, how can maleness *not* be the norm of Jewish humanity? If maleness is normative, how can women not be Other? And if women are Other, how can we not speak of God in language drawn from the male norm?

One consequence of the nature of male God-imagery as a model for community is that the prayer book becomes testimony against the participation of women in Jewish religious life. Women's greater access to Jewish learning, our increased leadership in synagogue ritual only bring to the surface deep contradictions between equality for women and the tradition's fundamental symbols and images for God. While the active presence of women in congregations should bespeak our full membership in the Jewish community, the language of the service conveys a different message. It impugns the humanity of women and ignores our experience, rendering that experience invisible,

even in the face of our presence. But since language is not a halakhic issue, we cannot change this situation through halakhic repair. It is not "simply" that *halakhah* presupposes the Otherness of women but that this Otherness reflects and is reflected in our speech about God. The equality of women in the Jewish community requires the radical transformation of our religious language in the form of recognition of the feminine aspects of God.

Here we encounter a problem; for it is impossible to mention the subject of female language without the specter of paganism being raised. For critics of (this aspect of) Jewish feminism, introducing female God-language means reintroducing polytheism into the tradition and abdicating all that made Judaism distinctive in the ancient world.<sup>18</sup> While, on the one hand, cries of "paganism" couch the question of language in dishonest and hysterical terms, they also make clear that the issue evokes deep emotional resonances. Rationally, it seems contradictory to argue that the Jewish God transcends sexuality, that anthropomorphism—while necessitated by the limits of our thought—is not to be taken literally; and at the same time to insist that a broadening of anthropomorphic language will destroy the tradition. As Rita Gross asks in her article on Jewish God-language: "If we do not mean that God is male when we use masculine pronouns and imagery, then why should there be any objections to using female imagery and pronouns as well?"<sup>19</sup> Use of sexually dimorphic images may be the best way to acknowledge the limits of language and God's fullness, so that the inclusion of women becomes, at the same time, an enrichment of our concept of God.

But the issue of female God-language touches chords that are not reached or responded to by rational discussion, and so such arguments do not do. The exclusive worship of Jahweh was the result of a long, drawn-out struggle, not simply with the people of the land, but with the many within Israel who wanted to maintain Goddess-worship alongside the worship of God. The victory of Jahwehism entailed suppression of the female side of divinity (and of women as members of the cult), almost as if any recognition the feminine was accorded might overwhelm the precarious ascendancy of God. The gods could seemingly be superseded,

their qualities included in the many-named God and recognized as aspects of himself. But the goddesses were apparently too real and too vital for their attributes to be incorporated in this way.<sup>20</sup>

It might seem we are now distant enough from paganism to understand the historical context of suppression of the Goddess without feeling the need to refight this struggle. But if Ba'al is impotent and voiceless, an object of purely theoretical condemnation, the Goddess still evokes resistance which is vehement and deeply felt. Albeit through the lens of our monotheistic tradition, she seems to speak to us as powerfully as ever. Yet this is itself a strong argument for the incorporation of female language into the tradition. It is precisely because she is not distant that the Goddess must be recognized as a part of God. For the God who does not include her is an idol made in man's image, a God over against a female Other—not the Creator, source of maleness and femaleness, not the relativizer of all gods and goddesses who nonetheless includes them as part of God's self. Acknowledging the many aspects of the Goddess among the names of God becomes a measure of our ability to incorporate the feminine and women into a monotheistic religious framework. At the same time, naming women's experience as part of the nature of the deity brings the suppressed experience of women into the Jewish fold.

This brings us to our last issue, one that is closely related to the other two. As Ozick points out in a particularly eloquent meditation, the Jewish tradition is not the product of the entire Jewish people, but of Jewish men alone.<sup>21</sup> Of course women have lived Jewish history and carried its burdens, shaped our experience to history and history to ourselves. But ours is not the history passed down and recorded; the texts committed to memory or the documents studied; the arguments fought, refought, and finely honed. Women have not contributed to the formation of the written tradition, and thus tradition does not reflect the specific realities of women's lives.

This fact, which marks so great a loss to tradition and to women, is cause and reflection both of the Otherness of women and the maleness of God. Women are not educated as creators of tradition because we are Other, but of course we remain Other

when we are seen through the filter of male experience without ever speaking for ourselves. The maleness of God calls for the silence of women as shapers of the holy, but our silence in turn enforces our Otherness and a communal sense of the "rightness" of the male image of God. There is a "fit" in other words, a tragic coherence between the role of women in the community, and its symbolism, law, and teaching. The Otherness of women is part of the fabric of Jewish life.

