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Women and World Religions

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Jewish Women

OVERVIEW

The full story of Jewish women covers close to four millennia. If we date Abraham and Sarah to about 1800 B.C.E., for nearly thirty-seven hundred years women covenanted to the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel have contributed to a culture of world-historic proportions. Through most of this long period, Jewish women have lived in patriarchal situations. Biblical, talmudic, medieval, and modern Judaism all assumed that men were to lead, teach, and legislate while women were to follow. To be sure, there were exceptions to this pattern, and present-day Jewish feminists have been happy to retrieve them. Deborah, for example, was a judge and prophet in Israel—a charismatic leader credited with a military victory over Canaanite enemies (see Judges 4–5). Judith and Esther were similar heroines, whose courageous actions liberated their people. In medieval times Beruriah, wife of Rabbi Meir, was celebrated for learning and Oudli, daughter of the Baal Shem Tov, for charismatic piety. Modern Judaism has numbered such outstanding women as Henrietta Szold, founder of the Hadassah Medical Organization, and Golda Meir, prime minister of Israel. Nonetheless, the vast majority of women throughout

Jewish history have made their mark as wives and mothers—mistresses of the domestic rather than the public sphere.

In any encyclopedic treatment of Judaism, several aspects predominate.¹ The first is the historical development from biblical times, through a medieval period dominated by the rabbis and the **Talmud**, to the Jewish encounter with European modernity. The second is the geographic and so cultural spread of Judaism, which calls for treatments of how Jews lived in the Middle East, in North Africa, in Asia, in Europe, and in the Western Hemisphere. The combination of historical development and geographic diversity suggests that all generalizations about the experience of Jewish women have to be taken with several grains of salt. Here, as in our treatments of women in other long-standing religious traditions, the advice of Alfred North Whitehead should apply: seek simplicity and distrust it. The stories and examples we treat certainly illumine common trends, but Jewish women have lived in so many different circumstances that what **Torah** (divine guidance), patriarchy, concentrating on raising children and the other apparently common factors have meant in specific situations are bound to remain inexact, unique, and reasons for surveyors to remain quite humble.

At present there are about 18 million Jews worldwide. About 275,000 live in Africa, 2,000 in East Asia, 1.5 million in Europe, 975,000 in Latin America, 8 million in North America, 85,000 in Oceania, 4.4 million in Israel, and 3 million in the Soviet Union. Eighty-four percent qualify as Ashkenazis or are from Northern and Eastern European stock. Ten percent qualify as Orientals, and 4 percent qualify as Sephardim, people from Iberian stock.²

Among the main ideas and events that have structured the experience of Jewish women, the following stand out. First, there was the Exodus from Egypt, under the leadership of Moses, and the consequent reception of the Torah, the guidance or law, associated with the **covenant** mediated by Moses. The Exodus came to function as the great symbol of God's concern for Israel, of God's redemptive or liberating character. The covenant was a unique (although rather patriarchal) bond between God and the people who looked back to Abraham and Moses as their founding fathers. One might say that it formalized the predilection and concern God had revealed in the Exodus, obliging the people to make God the foremost treasure in their lives. Receiving a land of their own was part of the covenant, while obeying the laws attributed to God's disclosures to Moses on Mount Sinai became the concrete way the people were to manifest their fidelity. One can consider the teaching and laws developed by the rabbis an extension of the Mosaic Torah, as the people strove to interpret what the covenant meant in new circumstances.

Second, later biblical history provided a series of events associated with the Israelite monarchy that also became prime symbols Jews used when they reflected on the meaning of their history. The sovereign rule

and prosperity achieved by David and Solomon in the ninth century B.C.E. came to shade the covenantal bond with God slightly differently from what we find in the Mosaic covenant. Where the Mosaic covenant, as interpreted by the "Deuteronomistic history" (found in the biblical books Deuteronomy through 2 Kings), taught that fidelity to God would bring prosperity and infidelity would bring ruin, the Davidic covenant was less conditional: God had sworn (to stand by the people) and would not repent. Both interpretations of the covenant came into play when the great prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel interpreted the destruction of the monarchy—the fall of the northern portion of the kingdom to Assyria in 721 B.C.E. and the fall of the southern portion to Babylon in 586 B.C.E. From 538 B.C.E., when leaders of the people returned from exile in Babylon, Jews nearly always were subject to foreign powers. However, their theologians continued to think about the Torah as the law of a people whose worship and daily life ideally occurred in a sovereign **theocracy**—a state where the sacred and the secular blended under the rule of the God of the covenant (whom the biblical kings had represented).

A third major event was the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and the dispersion of most Jews from the holy city that had been the center of their lives. In dispersion (**diaspora**), the leading rabbis of the first and second centuries C.E. both settled the shape of the Hebrew Bible and collected the traditions of the teachers who had recently flourished. In making this collection they created the **Mishnah**, the first building block of the Talmud. By 500 C.E. the Talmud (the Mishnah enlarged by the Gemara—commentaries on the Mishnah) was relatively complete and functioning as the operative guide for Jewish life. If the Hebrew Bible is our best source about the religious experience of Jewish women before the Common Era, the Talmud is the most important document about the official status of women in Judaism of the Common Era.

Throughout the Common Era, the vast majority of Jews have lived in cultures dominated by either Christians or Muslims. Perhaps the most dramatic line in the story of this second portion of Jewish history therefore has been how the people kept their Jewish identity. This dramatic line was prefigured in the Bible, insofar as the prophets inveighed against accommodating to the practices of Israel's neighbors and the postexilic reformers Ezra and Nehemiah argued for separation from those neighbors. But the psychology of the Jewish home where women came into their own during the Common Era regularly was dominated by interpretations of the Bible and the Talmud geared to assisting survival against persecution and assimilation.

Only in modernity, which came late to European Jewry (for the majority, only in the nineteenth century), did concepts such as democracy and pluralism arise to suggest Jews might become equal participants in national cultures that supposedly made religion and ethnic identity secondary. Even

then, the history of standing on the margins and being subject to the whims of non-Jewish majorities made most Jews suspicious. In the twentieth century, Nazi Germany proved this suspicion all too well founded. The creation of the contemporary state of Israel in 1948 consummated a centuries-old longing to return to the land of David and certainly has greatly influenced the lives of recent Jews. Even in Israel, however, the meaning of modernity is subject for fierce controversy, and with it the rights and roles of Jewish women. Such controversy greatly affects Jewish feminists, who usually have great affection for their cultural tradition as a whole but are troubled, if not deeply angered, by those who resist accommodating it so that the rights of women, religious as well as civil, might equal the rights of men. Thus patriarchal tradition is much on the minds of Jewish feminists.

TEXTS OF TERROR

The foundations of Jewish culture have lain in the Hebrew Bible, and even when Talmudic interests shaped the interpretation of biblical stories to make them serve much later circumstances, the bare power of the stories kept drawing people back to the original texts. Recently Phyllis Tribe has commented intensively on four biblical texts suggesting the terror into which women could be plunged. These four texts are neither the whole of the Bible's stimuli to consider the perils of powerlessness nor the whole of the Bible's estimate of relations between the sexes. As we shall see in the next sections, many positive tales and insights offset these scenarios of brutality. But it is useful to confront the worst of what biblical religion did to Israelite women, all the more so if we are accustomed to taking the Bible as divine wisdom pure and simple. Certainly there are many reasons for taking the Bible as divine wisdom, but after studying texts such as Tribe's four, little seems pure or simple.

