

TRACING THE CONTOURS OF A HALF CENTURY OF JEWISH FEMINIST THEOLOGY

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This essay examines the trajectory of Jewish feminist theology from the 1970s to today. It uses a synthetic, thematic approach, distilling concerns that appear across generically diverse theological writings over the last half century. These themes include the authority of Jewish classical texts and ritual practice, the meaning of embodiment, and the potential of theologies of immanence. The essay is framed by a consideration of the activist roots that fed Jewish feminist theology in its initial stages, on the one hand, and the changed conditions of production that characterize the present, on the other.

Keywords: activism, authority, embodiment, halakha, immanence, Jewish feminism

Feminist activism profoundly reshaped Jewish ritual life in North America. Communal leadership and worship practices are but the most visible, tangible markers of change in religious performance over recent decades. This same activism also decisively changed the landscape of Jewish God-talk in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Challenging entrenched patterns of women's subordination necessarily begged fundamental questions about the cosmic order, authority, and the human condition. The critiques of Jewish theological claims that resulted from this encounter led to an outpouring of innovative work in midrash, ritual, liturgy, and other expressive forms typical of Jewish theological reflection. These critiques also led to scholarly reconnaissance missions to theological terrain long overlooked or marginalized within academic scholarship.

This article examines the impact of feminism on Jewish theology from the vantage point of the current moment, using "theology" expansively to include systematic theological texts and a wide variety of non-systematic modalities that

are characteristic of Jewish intellectual and theological production. I begin by investigating the close relationship between Jewish feminist theology and feminist activism. I then consider how feminist Jewish thinkers have challenged the authority of classical textual sources, expanding the range of sources for Jewish theology, and I analyze key themes that recur in Jewish feminist theological work across genres. These themes are, to some extent, traceable to critiques of religion that emerged in the political and intellectual revolutions of the Enlightenment. Feminist theological work has underscored the ongoing significance of a number of critical modern philosophical challenges to foundational religious claims, in some cases intensifying the critique of religion by undermining yet another layer of the tradition's authority. At the same time, feminist Judaism and its theological innovations constitute one of the most fruitful contributions to Jewish life and thought in contemporary times.

From Activism to Theology

Feminist theological reflection seeks to end women's subordination by investigating the relationship between the ultimate or cosmic order, on the one hand, and the sociopolitical plane on the other. Jewish feminist theological work began with the feminist revolution and with the activists who aimed for nothing less than a dismantling of patriarchal social structures. Jewish feminist reimaginations of God emerged only through, and as a direct consequence of, experiences in which Jewish communities and their received texts and practices were examined in light of the cultural upheaval wrought during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, a direct line can be traced connecting the hard-fought grassroots activism of the 1970s and 1980s to the theological contributions of the 1990s. Jewish feminist theology began by interrogating the status of women and the practical implications of gender in lived experience, reflecting the inextricability of theological claims and questions of praxis. Indeed, theological and halakhic reasoning about gender followed, rather than paved the way for, changes in religious life.¹

Initially, feminists who outlined their vision for changes in Jewish social and religious life did not cite theological commitments or halakhic principles. Instead, feminists presented their demands in terms of social justice and aligning Jewish practices with contemporary American social norms. For example, the 1972 statement by the group of women calling themselves *Ezrat Nashim* demanded, among

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¹ Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995). Arnold M. Eisen observes that "practice has always been 'way out in front of theory' for Jews in the modern period" (*Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], 4).

other things, that women count in a minyan (prayer quorum), that asymmetries in testimony and in marriage and divorce law be eradicated, that women be admitted to the rabbinical and cantorial seminaries, and that women be considered obligated in mitzvot.² Only after agitators articulated their vision, and after a decade or two of social change, did the underlying principles of these transformative practices appear (sometimes in the work of figures who themselves were among the earlier activists).

Jewish feminists' agenda in the 1970s and 1980s was broad in scope, as is evident by the range of topics and concerns addressed in the pioneering 1983 anthology edited by Susannah Heschel, *On Being a Jewish Feminist*.³ In the generation following the first wave of feminist activism, a handful of Jewish thinkers worked to articulate and offer systematic responses to the fundamental questions that activist efforts raised. Judith Plaskow's 1983 essay "The Right Question Is Theological" and her systematic 1990 book *Standing Again at Sinai* took aim at the androcentric and patriarchal master narratives that inform traditional Jewish theology, arguing that the work of ameliorating gender oppression required reenvisioning foundational ideas of God, revelation, and authority.⁴ Plaskow's essay was formulated as a response to Cynthia Ozick's 1979 "Notes toward Finding the Right Question," in which Ozick argued for a sociological explanation for women's marginality in Judaism, implicitly insulating Jewish God-concepts from critique.⁵ Plaskow, by contrast, was among the few writers of this era who posited that this approach would not suffice. "The implications of Jewish feminism," Plaskow stated, "while they include halakhic restructuring, reach beyond halakhah to transform the bases of Jewish life."⁶

Experimentation with and transformative challenges to Jewish law that grew from feminist agitation laid the social foundation for Rachel Adler's holistic approach to halakha in her 1998 *Engendering Judaism*.⁷ New experiences of

² "Ezrat Nashim's 'Jewish Women Call for Change,' March 14, 1972," Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/media/jewish-women-call-for-change>.

³ Susannah Heschel, ed., *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader* (New York: Schocken, 1983).

⁴ Judith Plaskow, "The Right Question Is Theological," in Heschel, *On Being a Jewish Feminist*; and Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).

⁵ Cynthia Ozick, "Notes toward Finding the Right Question," in Heschel, *On Being a Jewish Feminist*.

⁶ Plaskow, "The Right Question Is Theological," 231. Plaskow's understanding of theology as foundational and ontologically prior to halakha was shaped by her doctoral work (conducted at Yale Divinity School and culminating in 1975 with a feminist dissertation on Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich) and by having been raised in Reform Judaism. Informing her work were also two agenda-setting books by Mary Daly, both of which argued for the theological foundations of women's oppression: Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), and Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

⁷ Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998).

prayer that emerged in feminist contexts, such as Rosh Hodesh groups and women's seders, constituted the spadework that necessarily preceded new approaches to God-language, such as the formulations in Marcia Falk's *Book of Blessings*.⁸ As Ellen Umansky and Diane Ashton noted in their preface to the landmark 1992 volume *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality*, the urgency of women's "commitment to personal and communal action" flowered in a "vast amount of published and unpublished spiritual writings" from the 1970s onward.⁹

The theological texts that emerged in the 1990s were the product of not only their individual authors but also grassroots efforts to depatriarchalize and reinvent Judaism. The authors of the first attempts to gather up the strands of on-the-ground feminist experimentation and protest brought critical analysis and reflection to these communal innovations. The texts that resulted wove the strands of the grassroots work into a coherent, if not unified, whole. Jewish theology is no longer as strongly informed by activist commitments, a development that, as I argue below, has had significant intellectual and practical consequences.