Once again, and now most clearly, we are brought up against the impotence of halakhic change. For *halakhah* is part of the system that women have not had a hand in creating, neither in its foundations, nor as it was developed and refined. Not only is this absence reflected in the content of *halakhah*, it may also be reflected in its very form. How can we presume that if women add their voices to the tradition, *halakhah* will be our medium of expression and repair? How can we determine in advance the channels through which the tradition will become wholly Jewish, i.e., a product of the whole Jewish people, when women are only beginning consciously to explore the particularities of our own Jewishness? To settle on *halakhah* as the source of justice for women is to foreclose the question of women's experience when it has scarcely begun to be raised.

Clearly, the implications of Jewish feminism, while they include halakhic restructuring, reach beyond *halakhah* to transform the bases of Jewish life. Feminism demands a new understanding of Torah, God, and Israel: an understanding of Torah that begins with acknowledgment of the profound injustice of Torah itself. The assumption of the lesser humanity of women has poisoned the content and structure of the law, undergirding women's legal disabilities and our subordination in the broader tradition. This assumption is not amenable to piecemeal change. It must be utterly eradicated by the withdrawal of projection from women—the discovery that the negative traits attributed to women are also in the men who attribute them, while the positive qualities reserved for men are also in women. Feminism demands a new understanding of God that reflects and supports the redefinition of Jewish humanity. The long-suppressed femaleness of God, acknowledged in the mystical tradition, but even here shaped and

articulated by men, must be recovered and reexplored and reintegrated into the Godhead. Last, feminism assumes that these changes will be possible only when we come to a new understanding of the community of Israel which includes the whole of Israel and which therefore allows women to speak and name our experience for ourselves. The outcome of these new understandings is difficult to see in advance of our turning. It is clear, however, that the courage, concern, and creativity necessary for a feminist transformation of Judaism will not be mustered by evading the magnitude of the required change.

## NOTES

1. Cynthia Ozick, "Notes toward Finding the Right Question," *Lilith* 6, (1979), pp. 19–29 [pp. 120–151 in this volume].
2. Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1971), pp. ix–x.
3. Simone de Beauvoir describes woman as the Other in *The Second Sex* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), pp. xvi–xxix and *passim*. Rachel Adler ("The Jew Who Wasn't There: *Halakhah* and the Jewish Woman," *Response*, 18, Summer 1973, pp. 77–82; pp. 12–18 in this volume) and Ozick (p. 21; pp. 123–124 in this volume) make use of this basic concept but without understanding its implications for halakhic change. See below.
4. Ozick, pp. 27, 29 [pp. 144, 149 in this vol.].
5. Jacob Neusner, "Mishnah on Women: Thematic or Systemic Description," *Marxist Perspectives* (Spring 1980), pp. 94–95.
6. See Moshe Meiselman, *Jewish Woman in Jewish Law* (New York: Ktav Publishing House and Yeshiva University Press, 1978), p. 43f.
7. There are, of course, important differences between Judaism and Christianity on this issue. Dualism did not receive the same theological expression in Judaism as it did in Christianity, nor in Judaism did dualism find expression in asceticism.
8. Neusner, p. 96.
9. Ber. 152a; Louis Epstein, *Sex Laws and Customs in Judaism* (New York: Ktav, 1967), p. 114.
10. See note 3, above. See also Paula Hyman, "The Other Half: Women in the Jewish Tradition," *Response* 18 (Summer 1973), pp. 67–75.
11. This applies to Adler and Ozick. Hyman calls for changes in "attitude" as well as law.

12. The absence of full equality for women within Reform Judaism is one clear indicator that *halakhah* is not the real issue.
13. The specific phrase is Dorothy Sayers', "The Human-Not-Quite-Human," *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), pp. 37–47. Rosemary Ruether has dealt extensively with the issue of projection as it affects women, Jews, blacks and other oppressed groups. See, e.g., her *New Woman/ New Earth* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), especially pp. 89–114.
14. Ozick, p. 20 [p. 122 in this volume].
15. In saying this, I am not denying that language shapes our sense of reality—quite the contrary. It is just that there are simply ways around male pronouns for any community that wants to find them: e.g., male pronouns but male and female imagery.
16. In *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, William Lessa and Evon Vogt, eds. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 205, 207, 213. See also *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., pp. 2–3.
17. "Women and Change in Jewish Law," *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Fall 1974), pp. 5–12.
18. E.g., Ozick, p. 20 [pp. 120–21 in this volume] (Ozick is obviously not a general critic of Jewish feminism). Ostow gives the impression that women are intrinsically pagan and that justice for women necessarily means the paganization of Judaism—but that raises other questions, which we cannot consider here.
19. "Female God-language in a Jewish Context," *Womanspirit Rising*, pp. 170–171.
20. Raphael Patai documents both the persistence of Goddess worship in Israel and the fact that suppression of the Goddess was never complete. *The Hebrew Goddess* (N.p.: Ktav Publishing House, 1967).
21. Ozick, p. 24f [pp. 136–38 in this volume].