First is the story of Hagar that one may piece together from Genesis 16:1–16 and 21:9–21. In the first phase of the story, Sarai (who later becomes Sarah), wife of Abram (who later becomes Abraham), is barren—the greatest affliction a biblical wife could suffer. Desperate for children, she conceives a plan: let Abram go in to Hagar, Sarai's Egyptian maid. This Abram does, making Hagar pregnant, but the result turns back on Sarai. Instead of getting the child for which she had hoped, she gets the contempt of Hagar. In Tribe's interpretation, this turn of events expresses a certain justice. Hagar, a slave with few rights, forced to place even her sex and fertility in the service of her mistress and master, finally gains a perspective that redresses some of the imbalance. Sarai becomes "slight" in the eyes of Hagar because Hagar realizes power can be of different sorts.² Washing his hands of the conflict between the two women, Abram tells Sarai to handle Hagar as Sarai wishes. So Sarai deals harshly with her and she flees.

In the wilderness an angel of God visits Hagar, commands her to return to Sarai and submit and promises that her child will be the start of a great multitude of descendants. This promise, which is quite like the promise given to the patriarchs, singles Hagar out. So does her sense of having seen God. But when Sarah later conceives her own son, Hagar suffers still further. Sarah sees her son Isaac playing with Ishmael, the son of Hagar, takes offense, and pressures Abraham to cast out both Hagar and Ishmael. Although Abraham is reluctant, God tells him to do as Sarah wishes, and so God seems to sanction the cruelty about to be visited on Hagar. When the bread and water that Abraham gave them run out, Hagar places the child under a bush and takes herself some distance from him, so she will not have to watch him die. What occurs at this point is a matter of interpretational dispute. As Tribe puts it,

Hagar wept. Pointedly, the Hebrew text says, "She lifted up her voice and wept" (21:16c). From ancient times, however, translators have robbed this woman of her grief by changing the unambiguous verb forms to masculine constructions. Such alterations make the child lift up his voice and weep. But masculine emendations cannot silence Hagar. A host of feminine verb forms throughout this section witness unmistakably to her tears: she departed and she wandered in the wilderness; she found a place for the child to die; she kept a vigil; and she uttered the dread phrase, "the death of the child." Now, as she sits at a distance from death, *she* lifts up her voice and *she* weeps. Her grief, like her speech, is sufficient unto itself. She does not cry out to another; she does not beseech God. A madonna alone with her dying child, Hagar weeps.³

Eventually an angel does save the two, but Tribe reads the text as the awful trial of a fugitive. Hagar has little if any voice throughout the whole story, and for obscure divine purposes she has to suffer not only abuse but the desolation of terrible rejection: slavery, being cast out by Abraham, and feeling utterly abandoned.

The terror of this text is perhaps the mildest of the four Tribe treats. In the story of Tamar (II Samuel 13: 1–22), we see a princess raped by her brother, the prince Amnon, and disregarded by her father, King David. Like the story of David's adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband Uriah, this story shows the dark side of the Israelite monarchy and the defenselessness of even high-class women. Amnon schemes to get Tamar into a position where he can satisfy his lust for her. She tries to reason with him and points out that if he merely asks the king, he can have her lawfully. As Tribe underscores, the text plays the folly of Amnon off against the wisdom of Tamar: hers is the voice of reason and decency. But Amnon will have none of it, and after he has violated her, he hates her and sends her away. This rejection is even worse than the rape, for it means Tamar is shamed and condemned to lifelong desolation. Eventually Tamar's brother Absalom has Amnon killed and turns against King David.

Absalom takes Tamar's part, but throughout she is simply a pawn, moved back and forth by the lust and hatred of the men in the royal household. Amnon will not hear reason, David pays his daughter little mind (his sending her to minister to a supposedly sick Amnon first put her in Amnon's clutches, and although David was angry when he learned of the rape, he did not punish Amnon. Worse, there is no indication he said anything to Tamar or did anything for her), and although Absalom treats her well, he urges her to stay silent and only two years later works revenge, perhaps more from other motives than to gain justice for Tamar. So even a princess weeps from abuse.

In Judges 19:1–30 we witness both rape and murder. This story is one of the most brutal in the Bible. An unnamed concubine flees from the Levite (member of the tribe of Levi) with whom she is living and returns to the house of her father. The Levite pursues her there and is entertained by the father, the concubine slipping away from the narrator's interest. After back and forth between the two men, Levite and concubine set out to return to their home. They pause half way to spend the night and encounter naked evil. Men of the town want to violate the Levite. The host and Levite respond as follows:

"No, my brethren, do not act so wickedly; seeing that this man has come into my house, do not do this vile thing. Behold, here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do with them what seems good to you; but against this man do not do so vile a thing." But the men would not listen to him. So the man [Levite] seized his concubine, and put her out to them; and they knew her, and abused her all night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. And as morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, till it was light. And her master rose up in the morning, and when he opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way, behold, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. He said to her, "Get up, let us be going." But there was no answer. (Judges 19:23–28)

The Levite puts the concubine on his ass, and when they are home he hacks her body into twelve pieces to distribute to the twelve tribes and make the infamy known. The result of this is war with Benjamin, the offending tribe—a war in which women are the greatest losers. But the scene of the host and the Levite offering to abandon the women to the rapists has to be the nadir: one can do anything to virgin daughters and concubines, but let nothing threaten one's male guest.

The fourth of Tribes's texts of terror, the human sacrifice of the daughter of Jephthah (Judges 11:29–40), completes the mosaic of degradation. The daughter is sacrificed in fulfillment of her father's foolish and faithless vow. The only redemptive note comes in verse 40: "And it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament

the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days of the year." Her sisters remember the virgin victim and so give her a sort of posterity.

THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN BIBLICAL SOCIETY

Speaking of history in general, Gerda Lerner has distinguished two senses of the word. One is simply what happened in the past. The other is how the past got recorded—written down, made available to later "historians." Concerning what simply happened in the past, we have to grant women a full 50 percent of the agency. They contributed just as much as men to the daily reality of their people. Concerning how the past has gotten recorded, we have to realize that almost always only men did the recording and interpreting. History in the second, more formal and academic sense therefore is shot through with sexism. Again and again events featuring men and of interest to men framed the narratives, while events featuring women and of interest to women were shunted to the sidelines, if not ignored altogether.⁵

In studying her four texts of terror, Phyllis Trible is sensitive not only to what the text says about the experience of the women in question, but also to what it does not say. For even when a sense of outrage clearly forms the narrative, and it is plain that rape and murder are being condemned, one does not find the feminist focus that a full historical or scriptural (revelational) narrative would entail. Because the Hebrew Bible was composed by men (for instance, by members of an all-male priesthood), it is nowhere near being an adequate record or interpretation of what all of Israel, female and male, experienced, suffered, or thought.

This is completely true of the legislation that framed relations between the sexes and family life. A bride was expected to come to her husband as a virgin (so that her husband could think of her as unused and be confident any early child was his), but the husband was not so constrained. If he could prove she had not been virginal at marriage, he could have her stoned (Deuteronomy 22:13–21). Biblical legislation did provide safeguards against false testimony, but in matters such as these its basic assumption was that the female was property. What outraged the legislators was that damaged goods had passed hands. This shamed the father, from whom the bride was going, and it offended the husband, who was not getting what had been pledged.

