

RESPONSE TO MELISSA RAPHAEL,
“THE IMPACT OF GENDER ON JEWISH RELIGIOUS THOUGHT.
EXEMPLAR: JEWISH FEMINIST THEOLOGY”

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ABSTRACT: While continuing to investigate the theological and transcendent, feminist theologians cannot afford to ignore practical aspects of Jewish life, since this could risk either a retreat to an essentialist position to justify halakhic discrimination, or to an approach that locates gender equality in the eschatological future. New trends in modern women’s midrashic writing offer opportunities for theological creativity, though much of the work being done in Israel is unknown to non-Hebrew speakers. Professor Raphael’s concern that some progressive Jewish feminist theological strands risk losing relevance may be answered by recent attempts to reclaim ancient and traditional feminine imagery and language.

First, let me express my warm appreciation and admiration for Professor Raphael’s broad and lucid survey of developments in Jewish feminist theology in the last four decades, which has really highlighted the origins, issues, and current critical junctures in both Modern Orthodox and non-Orthodox feminist theology.

I’d like to share a few thoughts about the assessments, and perhaps warnings, that Professor Raphael has given on the current state of Jewish feminist theology. First, she notes that Modern Orthodox feminist theologians are going to have to pay more attention to thinking about the nature of God and the transcendent, if they are to avoid a dominant focus on the social and imminent consequences of revelation that would risk a central failure to address the very grounding of those social aspects. With the exception of Tamar Ross,¹ most work by Modern Orthodox feminist thinkers has focused on the halakhic plane and the amelioration of women’s ritual and halakhic possibilities, but this has something of the air of sticking band-aids on the more apparent injustices, while failing to tackle the source of gender injustice itself in our ideas about God and the nature of revelation.

While I agree with the broad outlines of this assessment, I would still recommend that feminist theologians do not completely take their eyes off the halakhic and practical ball. The consequences of doing so can be seen in two trends in Orthodox women’s theological writings recently examined by Julia Schwartzmann.²

The first depends on a religious gender essentialism derived from difference feminism, and reinforces the existing binary gender discourse by describing spirituality, characterized as essentially feminine, as the heart and ultimate meaning of Judaism, a hidden powerhouse that lies at the centre; this trend can be seen in the works of Rebbetzins Tziporah Heller and Holly Pavlov (and to some extent in that of Tamar Frankiel).³ The second trend, which Schwartzmann describes as “evolutionary equality”, draws on kabbalistic ideas, embodied in a midrash that speaks of the demotion of the moon from equality with the sun at the time of creation, its consequent loss of light, and its eventual return to a perfect equality in a redemptive future.⁴ This is interpreted as an allegory of Jewish women’s status and significance, currently less than equal but ultimately destined to reach a perfect equality with men in a

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¹ Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2004).

² Julia Schwartzmann, “Religious Writing by Orthodox Jewish Women: Creating a Theology,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27 (2012): 485-501.

³ Examples include: Tziporah Heller, *More Precious than Pearls: Selected Insights into the Qualities of the Ideal Woman* (Spring Valley: Feldheim, 1993); Holly Pavlov, *Water from the Well: Reflections on Being a Jew at the End of History* (Jerusalem: Targum Press, 2007); Tamar Frankiel, *The Voice of Sarah: Feminine Spirituality and Traditional Judaism* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1997).

⁴ See BT Hullin 60b and many kabbalistic and hasidic developments of this midrash.

messianic future; recent writers along these lines include Devorah Heshelis and Sarah Schneider.⁵ But both trends ignore halakhic and social realities, taking refuge in a focus on a somewhat vaguely defined spirituality that is simultaneously disconnected from the exterior (male-dominated) world and presented as superior to it. If Modern Orthodox feminists are to address the source of gender injustice robustly, they must constantly bear in mind the immanent and social consequences of thinking about transcendence, and their motto should be the classically Jewish response of *na'aseh venishma*, which could perhaps be paraphrased as “We will take action and then theorize”. But of course, both elements are essential and, indeed, interlinked.