What Is an Authoritative Source?

Contesting the subordination of women in Jewish life led feminist theologians to grapple with the literature long perceived as defining Jewish norms: the teachings of the rabbis of late antiquity and the medieval period. The approaches that emerged among feminist theologians and scholars have included both rereading biblical and rabbinic literature and interrogating the social, political, and cultural location of the rabbis using a wide array of scholarly tools. But feminists have also expanded what is considered an authoritative source for Jewish theology. Both ethnography and the study of material culture have challenged rabbinic discourse as the arbiter of authentic Judaism, and the increasing interest in such approaches among feminist scholars has contributed to a broader base of evidence for what Jews of multiple classes, genders, races, sexualities, ages, and cultures have understood to be God.

Feminist theological innovation explicitly builds on the historicist challenges that shook Jewish and Christian theology in the last two centuries and has brought forth complex, often multiply held, hermeneutic stances toward scriptural

⁸ Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996). Earlier material included Penina V. Adelman, *Miriam's Well: Rituals for Jewish Women around the Year* (Fresh Meadows, NY: Biblio, 1986). See also Naomi Janowitz and Maggie Wenig, *Siddur Nashim: A Sabbath Prayer Book for Women* (privately circulated, 1976); selections are reprinted as "Sabbath Prayers for Women," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (1979; repr., San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 174–78.

⁹ Ellen M. Umansky and Dianne Ashton, *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality: A Sourcebook* (Boston: Beacon, 1992).

corpora.¹⁰ In the case of feminist theology, a double stance came to characterize feminist approaches to the normative textual sources, involving a hermeneutics of suspicion, which interrogates the androcentrism of the tradition, and a hermeneutics of retrieval (or remembrance), which forges a constructive and productive relationship to the tradition's foundational texts.¹¹ The concept of a double stance, deployed by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and other feminist theologians across multiple traditions, still offers a useful framework for articulating the tensions that characterize the hermeneutic enterprise.¹²

Even as scholars have limited the authority of the rabbis in the context of late antiquity, feminist theologians have found new potential in the narrative and practical traditions of rabbinic Judaism. Consider the sea change represented by the shift from the status of halakhic texts in recent decades. In *Standing Again at Sinai*, Plaskow considered halakhic texts primarily in terms of their legal content, bringing forth numerous talmudic examples that testified to the subordinate status of women in Jewish law.¹³ Plaskow not only argued that these sources exemplified the notion of woman as Other (in Simone de Beauvoir's famous formulation) but also went on to question whether law as an enterprise was "a female form."¹⁴ Scholarship on the Talmud in the last several decades, however, has suggested that feminist engagement with rabbinic "legal" texts has just begun. Scholars no longer read talmudic texts nominally focused on the minutiae of correct execution of mandated practices solely in terms of their halakhic content; law, as we understand it now, must also be read in terms of literary form, orality, narrative, folklore, and performativity. New attention to discursive style enables the appreciation and even appropriation of talmudic texts in ways that were unthinkable in an earlier

¹⁰ On historicism as it emerged in its German context, see Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968). Classic accounts of the challenges historicism creates for Christian and Jewish theology, but without reference to gender, are, respectively, Van Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996); and Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1989). On historicism as an asset and challenge for feminist theology, early and influential contributions include Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); and Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*.

¹¹ These terms are typically (mis)attributed to Paul Ricoeur. On the genealogy of the idea that "interpretation involves the exercise of suspicion," see Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Continuum, 2010), 59–96; Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), and Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967).

¹² Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*.

¹³ About five years before *Standing Again at Sinai* was published, Rachel Biale collected and published a guide to halakhic material concerning "women's issues" in *Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources* (New York: Schocken, 1984).

¹⁴ Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 65. See also Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1952).

period, and even for feminist scholars, disturbing discussions predicated on women's alterity have become more dynamic and nuanced as theologians have gone beyond legal positivism to engage the narrative structure of these texts.¹⁵

With this scholarly development, some feminists have found talmudic texts compelling and generative for constructive theological projects. For example, Julia Watts Belser has sought out talmudic texts as a feminist scholar and theologian. She consistently acknowledges the limitations of the talmudic corpus, regarding with suspicion the "familiar tropes of women's sexual sin as an explanation for catastrophe" in many amoraic treatments of the paradigmatic destruction of their own era—the destruction of Jerusalem—for comprehending the environmental destruction of our own time. Yet Belser also finds hope in a talmudic pericope that articulates "an alternate understanding of God's place amidst suffering and catastrophe," and in which God empathizes with individuals suffering "social oppression."¹⁶ Likewise, in *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*, I engage biblical, rabbinic, and modern Jewish sources not simply because of their privileged place in defining normative Jewish thought, but because I regard them as tremendously rich and "good to think with."¹⁷ In the book, which aims to bring maternal experience into conversation with Jewish thought, I use a dialectical approach for my constructive project, arguing "the dilemmas inherent in a fully imagined maternal subjectivity exist implicitly everywhere—if explicitly (almost) nowhere—in biblical texts and their rabbinic elaboration."¹⁸ I see tremendous potency in these texts because of, and not in spite of, their ineradicably ambiguous nature.

These nuanced developments in hermeneutics have occurred alongside a feminist decentering of classical texts, a move that holds great promise for feminist theology. In the case of scholars of late antiquity, feminists have called for the examination of the social and cultural construction of gender and how it shaped the conditions under which rabbinic teachings emerged. Feminist historians and political theorists have called attention to "the family" and the so-called private sphere as contingent, paving the way for research into women as part of the world

¹⁵ The Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud as a project is inconceivable without this development. See Tal Ilan, ed., *A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud: Introduction and Studies*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). For more on the term *countertradition* in the context of feminist hermeneutics, see Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). Consider the following as a particularly apt example of this feminist attention to narrative texture: Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "When the Rabbi Weeps: On Reading Gender in Talmudic Aggadah," *Nashim* 4 (2001): 56–83.