Similarly, adultery was a matter of abusing something that belonged to a husband. By violating another man's possession, the adulterous male risked death (Leviticus 20:10–11). So did the wife who strayed. Her body was not her own. She belonged to her husband. No similar understanding of the body of the husband made adultery a two-way street. For a husband

to cheat on his wife did not constitute an abuse of her property, a violation of her rights, that merited harsh punishment.

If a man violated an unmarried woman, he offended her father. He did not incur harsh punishment, however; only the obligation to marry the woman, pay her father a bride price, and not divorce her (Deuteronomy 22:28–29). Women had no rights to initiate divorce, and the only protection they had against being divorced arbitrarily was that a husband was supposed to provide substantial reasons and a formal decree (Deuteronomy 24:1–4).

This is not to say that the Hebrew Bible viewed marriage only in terms of adultery and divorce. From Genesis (2:24) through the prophets (especially Hosea), marriage was treated as natural, beautiful, and a figure for the covenant between God and Israel. Ideally husbands would love their wives, finding in them the complement and delight that Adam found when first contemplating Eve. It was more assumed than expressed that wives would find in their husbands both complement and delight. The main reason for marriage, in fact, was not delight but procreation. Without downplaying erotic love, the Bible is more interested in fertility. Thus women regularly are reduced to their wombs, and it is assumed that a woman's greatest longing and need is to have children.

One finds this in Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, whose story can stand duty for myriad unnamed biblical women:

There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. He had two wives; the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord. On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; and, although he loved Hannah, he would give Hannah only one portion, because the Lord had closed her womb. And her rival used to provoke her sorely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. And so it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. And she vowed a vow and said, "O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thy maidservant, and remember me, and not forget thy maidservant, but will give to thy maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head." (1 Samuel 1: 1–11)

Several features of this text deserve comment. First, notice how the introduction of Elkanah stresses genealogical line and so fertility. One can

assume that Elkanah married Hannah and Peninnah precisely to further his genealogical line through their fertility. Second, notice the rivalry between the two women, reminiscent of the rivalry between Sarai and Hagar. Because they have been acquired for their fertility, the women are pressured to compete in childbearing—a sort of uterine warfare. Third, although Elkanah may be sincere enough in his affection for Hannah, he seems a dolt not to appreciate how his distribution of the sacrifice was bound to affect her. Fourth, the distress and bitter weeping of Hannah before she makes her vow seem the telltale emotions. She feels useless, worthless, because she has not begotten a son (daughters don't count for much). If ever a woman was defined by her womb, pressured to neglect her brains and spiritual creativity, it was Hannah. Last, the promise that no razor would touch the head of the child marks the child as a **Nazarene**—one dedicated to God for holy purposes, as the great prophet Samuel proves to be. Eventually Hannah has her prayer answered, and the paean of joy she expresses in 1 Samuel 2 served as the basis for the Magnificat that Luke has Mary, the mother of Jesus, utter in thanksgiving for her conception (Luke 1: 46–55). One can rejoice with Hannah and Mary without admiring how their culture made their physical fertility their be-all.

One further aspect of biblical women's status that begs attention at this point is the blood taboos under which they labored. Although the main job of women was producing children, the authors of the biblical law codes weren't happy with the way women's productive mechanisms worked. As we see in Exodus 35:22–29, menstruation was considered incompatible with the ritual sacrifices made to God. So a woman was considered unclean from the onset of her bleeding until seven days had passed. Even when she had fulfilled her mission and begotten a child, blood made a woman unclean—for forty days if the child were male, eighty days if it were female (double pollution—see Leviticus 12:1–8).

These ritual considerations, along with the Israelite convictions about the uniqueness (monotheism) of their (male) God, combined in an ongoing attack on the different view of divinity and femaleness prevalent among Israel's neighbors. The Canaanite goddesses suggested that female fertility was a central part of the divine order, something capable of symbolizing ultimate holiness. Therefore, the Bible had to denounce them.⁶

FURTHER BIBLICAL IMAGES

Thus far what we have seen of the lot of biblical women has been fairly negative. At best they have been second-rate citizens, subordinated to male control. At worst they have been raped, slain, made to focus on their wombs, and castigated for the uncleanness of how their wombs functioned.

A major directive symbolism for the sexes' relations occurs in the Genesis accounts of how woman and man were created and first behaved.

Both accounts make the same claims: (1) man and woman have been willed into being by the direct action of God as the high point of creation; (2) they complement one another and *together* constitute humankind. This is all put dramatically by having woman created from man's rib and so to be a helper fit for him. Written from a male viewpoint, it makes primal man in effect say, "She is just what I need, an identical match for me, bone of my bone." In creation, then, Genesis intuits a basic equality for the sexes.

Further, dealing with the Fall (the divided human condition), Genesis depicts the sexes as types of early Israelite male and female behavior. So Eve, intelligent and practical, decides that the fruit is good to eat, delightful to behold, and a possible source of wisdom—a bargain. Adam simply eats what his wife has prepared. Both sin, both are punished. "Thenceforth," men have to sweat laboriously, women have to bear children in pain. Later biblical tradition (Ecclesiastes 25:24) misogynistically makes Eve the cause of sin, but the original story simply relates both sexes to the mystery of a life that is much less than our intuition says it should be.

The other women of the Bible support this Genesis interpretation of Eve, proto-woman, as intelligent and decent. Bathsheba is a clever woman, as is the woman from Tekoa, whom Samuel used to reunite David and Absalom (I Kings 1:11–31; II Samuel 14:1–20). Deborah is a mighty prophetess, Ruth is a noble daughter-in-law, Esther was able to save her people. Proverbs 31, cited earlier, shows the sort of model laid before Israelite women, and it suggests that all woman's fruitfulness, not just her sexuality, was prized.

In the Book of Ruth, however, we find the fully positive story of two women developing a mature friendship and loyalty. Naomi, the mother-in-law, bids her widowed daughter-in-law Ruth leave her to find a new husband. But even though Ruth is not an Israelite, she stays with Naomi, and together they succeed, first in surviving and then in carrying on the family line, as Ruth produces a child who becomes an ancestor of King David. The lines that Ruth speaks after Naomi has urged her to leave are a landmark in love between women:

But Ruth said, "Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts from you." (Ruth 1:16–18)⁷

This fusion of fates is especially precious to the biblical author because it is sealed in Ruth's acceptance of Naomi's God. Yet the same intensity of love, to the point of death, occurs in the Song of Songs without particular reference to God. There the love in question is heterosexual, so much so that the rabbis found the Song an allegory of Israel's bond with her God. The Song probably first appeared as secular love poetry, but even

in that case it was remarkable, because the lovers give and receive quite equally.⁸ For once the woman is not simply the underling, subject to the whim of the man. And certainly she is not simply a brood mare, valued mainly for her offspring. The Song pays procreation little mind. It is interested in eros, the love of beauty that compels maid and lad to rush toward union. Toward the end of the Song, like an editorial insert, occurs the poetic appreciation of love that links it with death as utterly primordial. When Israel listened to these verses, it knew that men and women were supposed to be to one another as flesh of flesh and bone of bone:

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned. (Song of Songs, 8:6–7)

Aware of some of this potential, great prophets such as Jeremiah, Hosea, and Ezekiel pursued the intense union between Israel and God through marital symbolism. In good times, which for the prophets meant times of religious fidelity and material blessing, Israel was to God as a beautiful young bride. Unfortunately, however, bad times of infidelity and hardship brought the prophets to lay greater stress on Israel's wantonness. In not offering God a pure (monotheistic) cult and not offering one another social justice, Israelites had played the harlot, loved wantonly, exposed themselves shamefully. The problem with this imagery was its sexual bias. Insofar as God was masculine and Israel feminine, Israelite deficiencies became cast in terms of feminine infidelity. Hosea, for example, used the example of the infidelity of his wife Gomer to illumine the defections of his people from God. Since he loved Gomer despite her failings, this gave him profound insight into the long-suffering character of the divine love. On the other hand, because there was little if any theology from female prophets, drawing on experiences of male infidelity and intuitions of a feminine divine persona, the Bible seems to consider women the unfaithful, unreliable, wanton sex.