What of future directions for this theological project? I wonder whether the modern reclamation of midrash and midrashic reinterpretation by women might not prove a fertile ground for new ideas and approaches. After all, theological concepts in Judaism were conveyed by means of aggadic texts in the rabbinic period, and the writing of systematic theology is a relatively modern Jewish enterprise. A survey of modern women’s midrashic writing by Jody Myers came out in 2000,⁶ and much more material has been produced since then, especially in Israel, where the first anthology of modern women’s midrash was published in 2009.⁷ In addition to imaginatively reconstructing stories of near-invisible biblical and rabbinic-period women, which formed the first layer of this midrashic revival, women have gone on to compose increasingly elaborate midrashim with theological content. One problem here, of course, is translation, with little of the rich material known to those who do not read Modern Hebrew.

Lastly, I would like to return to Professor Raphael’s warning that some strands of progressive Jewish feminist theology, in their swing to a non-personal God conceived of in highly abstract terms, may risk losing relevance to the wider Jewish community, by abandoning the basic biblical concepts of *iselem elokim*, the image of God as reflected in humanity (including women), as well as the ideal of gradual progress towards a messianic era of peace and true harmony. Though some progressive thinkers, such as Judith Plaskow,⁸ may have taken this route – reminiscent of the thought of Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism – others have held fast to the prophetic and revelatory traditions of Judaism while exploring new avenues leading to the divine. In this context, I’d like to mention the work of Elyse Goldstein, whose 1998 book, *ReVisions: Seeing Torah through a Feminist Lens* made a brave and unprecedented attempt to research and reclaim traces of women’s approaches to the divine that, though recorded in the Bible, are condemned as pagan and polytheistic. While she did not argue for a return to such practices, Goldstein asked whether these female images and ideas could be reappropriated in the modern context to restore a sorely needed female dimension of our understanding of God, both conceptually and in our creation of a “God-language” that is not exclusively, and indeed idolatrously, masculine. Lynn Gottlieb has similarly suggested a “remythologizing” of the classical image of the Shekhinah, God’s indwelling presence,⁹ and as early as 1982, Rita Gross, Arthur Green, and Arthur Waskow all explored the power of using traditional feminine imagery and language about God,¹⁰ a theme developed more recently in Professor Raphael’s use of both the image of the Shekhinah and Lurianic kabbalah in her book *The Female Face of God at Auschwitz*.¹¹ These creative responses surely

⁵ Examples include: Devorah Heshelis, *The Moon’s Lost Light: A Torah Perspective on Women from the Fall of Eve to the Full Redemption* (Southfield: Targum Press, 2006); Sarah Schneider, *Kabbalistic Writings on the Nature of Masculine and Feminine* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 2001).

⁶ Jody Myers, “The Midrashic Enterprise of Contemporary Jewish Women,” in Jonathan Frankel, ed., *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 119-42.

⁷ Nehama Weingarten-Mintz and Tamar Biala, eds., *Dirshuni: midreshci nashim* (Seek/Interpret Me: Women’s Midrashim) (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronoth Books, 2009). Lisa Fishbayn Joffe has informed me that an English translation is in preparation at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute.

⁸ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), and more recently, Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, *Goddess and God in the World: Conversations in Embodied Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016).

⁹ Lynn Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells Within: A Feminist Vision of a Renewed Judaism* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1995).

¹⁰ See their articles in Susannah Heschel, ed., *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).

¹¹ Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God at Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).

serve at least to balance the “drift away from God” of which Professor Raphael warns, as well as containing the seeds of future theological work.

Though both Orthodox and non-Orthodox feminist theology face real and important challenges, it seems that they contain equally significant resources and promise.

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**DISCUSSION POINTS FOLLOWING THE PAPER
BY MELISSA RAPHAEL AND THE RESPONSE
BY LINDSEY TAYLOR-GUTHARTZ**

What is the source of gender injustice, theology or halakhah? Consequently, how should gender injustice be addressed: primarily theologically by focusing on the gendered aspects of ideas about God, or by focusing on halakhah? Is there a third, holistic approach that recognizes the immanent consequences of ideas about the transcendent?

Does a cumulative account of revelation and pluralization of theology make critique of the masculinity of God redundant?

Does the ethical dimension of feminism necessitate the rejection of impersonal conceptions of the divine and of creation as amoral?

How can Jewish feminist theology be put into action?