¹⁶ Julia Watts Belser, *Rabbinic Tales of Destruction: Sex, Gender, and Disability in the Ruins of Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 207. The talmudic text in question is bGittin55b-59b. See also Belser, *Rabbinic Tales of Destruction*, 203.

¹⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 71.

¹⁸ Mara H. Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), xv.

of cultural production, for instance in the rabbinic households in which tannaitic teachings emerged.¹⁹ At the same time, feminist scholarship has contributed to the increasing recognition of the rabbinic corpora handed down from late antiquity as the intellectual production of a small, exclusively male, politically marginal group whose teachings did not become authoritative for Jews until centuries after the teachings of the Talmud had been redacted.²⁰ This shift in the historiography of the rabbis of late antiquity has opened up new interest in nonrabbinic sources and their possibilities for feminist scholars and thinkers, a move that has dovetailed with the rise in folklore studies.²¹ The same shift has occurred in the study of medieval Judaism, where feminist scholars have reread familiar textual sources and uncovered new ones that testify to medieval women's agency in their social and religious settings.²² This work has yet to be integrated into the work of Jewish theology, feminist or otherwise. While hardly providing a usable past in any simple sense, this research furnishes a more complicated and nuanced understanding of the past and lends further credence to the feminist claim that Judaic textual sources are not representative of the Jewish people as a whole.²³

¹⁹ On political theory, see Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). On developments in Jewish historiography, see Cynthia M. Baker, *Rebuilding the House of Israel: Architectures of Gender in Jewish Antiquity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); Elisheva Baumgarten, *Practicing Piety in Medieval Ashkenaz: Men, Women, and Everyday Religious Observance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Deena Aranoff, "Mother's Milk: Child-Rearing and the Production of Jewish Culture," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 12, no. 1 (2019): 1–17; Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); and Miriam Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender, and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also Rebecca Lesses, "The Most Worthy of Women Is a Mistress of Magic: Women as Witches and Ritual Practitioners in I Enoch and Rabbinic Sources," 71–107, and Kimberly B. Stratton, "Magic, Abjection, and Gender in Roman Literature," 152–80, both in *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World*, ed. Kimberly B. Stratton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²⁰ In addition to the texts cited above, see Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

²¹ On folklore and "folk practices" in late antique Jewish life, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²² Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood*; Eve Krakowski, *Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt: Female Adolescence, Jewish Law, and Ordinary Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); and Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

²³ The American feminist usage of the term *usable past* began, to the best of my knowledge, with Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 72. On the challenges of using history for Jewish theology, see Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 28–52.

Finally, ethnographers have become central to reshaping what qualifies as a source for theology. Barbara Myerhoff's 1978 *Number Our Days* demonstrated the fruitfulness of using ethnographic methods to study communities in which the scholar might also participate in some way.²⁴ A body of scholarship soon emerged that investigated Jewish lives past and present, documenting how Jewish theology and practice looks on the ground.²⁵ Some of the most fruitful studies, rich with potential for constructive theology, include ethnographies of communities marked by strongly differentiated gender norms, for example, certain Ashkenazi Haredi, Mizrahi, and American Jewish renewal circles.²⁶ This body of scholarly literature has demonstrated that women exercise agency in every circumstance, creatively resisting patriarchal social and intellectual norms or articulating those norms on their own terms.²⁷ But more than that, the research itself demonstrates the unacceptability of allowing texts produced by a small handful of men to pass as the sole authority on what Jewish theology is, what ideas and practices it includes, and who produces it. As theologians increasingly turn to these accounts, the landscape of Jewish theology will take on dramatically different contours.

Persistent Questions

Underlying the dizzying variety of Jewish feminist innovations—new rituals, liturgy, ways of imagining God, and communal forms—several issues have consistently (re)emerged as feminists have reconstructed Judaism. In particular,

²⁴ Barbara Meyerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: Dutton, 1978).

²⁵ To cite but a few examples: Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989); Ra'anana S. Boustan, Oren Kosansky, and Marina Rustow, "Anthropology, History, and the Remaking of Jewish Studies," in *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History: Authority, Diaspora, Tradition*, ed. Ra'anana S. Boustan, Oren Kosansky, and Marina Rustow (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); and Samira K. Mehta, *Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Jewish Interfaith Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018). Although not ethnographic, a sourcebook of queer Jewish primary sources deserves mention here, as it reveals new perspectives on and by queer Jews in the Jewish past: Noam Sienna, *A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century to 1969* (Philadelphia: Print-O-Craft, 2019).

²⁶ On Haredi communities, see Ayala Fader, *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Michal Raucher, *Conceiving Authority: Reproductive Agency among Haredi Women in Jerusalem* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020). On Mizrahi women, see Susan Starr Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). On Jewish renewal, see Chava Weissler, "'Women of Vision' in the Jewish Renewal Movement: The *Eshet Hazon* ['Woman of Vision'] Ceremony," in *New Age Judaism*, ed. Celia Rothenberg and Anne Vallely (Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2008). I thank Michal Raucher for sharing her forthcoming manuscript with me.

²⁷ Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) marked an important turning point in feminist scholarship in religion, in which feminists were encouraged to interpret agency to go beyond resistance.

Jewish feminists have revisited the pernicious cultural and intellectual legacy of Greek philosophical categories for theology, especially the dualistic metaphysical categories according to which the superior terms—spirit, reason, activity, mind, the universal, and transcendence—correlate with the male, while inferior terms—corporeality, animality, emotion, materiality, carnality, the particular, and immanence—correlate with the female. Feminist theologians both Jewish and Christian have focused on the deleterious consequences of this overarching classificatory scheme for the devalued side (women, bodies, the earth, and nonhuman animals) and analyzed the interlocking systems of oppression that such binary terms represent.

In the first two sections below, I examine several focal points of Jewish feminist theological innovation that are traceable to this more general feminist philosophical and cultural intervention: first, the significance of embodiment, and second, the revaluation of immanence in theology. In the third section, I address the problem of authority vis-à-vis the tradition, in particular, the authority of halakha and Jewish ritual practice.²⁸

Embodiment

Feminist thinkers uncovered the role of Western theology and philosophy in producing a negative association between women and many forms of materiality, including embodiment. For Jewish feminist theologians, the attempt to locate an alternative to this tradition has emphasized the body not only as that which separates humans from the divine but also as a point of contact with it. For scholars such as Daniel Boyarin, David Biale, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, and Elliot Wolfson, the positive valuation of embodiment became emblematic of a specifically Jewish discourse of the body that offered a counterdiscourse to Hellenistic-Christian theological traditions.²⁹ But the asymmetrical treatment of male and female bodies and the halakhic reinforcement of a gender binary in rabbinic discourse and practices has led some feminist scholars to be more circumspect about rehabilitating rabbinic traditions concerning the body as a vehicle for holiness.