This prophetic tendency reached a low point in Ezekiel, who tried to explain the exile to Babylon as due to the harlotry of God's bride:

But you trusted in your beauty and played the harlot because of your renown, and lavished your harlotries on any passer-by. You took some of your garments, and made for yourself gaily decked shrines [to false gods], and on them played the harlot; the like has never been, nor ever shall be. You also took your fair jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself images of men, with them played the harlot; and you took your embroidered garments to cover them, and set my oil and incense before them. Also my bread which I gave you—I fed you with fine flour and oil and honey—you set before them for a pleasing odor, says the Lord God. And you took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne to me, and these

you sacrificed to them to be devoured. Were your harlotries so small a matter that you slaughtered my children and delivered them up as an offering by fire to them? And in all your abominations and your harlotries you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, weltering in your blood. (Ezekiel 16: 15–22)

Countless generations of both Jews and Christians read the prophets devotedly, thereby taking in such negative stereotypes of women. Because the basic symbolism for God was masculine and the basic symbolism for Israel (and later the Christian Church, which claimed to be the New Israel) was feminine, all right and perfection fell on the masculine side of the equation, all sin and failing on the female side. Nonetheless, there were cracks in this wholly masculine theology, places where care and nurture brought biblical poets to speak of God as though the deity were female.

So, for example, in Jeremiah 31:20 the root metaphor used to express the divine compassion is being moved to one's womb. Standard translations blur this root metaphor, but Phyllis Trible has both commented upon it insightfully and translated it faithfully:

And the conclusion makes explicit the maternal metaphor for God. As Rachel mourns the loss of the fruit of her womb, so Yahweh, from the divine womb, mourns the same child. Yet there is a difference. The human mother refuses consolation; the divine mother changes grief into grace. As a result, the poem has moved from the desolate lamentation of Rachel to the redemptive compassion of God. Female imagery surrounds Ephraim; words of a mother embrace her son [note that Israel/Ephraim for once is considered masculine, in counter-point to a feminine God]. My translation is the following: Is Ephraim my dear son? my darling child? For the more I speak of him, the more do I remember him. Therefore, my womb trembles for him; I will truly show motherly-compassion upon him.⁹

Another positive feminine imagery concerns wisdom, an attribute of God that became extremely important at the end of the biblical period and is highly significant in both the Writings (the third portion of the Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament. Proverbs 8 speaks of wisdom as a maiden with God at the beginning and delightful to him. In Proverbs 9 wisdom is like a gracious hostess, anxious to nourish those starving by foolishness (the "simple"):

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth . . . when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a masterworkman; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men. . . . Wisdom has built up her house, she has set up her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her beasts, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table. She has sent out her maids to call from the highest places in the town, "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" To him who is without sense she says, "Come, eat of my

bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave simplicity, and live, and walk in the way of insight." (Proverbs 8:22–23, 29–31, 9:1–6)

These positive appreciations of female nature, which put it either within the divinity as an apt symbolism or alongside the divinity as a wise companion, did not outweigh all the negatives, but surely they were heartening.

TALMUDIC VIEWS OF WOMEN

The antecedents of the rabbis who fashioned the Talmud were the Pharisees. In contrast to their portrait in the New Testament, the **Pharisees** were concerned about both the letter and the spirit of the Torah. Nonetheless, the pre-Talmudic literature influenced by the Pharisees regularly was misogynistic. Thus Leonard Swidler has judged that "the Pharisees thought of women as 'in all things inferior to the man,' and 'evil,' as 'overcome by the spirit of fornication more than men,' as ones who 'in their heart plot against men,' and that every man should 'guard [his] senses from every woman.'"¹⁰ Writings from the first century B.C.E. such as *The Book of Jubilees* and *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* are similarly negative, as are the writings of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. The authors have a special animus against foreign women, but any woman carries the danger of fornication and so should be held suspect.

The Mishnah, which arose in the first centuries of the Common Era, deals with women as one of its six principal divisions. The special interest it exhibits focuses on when a woman is in transit, entering or leaving marital union to a man. When united to a man by marriage, or functioning as the ward of her father, a woman is holy: in her proper place. She becomes dangerous when she is unplaced—on the loose, moving. So marriage functions as a way of sanctifying women by placing them (putting them in their God-given place). In marriage God and the man involved are the active agents, while the woman is passive. The relations of women to one another fall outside the Mishnaic pale. Indeed, the Mishnah isn't much interested in women as wives and mothers. It is only when women are marrying and divorcing that they become problematic and so matters of legal concern. Behind this concern is a distrust of female sexuality like that of the Pharisaiic literature. Women on the loose, unplaced, are likely to be loose women. But even women who are placed and so holy are not as human as men. In the interpretation of Jacob Neusner, the Mishnah verifies Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of women's abnormality. Since the rabbis considered male humanity the norm, female humanity was bound to seem deficient or anomalous. That seems the principal reason they forbid women access to the priesthood and so to performing the religious cult. When study of To-

rah replaced the cult as the supreme act of Jewish religion, the rabbis were only logical in extending their prohibition to study: women were not to have access to Talmudic learning.¹¹

Despite this basic bias, we find passages in the Talmudic literature that praise the good wife and mother almost lavishly. To be sure, a "good" wife and mother submitted to the Talmudic scheme of things. For example, one text says that women acquire merit before God by sending their children to study Torah in the schools and their husbands to study with the rabbis (Ber. 17a). In other words, women are to be the enablers of men's study. Within the family, women had primary care for cooking, cleaning, and raising the children, while a man was supposed to study Torah as much as circumstances allowed. Frequently this meant that women carried a large share of the burden of making a livelihood, working in the shop or contributing to the trade that brought the family their bread. Since marriage was considered the normal estate and the unmarried person, male or female, was considered incomplete, arranging marriages was an important business. One rabbinic story asked what God had been doing since he finished the six days of creation. The answer was that he had been busy arranging marriages.

The ordinary Talmudic term for marriage is "sanctification" (*kiddushian*). The husband consecrates his wife, setting her aside as something dedicated to the sanctuary (Kid. 2b). Blessings come to a man because of his wife, so he should honor her (B.M. 59a). Although the Talmud counsels frugality concerning food and drink, when it came to his wife and children, a man was supposed to spend beyond his means (Chul. 84b). Thus wives had solid rights: to financial support, medical care, money in case of the husband's death or a divorce, and sexual satisfaction. Were a wife kidnapped, a husband was obliged to spend all that he had to ransom her. Although all inheritance went to sons, a man was also supposed to provide for the welfare of his daughters after his death.