²⁸ The complex modern constructions of *law*, *ritual*, halakha, and other cognate terms are carefully examined in Rachel Rafael Neis, “The Seduction of Law: Rethinking Legal Studies in Jewish Studies,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 109, no. 1 (2019): 119–38.

²⁹ For the contrast to Hellenistic-Christian cultural formations, see Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Like other works organized around themes of embodiment and/or sexuality (such as Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus: And Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* [Boston: Beacon, 1994]; and Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995]), these academic inquiries did not necessarily profess an overt commitment to the amelioration of gender oppression. However, their appearance in the 1990s is all but inconceivable without the feminist activism and scholarship that examined gender as a social construct in the previous decades.

Jewish feminists have therefore drawn on this ambiguous heritage while also criticizing it. For instance, Adler's 1976 essay, "*Tumah* and *Taharah*," argued that the practices associated with *niddah* (menstrual purity) enable human creatures to become aware of their status as both connected to and separated from the source of all life. At that time, Adler noted that "our consciousness tells us that we are created beings and so are mortal. Our soul tells us that we are the image of the Creator and so cannot be mortal. Our knowledge of ourselves, then, is paradoxical. How do we reconcile it and make ourselves whole? Jews solve the paradox with the ritual cycle of *tumah* and *taharah*, in which we act out our death and resurrection."³⁰ In an article published almost twenty years later, Adler recanted this statement, positing that her earlier view of *niddah* "reflected [her] awareness of and hopefulness about egalitarianism as a value in secular society" but not the actuality of the practice of *niddah* and its misogynist underpinnings. Nonetheless, even in her later criticism, Adler portrayed a steadfast commitment to the claim that the human situation, as refracted through the prism of women's bodies, is not antithetical to the divine, even though the body is by definition "imperfect." "We do not become more God-like by becoming less human," she argued, "but by becoming more deeply, more broadly, more comprehensively human. . . . Human is not whole. Human is full of holes. Human bleeds. Human births its worlds in agonies of blood and bellyaches."³¹

Both Adler's initial embrace and then rejection of *niddah* are grounded in a common vision: that humans can approach the incorporeal God not in spite of but on account of human embodiment. Adler's work gestures toward a recurring trope in feminist theologies of embodiment vis-à-vis rabbinic Judaism. On the one hand, patriarchy is woven into the cultural patrimony of the rabbis of late antiquity, as is evident in the asymmetry of post-Temple purity practices.³² At the same time, Jewish sources articulate a discourse of embodiment that, for feminists, can and should be retrieved and lifted out of its misogynist underpinnings.

This double move also characterizes recent innovations in queer and trans theology.³³ As with Adler's evolving work on *niddah*, queer and trans thinkers

³⁰ Rachel Adler, "*Tumah* and *Taharah*: Ends and Beginnings," in *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun (New York: Schocken, 1976), 64.

³¹ Rachel Adler, "In Your Blood, Live: Re-Visions of a Theology of Purity," *Tikkun* 13 (1993): 38–41.

³² For a thorough exploration of this issue in its late antique context, see Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

³³ Important intellectual groundwork for the recent theological work I describe was laid by contributors to, among others, Evelyn Torton Beck, *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (Boston: Beacon, 1984); Christie Balka and Andy Rose, *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian, Gay, and Jewish* (Boston: Beacon, 1989); and Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Contributors to these volumes emphasized intersectionality and multiple forms of identification among queer Jews.

have regarded rabbinic Jewish sources as offering a distinctive, if equivocal, set of resources for Jewish discourses of embodiment. The classical rabbinic corpus, on this reading, takes gender seriously and as constitutive of the human situation, and moreover, recognizes that human bodies are sexed in multiple ways.³⁴ Many contemporary trans, nonbinary, and queer Jews have found the rabbis' recognition of multiple genders promising both socially and theologically.³⁵ As Elliot Rose Kukla argues,

In the Mishna, Rabbi Yossi says that the androgynos is neither essentially male nor female but a “created being of its own.” This phrase is a classical legal term for exceptionality; it is an acknowledgment that not all of creation can be understood within binary systems. In my reading, it is also a theological statement. It is a proclamation that God creates diversity that is far too complex for humans to understand or ever fully categorize. There are parts of each of us that are uncontainable. All of us—whether we see ourselves within or between male and female genders—are uniquely “created beings of our own.” This idea allows for infinite gender identities that are all created in the image of God.³⁶

Kukla argues that recognition of gender multiplicity on the human plane is both critical to human liberation and consistent with Jewish theological anthropology's grounding metaphor, of human beings created *imago dei*. Joy Ladin similarly offers a programmatic statement of trans theology in which *tselem 'elohim* establishes theological and ethical commitments. Here, too, the limitations of a dual-gendered grid are revealed through trans experience. According to Ladin, “whether or not we are transgender, we engage in trans theology whenever we try to look past sex and gender, bodies and binaries, to understand what in humanity reflects the image of God. Trans theology holds that if our goal is to recognize our

³⁴ Recent scholarship has focused on the multiplicity of gender in rabbinic legal sources, in which the *adrogynos* (dual-sexed person), *tumtum* (person of indeterminate anatomical sex), and others with atypical primary or secondary sexual characteristics are catalogued as part of the human gender array—much as biologists have more recently documented the varieties of intersexuality. At the same time, trans theologians who value what appears to be a capacious approach to gender multiplicity must grapple with the rabbinic commitment to “male” and “female” as organizing principles, or what Fonrobert terms a “dual-sex grid” of rabbinic legal thought (Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “Regulating the Human Body: Rabbinic Legal Discourse and the Making of Jewish Gender,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Martin Jaffee and Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 270–94). On this ambiguous legacy, see Max Strassfeld, “Translating the Human: The *Androgynos* in Tosefta Bikurim,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 3–4 (2016): 587–604; and Sarra Lev, “The Rabbinic *Androgynos* as the ‘Sometimes Jew’: Investigating a Model of Jewishness,” *Journal of Jewish Identities* 11, no. 1 (2018): 75–85.

³⁵ On tensions between some of these contemporary trans and queer theologies for feminist approaches, see Judith Plaskow and Elliot Kukla, “Remapping the Road from Sinai,” *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas* (2007): 2–5.

³⁶ Kukla, in Plaskow and Kukla, “Remapping the Road from Sinai,” 4.

kinship with God, we need to look to the aspects of our humanity that, like God, exceed, confound, or defy gender and other human categories.”³⁷

These recent reflections testify to a further development of the feminist insight that the relationship between human embodiment and theology is political.³⁸ Remarkably, recent feminists have attempted to retrieve material that an earlier generation of feminists sought to jettison. For some theological writers of the 1980s, God’s transcendence was inextricable from domination and maleness, and so a pan(en)theistic, impersonal notion of God was needed as a corrective.³⁹ But other Jewish thinkers have contested the correspondence between the divine male and social patriarchy in a variety of ways: Catherine Madsen’s “Notes on God’s Violence” imagines a male God whom women resist, and Lois Dubin finds human agency in speaking *to* God in the second person.⁴⁰ More recently, queer and trans thinkers such as Elliot Kukla and Joy Ladin have similarly challenged this orthodoxy: for Kukla, by conceiving of God as a “person”—but a person beyond the gender binary, who can only be known through the multiplicity of gender arrangements on the human plane.⁴¹ For Ladin, a radically transcendent God affirms *imago dei* in new ways.⁴²

³⁷ Joy Ladin, “In the Image of God, God Created Them: Toward Trans Theology,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 53–58, quotation on 56. See also Joy Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2018). I thank Ladin for sharing her manuscript with me before its publication. For an emerging investigation into and critique of *tselem ’elohim* as a grounding for Jewish ethics, see especially Rachel Neis, “The Reproduction of Species: Humans, Animals, and Species Nonconformity in Early Rabbinic Science,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (2017): 289–317.

³⁸ Citing Judith Plaskow’s formulation of this insight, Ladin argues, “Just as feminist theologies grew out of the recognition that humanity includes women as well as men, the recognition that human beings are not only created male and female but other ways as well demands that we develop trans theologies, ‘new understandings of God that reflect and support’ inclusion of transgender perspectives” (Ladin, “In the Image of God,” 56).

³⁹ Marcia Falk, “Notes on Composing New Blessings: Toward a Feminist–Jewish Reconstruction of Prayer,” in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989); Judith Plaskow, “Wrestling with God and Evil,” in *Chapters of the Heart: Jewish Women Sharing the Torah of Our Lives*, ed. Sue Elwell and Nancy Fuchs Kreimer (La Vergne: Wipf and Stock, 2013). For an argument for transcendence as a necessary element for feminist agency, see Lois C. Dubin, “Who’s Blessing Whom? Transcendence, Agency, and Gender in Jewish Prayer,” *Cross Currents* 52, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 165–77; and Catherine Madsen, “Notes on God’s Violence,” *Cross Currents* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 229–56.

⁴⁰ Madsen, “God’s Violence”; and Dubin, “Who’s Blessing Whom?” See also Madsen’s earlier short essay and the roundtable in response, “If God Is God She Is Not Nice,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 1 (1989) 103–17.

⁴¹ Kukla, in Plaskow and Kukla, “Remapping the Road from Sinai,” 4.

⁴² Ladin, “In the Image of God.”

Immanence

Theorizing embodiment as a positive component of human experience has prompted a parallel retrieval of immanence for Jewish theology. Immanence, traditionally the “other” of transcendence, invokes that aspect of the divine that is embedded in or accessed through material forms—primarily, the created world. Many feminist Jewish theologians have revitalized immanence; often, in doing so, however, they have reified the binary between transcendence and immanence.⁴³

The emphasis on immanence, and a corresponding retreat from transcendence, emerged out of necessity. Claims to objective knowledge—even apophatic knowledge—of the transcendent God that had been legible to generations of medieval philosophers became opaque to modern philosophers. Theologians, following suit, redirected their attention to what the individual could experience or postulate. In keeping with this limitation on the truth claims of theology, defining transcendence as the *sine qua non* of Jewish theology understanding became problematic.⁴⁴ Instead, thinkers like Martin Buber emphasized the possibility of knowing God in and through the earthly realm. Buber claimed that Hasidic stories and theologies taught sanctification of the “everyday” and pointed to the possibility of encountering God in the “here and now.”⁴⁵ In recent constructive projects, attempts to correct the cleavages between matter and spirit that arise out of metaphysical dualism likewise underscore the need to locate God in the world. Work in this vein has appeared in ecological theologies, in neo-Hasidic

⁴³ Jewish theological texts have negotiated and renegotiated the relationship between divine immanence and divine transcendence since the rabbis of late antiquity, as is made clear from the abundant examples gathered in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, trans. Gordon Tucker (New York: Continuum, 2005). This question is also central to medieval philosophical and mystical texts (Steven M. Nadler and Tamar Rudavsky, *The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy: From Antiquity through the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 1 [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009]).

⁴⁴ I argue elsewhere that even theologies of alterity, such as those in Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas, are a response to the problematized place of theology in a post-Kantian intellectual world; see Mara H. Benjamin, *Rosenzweig’s Bible: Reinventing Scripture for Jewish Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). In addition, see chap. 4 of Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁴⁵ On “hallowing the everyday,” which Buber identified with Hasidut, see Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). Gershom Scholem took Buber to task precisely on this point, arguing that Buber’s commitment to religious existentialism led him to misrepresent the claims of Hasidic theology. In particular, Scholem argued that Hasidism retained an eschatological dimension in which the annihilation, not the sacralization, of this world was the goal. See Gershom Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation of Hasidism,” and “The Neutralization of the Messianic Element in Early Hasidism,” both in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971).

writings, and among Renewal thinkers, all of whom have retrieved Jewish traditions of God's immanence.⁴⁶

Feminist thought aligns with this theological development, but typically emphasizes the negative consequences of transcendent models of God for women. Feminists have argued that transcendence, classically expressed through the metaphor of God as king, is inextricable from an interlocking set of hierarchical oppositions and the legitimization of male domination.⁴⁷ Mary Daly gave classic expression to this position: "If God in 'his' heaven is a father ruling 'his' people, then it is in the nature of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male dominated."⁴⁸ Jewish feminists, alongside Christian and post-Christian theologians, argue that a God envisioned as outside, above, or beyond the world of creation by definition devalued earthly, material reality—and with it, women as well.⁴⁹