The obligations of a wife to her husband included providing him sexual satisfaction, physical comfort (food and rest), and leisure in which to study Torah. Thus the wife of Rabbi Eleazar cooked sixty different kinds of food for him when he was sick. Good wives knew that the best way to guard their husbands from temptation was to give them sexual pleasure at home. Indeed, this Talmudic view of marital relations led to lengthy discussions of just when menstrual prohibitions of intercourse were and were not in force.

The wife's great fear was sterility, for to be childless was to be as one dead (Gen. R 71:6). On the other hand, fruitfulness was such a blessing that one text said that in the next life women would bear children daily (Shab. 30b). The rabbis permitted contraception if more children were likely to harm the mother (Jeb. 12b), but to have many children was a great blessing, because each was a gift from God. Thus when Rabbi Meir was weeping at the death of his two sons, his wife reminded him that they had

only been on loan from God. So they prayed: "The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord."

If all children were gifts from God, male children were special gifts. Sometimes the Talmudists expressed this thought quite negatively: "Happy is he whose children are sons and woe to him whose children are daughters" (B.B. 16b). A father must worry about a girl, lest she be seduced. When she comes of marrying age he must worry that she not find a husband. While she is married he must worry that she might prove barren. And when she is older (after menopause) he must worry that she might become a witch. Thus in commenting on Numbers 6:24 ("The Lord bless thee and keep thee") the Talmud adds, "bless thee with sons, and keep thee from daughters because they need careful guarding" (Num. R. 11:5).

In the Talmudic period, divorce continued to be the prerogative of men. On the other hand, the Talmudists strove to protect women from arbitrary divorce. Also, rabbis would pressure men to grant their wives' petition and give them a divorce, if the marriage seemed broken irreparably. Only the woman who had committed adultery had to be divorced. In other cases, as long as the marriage showed a chance of being saved, the rabbis would drag their feet in allowing a divorce. Divorce involved preparing a bill that formalized the abolition of the marriage and working out the finances of the marriage settlement. However, if women gave scandal they could be divorced without giving them a settlement. In lax interpretation, "scandal" could include appearing in public with an uncovered head or speaking too loudly, so women always had to fear they might be divorced without a penny.

Still, rabbis would favor the pleas of a woman who sought divorce (sought to get her husband to divorce her, since she could not actually divorce him) on such grounds as impotence (male barrenness), his refusing her sexual relations, and his staying away from home longer than his job required. (Scholars were especially free to travel.) If a man had boils, goniter, or leprosy, or if he worked as a collector of dog-dung, a coppersmith, or a tanner—smelly occupations—a wife might find it too much and petition to get free of him. As one Talmudic text put it, even though she knew what his occupation was before she married him, she might claim, "I thought I could endure it, but now I find that I cannot" (Ket. 7:10). Desertion, however, was not a valid basis for granting a divorce, and only when a woman could bring forward two male witnesses that her husband was dead (female witnesses did not count) could she gain the right to remarry. Thus widows of men lost in war often were not free to remarry.

TRADITIONAL VALUES

Feminist scholars such as Judith Hauptmann and Judith Baskin have made solid contributions to the work of assessing not only what the Talmud says

about women but how it formed the consciousness of both sexes.¹² In Baskin's view,

Women did not play an active part in the development of rabbinic Judaism, nor were they granted a significant role in that tradition's religious life. By examining the way the rabbis divided the world between men and women, however, particularly in light of insights derived from anthropological and structuralist approaches to social life and religious traditions, the general separation of the sexes can be seen as part of a larger system of dichotomies and oppositions. In fact, rabbinic Judaism's definition of women shares many characteristics with that of other conservative societies. Here, as elsewhere, women do not emerge as beings inferior to men, but are instead a creation completely and necessarily different from the unblemished male who alone can serve God fully. In rabbinic Judaism, no woman is deemed capable of any direct experience of the divine.¹³

Baskin goes on to enumerate some of the consequences of this rabbinic view, which shaped the lives of most Jews throughout the Common Era. Concerning witness in court, for example, women were unacceptable, as were slaves and children. Concerning religious obligations, which weighed heavily on men, women were exempt, in part lest prayer and study take them from their domestic obligations, but probably more profoundly because the rabbis thought little of women's religious capacities. Indeed, the pious Jewish man would thank God each day for three blessings: not having been made a Gentile, not having been made a slave, and not having been made a woman.

In not having been made a woman, a man avoided such supposedly typical female vices as greed, curiosity, sloth, envy, and talkativeness ("God gave the world ten measures of speech and women took nine of them"). The only woman traditionally credited with learning was Beruriah, wife of Rabbi Meir, and she supposedly fell into adultery. Like the deaf-mute, the imbecile, the child, and the androgyne, women were not commanded to appear at the temple for worship. The common denominator in this catalogue seems to be incompleteness, lack of human wholeness. (As a Gentile equivalent, one thinks of Aristotle's view that a woman was a misbegotten man.) Of the 613 precepts or obligations taught by the rabbis, only 3 held for women, and in Baskin's view the rabbis did not consider these three *mitzvot* (divine commands that enhance religious life). The three precepts applying to women were

the lighting of candles to signal the advent of the Sabbath; the breaking off and burning of a bit of dough used in forming the Sabbath loaf (*challah*); and the observance of the laws of *midlah* (legislation pertaining to the menstruating woman) which strictly limit a woman's contact with any man during and for a week following her menstrual period. It is a crucial fact that rabbinic tradition does not regard these ordinances as *mitzvot*, that is, as divine commandments whose observance enhances the religious life of the observer and assures divine favor. Rather these precepts are described as eternal punish-

ments brought upon woman to remind her of Eve's responsibility in the death of Adam, and therefore in all human mortality.¹⁴

On the other hand, the traditional separation of women from men and official religion did not mean no appreciation for women's gifts. Perhaps the best epitome of the traditional appreciation was the passage from Proverbs 31 frequently read before the Sabbath meal:

A good wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from afar. She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and tasks for her maidens. She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. She girds her loins with strength and makes her arms strong. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night. She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet. She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers girdles to the merchant. Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all." Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates. (Proverbs 31: 10-31)

Feminists looking for positive images of women on which to build have stressed the competence and activity laid out in this portrait. Even though the woman is an enhancement of the man and the penultimate verses fearful of charm and beauty have a sour ring, the overall picture is energetic and positive.

Both the positive and the negative views of women wove through the fabric of the small village (*shetel*) life of Eastern Europe, where traditional Jewish values had centuries in which to take root. In the *shetel* women were active and busy, running the home, caring for the children, helping with any business, and looking out for community members in need. Regularly they faced the practical problems of life much more directly than men, who received many exemptions to study. In commenting on the relations between the sexes in the *shetel*, Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog have stressed how the traditional mores reached into each individual's life:

The invariable involvement of the family and the community in the behavior of the individual is nowhere more evident than in the explanations offered and the attitudes expressed with regard to the rules for behavior between

men and women. One of the “fences” erected to protect both the *mitsva* [precept] of learning and the sanctity of the home is that which separates the sexes during the daily round of activities. Extreme avoidance of women by men is the prescribed pattern of the *shetl*. Usage with regard to this pattern varies from fanatic observance to nonchalant semi-conformity, and demonstrates the ease with which behavior spans the distance between the spirit and the letter of the Law.

The people of the *shetl* give a number of reasons for the avoidance rule, all of them bearing on the need to insure fulfillment of the two leading *mitsvos*. A woman too freely contemplated would fill a man’s thoughts with sex when he should be concentrating on study. It is striking that, despite the emphatic avoidance rule, sexual enjoyment is considered healthy and good—at the proper time and place, and in the proper context. To bring children into the world is the duty of every Jew and it is right for man and wife to enjoy intercourse as a means to procreation. Such enjoyment is not only permitted, it is prescribed. God does nothing without a purpose and since He made man with sex organs and appetite, the exercise of them must be good.

Excess in anything is bad, however, and not only bad but un-Jewish. The ideal Jew is moderate in all things. It is good for him to enjoy intercourse with his wife under correct circumstances. But it is wrong for him to entertain sexual thoughts or impulses toward her or any woman outside of actual intercourse.¹⁵

HASIDISM AND REFORM

The Eastern European *shetl* was home to Hasidism, the devotional movement begun by Israel Baal Shem Tov (1700–1760). The Hasidim took the rabbinic law (*halakah*) seriously, but they were more interested in religious ardor: feeling the love of God. The leading Hasidic rabbis were mystics, rapt in the splendors of the divine beauty yet wondering why their people had to suffer so much persecution.

Elie Wiesel has spoken of the leading feminine figure in Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov’s daughter Oudil, as follows:

The Besht [Baal Shem Tov] had two children: Reb [Rabbi] Tzvi-Hersh and his sister Oudil. They were totally different in character and temperament. Reb Tzvi-Hersh was shy, forthorn, unassuming, withdrawn—unable and unwilling to assure his father’s succession at the head of the rapidly expanding movement. His sister, on the other hand, was an extrovert. No woman is as romanticized, as admired in Hasidism, as she was. She brought to the movement an added dimension of youth and charm. Oudil—the name is probably taken from Adele, Adella—was honored by Hasidim as though she were a Rebbe herself. And, in a way, she was. At her father’s side—always. Full of life, ideas, projects; forever in the middle of events, forever generating excitement, enthusiasm; forever in the middle of a story. Hasidim believe that the Shekina [divine presence, conceived as feminine] rested on her face.¹⁶

Hasidic teaching usually proceeded by way of stories. The story of how Oudil became the mother of Rebbe Baruk is typical of the tales told of the Besht and of the Hasidic sense of divine providence:

One evening she [Oudil] was present at a celebration. Her father’s disciples sang and danced for hours on end, aiming to achieve communion with God, trying to let their souls enter His. They chanted with fervor, they danced with exuberance—until they left behind all links with things earthly. They forgot their own senses; shoulder against shoulder, hand in hand, their eyes closed, they formed a circle of friendship, a circle around God and His people. Oudil was looking at them, finding it breathtakingly beautiful, when suddenly she noticed that one disciple was losing his balance. His shoes had disintegrated, and sad, distressed, he had to leave his friends.

“Poor young man,” Oudil said to her father.

The Besht smiled: “Promise him a pair of new shoes, if he promises you another son.” [Oudil must have already had one son; perhaps she was widowed.]

Both did. And thus, for the price of a pair of shoes, Oudil got her second son, Barukh.¹⁷

Hasidism continues in small enclaves, where pious Jewish families have striven to keep as many of the traditions and laws as contemporary life allows. In Lis Harris’s wonderful description of a Hasidic community in Brooklyn, one senses how the people have humanized all the rituals concerning food and purity, making them ways of enhancing both their religion and their interpersonal relations. For example, Harris’s informants explain to her that the laws prohibiting sexual contact during menstruation function as a break that makes the renewal of relations after menstruation like a honeymoon. When Harris visits the *mikvah*, the ritual bath, she experiences the sense of cleansing and renewal that the Hasidic women have told her they enjoy each month:

I tell Brachah [the attendant] that I’ve never taken a *mikvah* before. She folds her hands over her stomach and beams. “Well, then, we’ll treat you like a *kallah* [a bride]” and proceeds to explain some of the basics of the ritual to me. Then she asks, enumerating the various items on the checklist one by one, if I have remembered to do all of them. I have not. I have forgotten to comb my wet hair and I have forgotten my nose, which I proceed to blow, rather showily. Then, after blotting my eyes with a linen cloth to make sure no mascara lingers on my lashes, Brachah leads me over to the *mikvah*. I take off the robe and stand expectantly in the chest-deep warm green water. Brachah tells me to keep my eyes and lips closed but not too tightly and to keep my feet and arms apart, so that the water will touch my whole body. When I go underwater I instantly curl into the fetal position because of the position of my body. When I come up, Brachah places a linen cloth over my head and I repeat the *mikvah* blessing after her. Then, the cloth removed, I go down two more times. The second time down, I see a little speeded-up movie of all the religious people I know, performing this ritual. I think of all the generations of people I have not known who have considered the impurities of the world dissolvable. My grandmother floats by, curled up, like me, like a little pink shrimp. I see her as she was in her very old age, senile and mute, curled up in this same position on her bed. The third time down, I think of my boys suspended inside me, waiting to join the world. I look up and see Brachah’s smiling face through the water. I feel good. As I am climbing out, Brachah tells me that some people prefer to immerse themselves with their bodies in a hori-

zontal position, and asks me if I'd like to try it that way. I try it, but find it less satisfactory. It's too much like going for a swim.¹⁸

The advent of modernity brought many changes to Judaism. As a result, very few Jews now follow a Hasidic way of life, keep the laws for diet and the Sabbath as strictly as the medieval rabbis expected, and visit the ritual bath. From the time of the European Enlightenment, traditional Judaism came under question, if not attack, from Jews interested in correlating their faith and culture with the modern stress on reason and ethics. For those with such an interest, many of the laws and traditional stories seemed myths that modern times made laughable. Reform Judaism was the effort to rethink Jewish faith in modern terms. By contrast to it, traditional faith came to be called Orthodoxy. Where Orthodoxy claimed those reluctant to give up the old ways, Reform attracted Jews who wanted to mingle with Gentiles and enter the cultural mainstream. Conservative and Reconstructionist Jews attempted other reworkings of tradition and accommodations, Conservatives standing between Orthodox and Reform and Reconstructionists taking the most radical position, to the left of Reform.

The Breslau Conference called by the Reform Movement in 1846 called for sexual equality in all areas of religion and so seemed to promise Jewish women considerable liberation. However, this call was little heeded. One woman who took advantage of the beginnings of change, though, was Henrietta Szold. She lobbied for equality for Jewish women in the 1890s, studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, and spent the last decades of her life in Palesine, building the remarkable health care network that became the Hadassah Medical Organization of present-day Israel. Not surprisingly, she drew her share of male detractors, but she had more than enough wit to keep them at bay. For example, regularly she would refer to such men as "our more awkward fellow creatures."

Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, who founded Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati as a Reform Seminary, championed women's rights. In 1846 he admitted women into the choir of his congregation in Albany, New York, and during his presidency of Hebrew Union College, he encouraged women to attend. In 1921 the issue of ordaining women as rabbis arose, and after some debate the faculty of Hebrew Union College went on record as in favor of opening this option to women. However, the Board of Governors would not approve the change, and only in 1956 did the College promise that it would ordain any woman passing the required courses. Another sixteen years later, Sally Priesand became the first woman actually ordained, and since 1972 more than sixty-one women have followed her. Slowly they are gaining better acceptance. The case seems similar within Reconstructionist Judaism (a branch stressing humanistic values and downplaying revelation): "At present, fourteen women (almost 20% of all Reconstructionist rabbis since the movement's Reconstructionist Rabbinical

College opened in 1968) have received ordination."¹⁹ Of the students ordained by 1983, almost half were women (23 of 47).