Immanentist theologies, liturgies, and rituals have attempted to address both problems together. In one of the best-known attempts to construct a language for imagining God in different terms, Marcia Falk took aim at the traditional blessing formula, "Blessed are you [masc.], Lord our God, King of the Universe, who . . ." The blessings she composed eliminated gendered language about God; more radically, her blessings jettisoned the idea of a God who is addressed in the second person as a personal being "out there." Her formulation, "Let us bless the source of life, which/who has" aimed to extirpate what she called the "dead metaphor" of God as King, a metaphor that, because of its "absolute and exclusive authority in Jewish prayer, . . . reinforced forms of patriarchal power and male privilege in the world."⁵⁰ The liturgical creations collected in Falk's *Book of Blessings* sought to "suggest the presence of the divine in the whole of creation," expressing Falk's

⁴⁶ David Mevorach Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); and Lawrence Fine, Eitan P. Fishbane, and Or N. Rose, *Jewish Mysticism and the Spiritual Life: Classical Texts, Contemporary Reflections* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2011).

⁴⁷ For an expanded consideration of hierarchy for feminists, see Judith Plaskow, "What's Wrong with Hierarchy?," in *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972–2003* (Boston: Beacon, 2005).

⁴⁸ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 13. Compare with Cynthia Ozick, "Notes toward Finding the Right Question"; and Dubin, "Who's Blessing Whom?."

⁴⁹ See, for example, Susan Shapiro, "A Matter of Discipline: Reading for Gender in Jewish Philosophy," in *Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: The Big Questions*, ed. Naomi Zack (London: Blackwell, 1998), 212–26; and Julia Watts Belser, *Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁵⁰ Falk, *Book of Blessings*, xvii. For an important feminist theological contribution to the work on metaphor, see Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

theological commitment to the idea that “everything is capable of being made holy.”⁵¹ Some blessings do not include reference to the divine at all.

Several Jewish Renewal communities have similarly embraced theological immanence as a feminist commitment. There, the twin commitments to divine immanence and feminist theological correctives are expressed through the language of Shekhinah. The Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute, for instance, presents itself as “creating a paradigm of earth-based, embodied, feminist, Judaism” by “celebrat[ing] the sacred in the body, the earth, and the cosmos, holding the world to be an embodiment of Shekhinah—divine presence.”⁵² As demonstrated in Chava Weissler’s ethnographic studies of Aleph: The Alliance for Jewish Renewal, the concept of the Shekhinah functions to “express[] the immanence of the divine presence in the world and eschew[] both hierarchy and gender imagery.”⁵³ Both of these examples bespeak an approach that figures women as possessing distinctive spiritual gifts or potential. While some feminists argue that accessing this potential is critical to the broader project of theological and social repair, many others reject the essentialism of this move as an impediment to feminist goals.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, reworking traditional liturgy and invoking Shekhinah exemplifies an interest in seeking the divine in and through the material world that has characterized contemporary Jewish theology generally.

Authority and Practice

In Jewish traditions, theological concepts are deeply tied to practice. Biblical and rabbinic sources imagine the theophany that constitutes the people of Israel as inclusive of, and made manifest in, performance. The covenanted relationship between God and the people of Israel is to be enacted, and therefore Jewish theology cannot avoid matters of practice. This is not to say that theological belief is directly dramatized in performance; it has become increasingly clear that ritual action bears an indirect, dynamic relationship to theological commitments, and that performance plays a primary rather than a secondary role. And as the ethnographic literature cited above makes abundantly clear, contemporary practitioners

⁵¹ Falk, *Book of Blessings*, xviii, xix.

⁵² Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute, “Mission,” accessed January 4, 2020, <http://www.kohenet.com/mission/>. A full consideration of the relationship between feminism and neo-Hasidism goes beyond the scope of this essay, but is discussed in Chava Weissler, “Meanings of Shekhinah in the ‘Jewish Renewal’ Movement,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues* 10 (2005): 53–83; and Yaakov Ariel, “Can Adam and Eve Reconcile? Gender and Sexuality in a New Jewish Religious Movement,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 9, no. 4 (2006): 53–78.

⁵³ Weissler, “Meanings of Shekhinah,” 66.

⁵⁴ Adler, *Engendering Judaism*; Jody Myers, “The Myth of Matriarchy in Recent Writings on Jewish Women’s Spirituality,” *Jewish Social Studies* 4, no. 1 (1997): 1–27; and Weissler, “Meanings of Shekhinah.”

are skilled in creating robust relationships to traditions of practice, even when the latter are no longer conceived as “authoritative.”⁵⁵

The specifically modern character of Jewish theological discourse, with its ongoing quest for authority, has treated practice as a plastic realm in which the most difficult questions of authority were addressed, albeit obliquely or implicitly.⁵⁶ Even the language used to refer to Jews’ ritual actions cannot be presumed to reflect a direct relationship to halakha. It is, indeed, the authoritative character of halakha that has itself been the object of questioning, such that many Jews perform rituals without the presumption of normativity that undergirds traditional halakha.

Feminist Jewish theology, like modern Jewish theology generally, navigates a complex relationship to practice and its authority. Challenging and rethinking the authority of Torah has been a focal point for contemporary feminist theologians because they, like their modern predecessors, apprehend the critique of religious authority to ultimately reveal the community, rather than God, as the source of authority.⁵⁷ The feminist innovation here does not lie in the claim that religious norms derive from human beings rather than the divine; that argument, after all, was central to Baruch Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*, to the nineteenth-century German rabbinical assemblies at which Reform and Positive-Historical Judaism coalesced, and to modern hermeneutics from Hans-Georg Gadamer to Paul Ricoeur and beyond. The feminist contribution, rather, lies in the explicit and critical application of this insight to the category of gender. The textual inheritance, halakhic norms, and even God-concept of Judaism, presented as the whole of the tradition, in fact “speaks in the voice of only one half of the Jewish people.”⁵⁸ If what passed as normative practice was a partial, androcentric creation, the task for feminists was to abolish, alter, or reinvent it.

Given the intimate tie between practice and theology in both traditional and modern Judaism, it is no surprise that feminist agitation has focused on challenging traditional practices. In the 1970s, many Jewish feminist activists developed a vision of a Judaism in which women were full and equal members. Dominant halakhic norms, however, impeded this vision. As noted above, Ezrat Nashim outlined a number of demands for the full inclusion of women in all spheres of Jewish

⁵⁵ See, for instance, Samira Mehta’s argument that interfaith families mobilize the language of “culture” rather than “religion” to “create a space for [their] choices to be framed as morally cohesive through the language of multiculturalism” (*Beyond Chismukkah*, 136–37).

⁵⁶ As Arnold Eisen has argued, “All theology of whatever period is concerned with the basis of religious authority But [Jewish thought in the modern period] has been disproportionately given over to this activity of justification” (*Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], 209).

⁵⁷ This move is directly traceable to Mordecai Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (1912; repr., New York: Behrman’s Jewish Book House, 1937); and before it, to Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

⁵⁸ Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 5.

religious life. In her 1973 “The Jew Who Wasn’t There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman,” Adler argued that “ultimately, our problem stems from the fact that we are viewed in Jewish law and practice as peripheral Jews.”⁵⁹ Other individual proposals, like Esther Ticktin’s “A Modest Beginning,” likewise outlined concrete steps that could be taken (in this case, by men in particular) to move toward egalitarian Jewish religious practice.⁶⁰

Most such proposals were formulated not as halakhic arguments but as matters of justice in which society’s advances in gender equality demanded parallel advances in Jewish life. In some cases, these proposals were presented as moral demands that were compatible with, or arose from, Jewish ethical traditions. For instance, Ticktin, arguing in 1976 that men ought to refuse to accept Jewish religious honors in settings where women were excluded from those honors, argued, “the Biblical basis of both categories of these ‘new’ halakhot is: ‘for you were a stranger in the land of Egypt.’”⁶¹ But these appeals were clearly secondary to the argument that changes in Jewish law were justified due to changes in the “social position and self-image of women,” given that “it is now universally accepted that women are equal to men in intellectual capacity, leadership ability, and spiritual depth.”⁶² Halakha, in this view, could be and should be amended so as to make it impossible to “lessen the humanity of women.”⁶³

These forms of reasoning satisfied most liberal feminist Jews. But Jews who regarded halakha as binding could not be content with this approach. Orthodox and other Jews seriously engaged with traditional observance regard matters of ritual practice, civil procedure, and status within the community as the directives of God elaborated through human interpreters. In confronting a halakhic system wherein women are systematically subordinated, Orthodox feminists have been unable to avoid implicating revelation itself.

Orthodox Jewish feminist thinkers have typically made two arguments in support of their cause: first, that halakha contains within it the tools to adapt to feminist critique, and second, that a notion of “continuing revelation” or “cumulative revelation” undergirds the process of halakhic change that feminist critique demands.⁶⁴ For instance, in her 1981 *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*, Blu Greenberg argued that halakha always responded to changing conditions; the “techniques of reinterpretation are built right into the system”; proper

⁵⁹ Rachel Adler, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman,” *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review* (1973): 77–82.

⁶⁰ Esther Ticktin, “A Modest Beginning,” in Koltun, *Jewish Woman*, 129–38.

⁶¹ Ticktin, “A Modest Beginning,” 133.

⁶² “Ezrat Nashim’s ‘Jewish Women Call for Change.’”

⁶³ Ozick, “Finding the Right Question,” 149.

⁶⁴ Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), 44; and Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 197–207, respectively.

usage “enabled rabbinic Judaism to be continuous with the past.”⁶⁵ Halakhically valid methods of reasoning, such as *minhag*, *asmakhta*, *gezera*, and *takkanah*, for Greenberg, have demonstrated the adaptability of halakha over the centuries.⁶⁶ Although her book was not primarily theological in orientation, Greenberg briefly addressed the questions that undergird the place of women in halakha by asking, “does halakhic stratification of the sexes explicitly serve a theological purpose? . . . Intuitively, and with a new awareness of male-female equality, I find it hard to accept any notion that assigns to God a plan for the hierarchy of the sexes: role division, yes to some extent; but superiority, no Halakhah, the Jewish way, cries out for reinterpretation in light of the new awareness of feminine equality, feminine potential.”⁶⁷ Almost a quarter century later, Tamar Ross extended this theological argument. Paraphrasing Abraham Isaac Kook, she argued that “of course revelation is influenced by history and the evolution of ideas (even when such ideas are or parallels are to be found in non-Jewish sources)—but history and the evolution of ideas themselves are also the instruments of revelation!”⁶⁸ (This final move, in which history itself becomes the stage on which God’s will is played out, returns her not to Kook but rather to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.⁶⁹)

These Orthodox feminist thinkers have exhibited a consistent approach to the problem of revelation. But the category of Orthodox feminist theology is still in its infancy, and it is not unlikely that a new generation of scholar-thinkers nurtured in Orthodox feminist environments will develop new modes of speaking about God.⁷⁰ By contrast, the developments in feminist Modern Orthodox practice and community are significant and thoroughgoing; consider, for example, the ongoing work by and on behalf of *agunot* (literally, “chained women”). Here we may recall the observation that “religious observance has almost always remained way ‘out in front’ of theological beliefs,” and note that the Orthodox feminist world has been far more engaged in institution building, expanding access, and pushing at

⁶⁵ Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism*, 43–44.

⁶⁶ Though not identified as an Orthodox feminist, Judith Hauptman’s work on rabbinic halakhic change supports the kinds of arguments we find in Greenberg; see her *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman’s Voice* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998).

⁶⁷ Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism*, 45–46.

⁶⁸ Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah*, 207. See also Hava Tirosh-Samuels and Aaron Hughes, *Tamar Ross: Constructing Faith*, Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers (Boston: Brill, 2016), 225.

⁶⁹ Adler notes the “great danger in the doctrine of revelation through history is that history itself will be sacralized. If we made history its own ethical arbiter, injustices of the past, like slavery or the subordination of women, could not be condemned” (*Engendering Judaism*, 32).

⁷⁰ Although not primarily engaged in issues concerning women, an important text that explicitly addresses theology from an Orthodox perspective (and recognizes its debt to feminism) is Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

halakhic boundaries from within.⁷¹ We have not seen any evidence from within Orthodox feminism yet that contradicts this truism.