In terms of Jewish civil law, too, women still need relief in several areas, for this is often commingled with *halakah* (religious law). Like the deaf-mute and the idiot, women are still "protected"—prohibited from appearing in court, for instance. They do not yet have equal inheritance, marriage, and divorce rights. The deserted wife still cannot obtain a divorce and permission to remarry, unless she can prove her husband's death. In Israel, this civil statute has resulted in the widows produced by three recent wars often being doubly afflicted. They have lost husbands to combat and, because no bodies were recovered, also have lost the legal right to remarry. If men were anchored by such legislation, it is said by more than just the cynical, things would have changed long ago. That things have not changed in the civil code is for many a continuing testimony to Jewish males' chauvinism and traditional religion's misogyny.

To combat this, feminists not only have called for women's access to religious studies, they also have devised new rituals, so that the image of the Jewish woman, in both her own eyes and that of the whole community, might change from that of an underling to that of a mature and equal participant. In the traditional marriage ceremony, for instance, the bride is totally silent, which has tended to enforce an image of effacement or nonpersonhood. The new rituals try to make it clear that woman and man are strictly copersons—that humanity is, as Genesis teaches, created male and female. Similarly, rituals are being devised for the female life cycle, so that key moments in girls' lives will be solemnized, as they have always been for boys. This means celebrating a daughter's birth with a special blessing, paralleling the gift giving for a boy's "redemption" with one for a girl's, working out *bas-mitzvah* rituals in which girls read Torah on their coming to maturity, and so on. It is simply a matter of social justice, the feminists say, and increasingly their view is gaining converts.

In Israel one can see the conflict of ancient traditions and new claims for social justice especially clearly. The Declaration of Independence assures complete equality of social and political rights, without regard to religion, race, or sex. The Women's Equal Rights Law of 1951 gives married women equality in ownership of property and guardianship of children. It also makes unilateral divorce, against the wife's will, a criminal offense. The Equal Pay for Equal Work Law of 1964 applies to both private and government employment. However, many of these civil rights, especially those surrounding marriage, have been diluted or vitiated by the religious courts, which will not cede their old, Talmudic ways. Because of their influence, a determined husband can still keep his wife from obtaining a divorce, no matter how impossible the relation has become for her. The Orthodox are not beyond playing hard politics with such issues, either, for they defend the old religious prerogatives with appeals to "national security," arguing that religion is Israel's chief unifying force. The result is that

if a woman remarries without Orthodox sanction, a large percentage of the population will consider her children bastards, unable to marry legitimate offspring. In the field of labor, women are protected as "women." This means that night work and heavy labor are forbidden and also that women have earlier retirement than men. Postnatal care and child raising almost completely devolve to women, as well, so the labor legislation, overall, has not broken with sexual stereotyping.

Finally, the vaunted equality of the *kibbutz* (agrarian commune) has turned out in practice to be less than full. Today fewer than 10 percent of the women work in the valued areas of production, and since this is tied to leadership roles and committee work, the *kibbutzim* are now largely run by men alone, women having become the staff of the nurseries, laundries, and kitchens. Moreover, this lower status has become self-perpetuating. In 1972, for instance, only 14 of the 220 university students from *kibbutzim* were women. With such a return to segregated roles, observers record, *kibbutz* women have again begun to worry about their sex appeal and concern themselves with beauty aids. On the other side, industrialization and the women's movement appear to be challenging these trends, and baby production may soon become less of a national imperative. Nonetheless, for Israeli women, as for Jewish women generally, the ethnicoreligious identity that they so passionately affirm or seek is still shadowed by the traditional Talmudist's daily prayer: "I thank Thee, God, for not having made me a woman."

Recently some humanistic Jewish women have added their voices to those opposing not only the stranglehold the Orthodox have had on official religious influence in Israel but also hawkish, militaristic trends. For example, Shulamith Koenig has eloquently explained the depression that comes over humanistic Jews when they have seen the freedom and ethical sensitivity of the prophets ignored in the name of a restrictive *halakah* and a vindictive need to punish Palestinian enemies. To her mind this depression represents a natural reaction to the default on the promise held out when Zionists like her parents emigrated to Israel more than fifty years ago. Women, Jews who are religious but not Orthodox, nonreligious Jews, and non-Jews have all suffered because of this default. Due to Orthodox intransigence, the lovely freedoms enshrined in the 1948 Bill of Rights associated with Independence have never been officially promulgated as the law of the land.

Moreover, in Koenig's view Zionists of all persuasions have indulged a fatal blind spot. In their exultation at coming back to their ancestral land, they have overlooked the fact that for centuries that land had been the possession of others, who were bound to resist Jews' return. So she thinks only a deepened commitment to the equality of all the inhabitants of Israel and a spirituality free of religious dogmatism are likely to redeem the original ideals of the Zionist movement. As long as patriarchal religion prevails over

the conception that Judaism is a freeing way of life, and retribution prevails over the generosity of spirit necessary to make peace, it will be hard for any Jews who want equality between the sexes and peace throughout the land to be fully happy with Israel.²⁰

CURRENT JEWISH FEMINISM

All the major branches of Judaism now house feminists interested in making the tradition more acceptable to present-day women. Among the Orthodox, for example, considerable work has been done on trying to change the religious laws that have pushed women to the margins of religious participation and have put them at a disadvantage in marriage and divorce.²¹ As we have seen, Reform and Reconstructionist Jews have admitted women to the rabbinate. Conservative Jewry has witnessed similar trends, beginning to ordain women as rabbis and cantors. On the other hand, many of the women in the *kibbutzim* of Israel have reasserted traditional women's roles.

The leading Jewish participants in the feminist critique of patriarchal cultures have applauded the liberalizing trends without thinking that they are likely to do the needed job. In the minds of Jewish feminists such as Judith Plaskow and Naomi Goldenberg, tinkering with the traditional laws is but a halfway house. Until the assumptions of rabbinic Judaism are challenged and replaced, the laws will still be dealing with women who are not men's equals in religious dignity or capacity. Indeed, as we saw when dealing with the Mishnah and have postulated concerning recorded history as a whole, men's cultural creations regularly have ignored women's interests and needs, so that even when women were not being penalized by sexist laws they were being ignored—rendered invisible.

Judith Plaskow has summarized the pass to which this has brought more radical Jewish feminists:

Third—and for me, this is the most important point—the invisibility of women cannot be remedied within the legal structure. In fact, the Jewish feminist movement of the last ten years has focused largely on *halachah* and the rectification of certain problems it raises for women. For example, according to Jewish law, women are not required to put on a prayer shawl or phylacteries or say the *she'ina* (Deuteronomy 6:4–5) three times daily. But since in Jewish law one who is not obligated to perform a commandment has a lower status in its performance than one who is obligated, Orthodox women cannot form part of the minyan, or quorum of prayer, made up of those obligated to pray. (In other branches of Judaism women can be part of the minyan.) Divorce is another important feminist issue. According to Jewish law, only a man can write and deliver the *get*, or divorce decree, which ends a Jewish marriage. This means that in a case in which a man cannot or will not give his wife a *get*, she is forever prevented from remarriage.

These concerns can and have been addressed within a halachic [legal] framework, and adjustments have been made. In fact, the tradition has been trying for hundreds of years to remedy the inequity of the divorce laws by finding ways to get a recalcitrant husband to give his wife a *get*. But these only partially successful efforts reveal very clearly that the desire to render justice to women is secondary to the preservation of the halachic system. For really the only way to solve the problem of divorce is to give women equal agency, to allow them to write a *get*. But this is precisely what has not been and cannot be done within the traditional framework, because it would entail a recognition of women's situation as women, which goes beyond the system. It is to just such a recognition, however, that we as feminists are committed. Once we begin to see women as a class, and gender as a central category for the analysis of any culture or tradition, we are bound to break out of a system which renders women's status invisible. At this stage, in any case, a feminist Judaism must insist on the importance of women's experience and, thus, on shaking up the categories and processes of Jewish life and thought.²²

Plaskow is aware that even within the old patterns Jewish women forged bonds among themselves and found ways of ignoring the official repressions. She speaks with appreciation, even with nostalgia, of the sisterhood that traditional Jewish women experienced through the laws that prescribed sexual segregation. In the marketplace, at the *mikvah*, or on the women's side of the synagogue, women shared gossip, ideas, common frustrations. Because of the commitment of Jewish men to study, Jewish women often carried the main economic responsibilities and so were active in crafts, trade, and even business travel. Much of how one regards the oppression of traditional Jewish women therefore depends on where one is looking, what one is choosing to stress. Nonetheless, the official structures of the past strike most present-day Jewish feminists as deeply sexist, so most present-day Jewish feminists are asking for a thorough reconception of how "Jewish" and "woman" should be put together.

In a recent symposium published in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, five Jewish feminists discuss the question of separation and union in Jewish religion, with special reference to the implications for women. The discussions suggest the ways that feminist theory is making Jewish women rethink the most basic assumptions of past Jewish theology. As well, the discussions frequently spotlight the importance of ritual and community life. Several of these concerns come together in a contribution by T. Dvorah Setel:

What it means to develop a Jewish *practice* based on relational values is a more difficult question. It is far easier to discuss and redefine theological perspectives than it is to challenge the holiness of practices such as keeping kosher, observing the Sabbath or performing male circumcision. It may be easier to transform specific rituals less concerned with contemporary identity, such as *havdalah* (lit.: "separation"), the ceremony separating the Sabbath from the rest of the week. *Havdalah* concludes with a paradigmatic statement of hier-

archical dualism: "You are praiseworthy, Lord our God, Power-over the whole world, The-One-Who-Separates: holy from common; light from darkness; Israel from the other peoples; the seventh day from the six days of common labor. You are praiseworthy Lord, The-One-Who-Separates holy from common."

The ritual of *havdalah* then closes with a dramatic act: the extinguishing of the candle used in the ceremony, thus *making* separation and not merely describing it. At first glance, *havdalah* appears impossible to incorporate into Jewish feminist practice but it contains at least one action which forces us to confront the issue of diversity within unity: the smelling of fragrant spices, which traditionally represent a sense of the sweetness of *shabbat* that may remain throughout the week—in other words, an acknowledgment that the Sabbath cannot and even should not be wholly separate from the other days. In fact, the tradition describes *shabbat* as "a taste of the world to come," thus envisioning a time when the separation becomes obsolete.

I believe that that time has begun. I think feminism has clearly shown that separational modes of thought have run whatever course they may have had as empowering constructs. As a Jewish feminist I think my present task is to speak no longer in that obsolete language. At the same time I must acknowledge that we are still far from the realization of a repaired, unified world, and ask what distinctions still remain useful and significant. I may still wish and need to preserve the observance of *shabbat* as a model for the rest of the week, a time focused on the task of unification. I may wish to maintain a kosher home as a means of relationship to my people and/or a process of awareness concerning the lives that have brought food to my table. To be honest, I cannot see any way that Jewish feminists can *intellectually* justify the practice of male circumcision but I think feminists, of all people, understand that such decisions are not necessarily theoretical ones.²³

One sees, therefore, that feminist instincts of wholeness, unity, and relationship are entering into the theology of current Jewish women. As they insist on the importance of honoring women's experience, they find themselves drawn into the complexity and richness of the tradition they are reviewing. The result is a proper sophistication, a proper awareness that bad forms (of both thought and practice) have sometimes been used to good ends and that good forms do not necessarily guarantee justice, piety, and love. We need both good forms and good use.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was the significance of the Mosaic covenant?
2. What was your reaction to the story of the nameless concubine who was raped, murdered, and dismembered?
3. What made biblical women valuable property?
4. Explain the positive implications in the story of Ruth and the Song of Songs.
5. Why did the Mishnah's interest in women focus on their transitions?

6. What were the three obligations to which traditional Jewish women were held and what were their negative overtones?

7. Write a brief endorsement of the mikvah, stressing the positive religious ends it could serve.

8. Lay out the pros and cons of keeping the traditional kosher laws.

NOTES

¹See Eugene B. Borowitz et al., "Judaism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 8, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 127-205.

²See 1987 *Britannica Book of the Year* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1987), p. 338.

³Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), p. 12.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

⁵See Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 4-14; and Jo Ann Hackett, "In the Days of Jaël: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel," in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, eds. C. Atkinson, C. Buchanan, and M. Miles (Boston: Beacon, 1985), pp. 15-38.

⁶See Steve Davies, "The Canaanite-Hebrew Goddess," in *The Book of the Goddess: Past and Present*, ed. Carl Olson (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp. 68-79.

⁷See Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 166-200; and Karen Doob Sakentfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 32-38.

⁸See Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 144-165; and Samuel Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 29-49.

⁹Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 45.

¹⁰Leonard Swidler, *Women in Judaism* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1976), p. 56.

¹¹See Jacob Neusner, "Thematic or Systematic Description: The Case of the Mishnah's Division of Women," in his *Method and Meaning in Ancient Judaism* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979).

¹²See Judith Hauptmann, "Images of Women in the Talmud," in *Religion and Sexism*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), pp. 184-212; and Judith Baskin, "The Separation of Women in Rabbinic Judaism," in *Women, Religion and Social Change*, ed. V. Z. Haddad and E. B. Fendly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp. 3-18.

¹³Baskin, "The Separation of Women in Rabbinic Judaism," p. 3.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 7, drawing on P. Shabbat 2, 5b, 34; Gen. R. 17:7.

¹⁵Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Street* (New York: Schocken, 1962), pp. 134-135.

¹⁶Elie Wiesel, *Four Hasidic Masters* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), p. 33-34.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁸Lis Harris, *Holy Days: The World of a Hasidic Family* (New York: Summit, 1985), pp. 147-148.

¹⁹Ellen M. Umansky, "Feminism and the Reevaluation of Women's Roles Within American Jewish Life," in *Women, Religion and Social Change*, p. 484.

²⁰Lee Shulman Koenig, "A Jewish Perspective from Israel," in *Speaking of Faith*, ed. Diana L. Eck and Dewaki Jain (Philadelphia: New Society, 1987), pp. 61-69.

²¹See Blu Greenberg, "Marriage in the Jewish Tradition," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 22, no. 1 (Winter 1985), pp. 3-20.

²²Judith Plaskow, "The Wife/Sister Stories: Dilemmas of the Jewish Feminist," in *Speaking of Faith*, pp. 125-126.

²³T. Dvorah Setel, "Roundtable Discussion: Feminist Reflections on Separation and Unity in Jewish Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2, no. 1 (Spring 1986), pp. 117-118.