An alternative approach to halakha and authority emerged among several non-Orthodox thinkers. These individuals seek to both honor and challenge the internal workings of halakhic thinking, seeing greater potential for change than do Greenberg or Ross. Adler's *Engendering Judaism: Toward an Inclusive Theology and Ethics* develops a proposal for "a halakha" that is distinct from the "classical halakha." For Adler, the project of creating a "communal praxis grounded in Jewish stories" implicitly engages theological-anthropological questions of "what it is to be human."⁷² This move separates her from both those feminist theologians who dismiss the internal processes of halakha and those who feel bound by the halakha's typical legal positivism. Adler instead draws on the work of legal theorist Robert Cover to bridge the work of lawmaking with the ethical vision from which it springs. Adler was followed by other liberal halakhists who recognized a gulf between their theological commitments to justice, grounded in a God of justice, and a halakha that perpetuates the subjugation of women and sexual minorities.⁷³

Returning to the Question of Activism

The growth in feminist Jewish life in the last several decades has been astounding. The social and ritual status of women has shifted dramatically in liberal and Modern Orthodox Jewish communities, and new feminist institutions have blossomed out of these efforts: the Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute; the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, Drisha Institute for Jewish Learning, Yeshivat Maharat, Mayyim Hayyim, Ritualwell.org, and many more, not to mention the LGBTQ-oriented institutions that have extended the groundwork laid by feminism.

Although these institutions have radically changed the landscape of Jewish life, they have not become sites for nurturing theological writing, nor will they likely become so in the future, given that theological advancement is not their primary aim. In the years since the initial breakthroughs of feminist analysis and their influence within the academy, the relationships among feminist critical scholarship and grassroots, activist, and institutional religious life have attenuated. For

⁷¹ Eisen, *Rethinking Modern Judaism*, 4.

⁷² Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, 32, 40.

⁷³ In the years following the publication of *Engendering Judaism*, Cover's insight influenced other liberal halakhists. See, for example, Gordon Tucker, "Halakhic and Metahalakhic Arguments Concerning Judaism and Homosexuality" (paper presented at the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, Rabbinical Assembly, 2006), https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/20052010/tucker_homosexuality.pdf. On the attention to narrative and its role in reframing legal sources in Jewish feminist theology, see Claire E. Sufrin, "Telling Stories: The Legal Turn in Jewish Feminist Thought," in *Gender and Jewish History*, ed. Marion Kaplan and Deborah Dash Moore (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 233–48.

all the potentially radical effects of feminist scholarship on traditional concepts of authority, revelation, and tradition, critical research has not had the same close relationship to feminist politics it once had, nor have most scholars of Judaism foregrounded the implications of their work for women and gender in Jewish life.

For institutional, political, material, and intellectual reasons, the circumstances conditioning the emergence of feminist theology from within the academy have become even less hospitable than they were in the 1980s and 1990s. Women's studies programs, as they were once called, were the result of feminist action within the academy. However, such programs have been consistently deprived of institutional resources. Meanwhile, the welcome and necessary attunement to intersectionality has demanded a more diffuse, more theoretically nuanced, attention to women's history and women's, gender, and/or sexuality studies.⁷⁴ As queer studies and intersectional studies of race, class, and geography have fruitfully challenged the coherence of "women's studies," the ability to speak meaningfully in broad categories about "women" emerged at the same time as the organized political application of intellectual work has become more elusive. Finally, in most institutions, Jewish studies has not become fully integrated into multicultural academic contexts, and in particular, with intersectional studies of race, gender, and ethnicity, and Jewish feminist studies has also remained peripheral to work at the nexus of academic and activist concerns.

At the same time, the center of Jewish studies has moved decisively from rabbinical seminaries to the academy. Whereas seminaries are at least theoretically conducive to theological engagement, the academy eschews explicit theologizing, and scholars of religion are expected to remain detached from theology. In addition, academic fields such as religious studies have become ever more professionalized and specialized as the relative number of PhDs has grown in relation to the academic job market. As the pressure has increased on academics to produce writing for fellow scholars and as the readership for scholarship has become increasingly restricted to the academy, the publishing houses that once delivered academic Jewish studies work to lay audiences have all but given up hope in the educated lay reader.⁷⁵ Finally, even as women and LGBTQ people have increasingly entered seminaries and gained access to the textual traditions of Judaism,

⁷⁴ On some of the tensions in these different approaches, see Alice Kessler-Harris, "Do We Still Need Women's History?," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 7, 2007, B6. In the Association for Jewish Studies, the largest professional body dedicated to Jewish studies, the gender studies program unit folded in 2013. At the time, one could submit proposals only to one unit. As more scholars submitted to other disciplinary units, gender studies became depleted. I thank Laura Levitt for clarifying the history of this program unit with me.

⁷⁵ Consider the formerly substantial numbers of publications from Beacon, Schocken, HarperCollins, and the Jewish Publication Society—publishing houses whose imprints are found on many of the feminist theological writings from twenty or more years ago—that have dwindled to a trickle.

the seminaries have also become increasingly professionalized. As a result, theological discourse is subordinated to the ends of training clergy.

We must view the significant scholarly developments concerning theological discourse in Jewish texts and the reexamination of the sources for Jewish theology with these changes in mind. A proliferation of new scholarship has shed new light on fundamental questions of what it means to be a human, a posthuman, a self, and a creature. Scholars have reexamined rabbinic, philosophical, and mystical discourse on these topics using a sophisticated critical apparatus drawn from gender/sexuality studies and adjacent fields, such as queer studies, disability studies, animal studies, critical race theory, and postcolonial/decolonial studies. To the extent ethnographic and historical scholarship attempts to uncover Jews' responses to these basic questions, scholars implicitly tread on theological terrain.

At the same time, scholars by and large understand the craft of scholarship to permit, at most, a documentation and interpretation of how Jews have understood these fundamental questions. It remains beyond the bounds of traditional scholarship to explicitly recommend specific theological positions. While the best contemporary constructive work draws on and is informed by critical scholarship, respect for the nature of the critical task and the boundaries that accompany it are widely understood as essential to the intellectual freedom that grounds the academy. Consequently, the constructive potential of scholarship on Jewish religious sources typically remains latent or implicit, and feminist theological interventions that might arise from within academia can only obliquely approach the object of its critique and reconstruction. Part of the ongoing task for feminist theology will necessarily involve breaching the divides that have severed the critical study of gender in Jewish theological texts from practical feminist goals.

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