

Jewish Women's Archive



***Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution:
Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges***

Materials for Part 2

Excerpted from the Jewish Women's Archive's online
exhibit at

<http://jwa.org/feminism>

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Tamara Cohen

One of the key ways that Judaism continues to live and be lived throughout the world is through holiday celebrations and rituals. Knowing this and valuing the importance of ritual and practice, Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project of the JCC in Manhattan devoted resources and much energy during its first ten years as a Jewish feminist organization (1994-2004) to bringing Jewish feminist practice into homes and synagogues throughout the United States and beyond.

I remember sitting at many meetings with the rest of the Ma'yan staff and various friends and co-conspirators, trying to figure out creative ways to translate into accessible and usable forms and objects the transformative effect that Jewish feminist thought had had on our lives. We wanted to bring Jewish feminism into mainstream synagogues and community centers and to help make it part of the vocabulary of Jewish teachers and families, sometimes without their even noticing. We didn't want to let Jewish feminism be one "topic" or bookshelf in a Jewish library. Instead we knew that Jewish feminism needed to be suffused through all of Jewish practice so that it would be impossible to ignore. We also had the good sense to realize that by bringing together Jewish feminist thought with a perhaps more traditional form of Jewish women's contribution to the home and community – the making of beautiful Judaica – we could help make Jewish feminism not just intellectually and spiritually fulfilling, but also aesthetically and sensually engaging.

In the case of Miriam's Cups, Ma'yan did not invent the ritual object; we simply set out to bring it from the fringes into the mainstream. Born out of a meditation on the midrash of Miriam's Well in a Rosh Hodesh group in a suburb of Boston, the idea of a ritual goblet filled with water which would symbolize the mythic healing waters of Miriam's Well immediately struck the members of the group as something that "already existed and was just waiting to be discovered." In 1992, *Lilith* magazine began spreading news of the new ritual object more widely when it first commissioned a Miriam's Cup. Then in 1998, Ma'yan invited 80 artists from around the world to participate in an exhibition and sale entitled "Drawing From the Source: Miriam, Women's Creativity and New Ritual." Artists were invited to make usable original Miriam's Cups. Many, for whom the exhibition was their first discovery of the Miriam's Well story and/or Jewish feminist ritual, have continued to produce Miriam's Cups, which have become part of more and more seders and other rituals across the country and indeed the world.

Through Miriam's Cups and many other ritual objects like them, Jewish feminism has brought new shape, color, sound, and experience to our seder tables, sukkot, and synagogue celebrations. As these objects grow older and more used, I delight to think that they will soon become family heirlooms, treasured symbols of Jewish tradition strengthened, enhanced, and transformed through feminist innovation.

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Tamara Cohen's work with the Jewish Women's Archive and Ma'yan: the Jewish Women's Project helped popularize lesser-known heroines of Jewish history and new feminist rituals such as making Miriam's Cup part of the Passover Seder. A writer and educator, Cohen served as program director of Ma'yan for many years and edited their feminist haggadah, The Journey Continues. She also collaborated with the Jewish Women's Archive to create the first Women of Valor posters, and created a women's Omer calendar in conjunction with the women's studies department at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Through Project Keshet, she worked as an educator with women in the former Soviet Union. She is a cofounder of Jewish Activist Gays and Lesbians and serves as the director of multicultural and diversity affairs at the University of Florida.

To learn more about Tamara, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/feminism/cohen-tamara>.

Dianne Cohler-Esses

This photo and the accompanying article represent the span of culture and history I navigated in order to become the first female rabbi, as well as the only non-Orthodox rabbi from the Syrian Jewish community.

Very few people leave the tightly-knit world of the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn and when they do, they often leave the way of life behind, including any kind of religious practice. When I left my community, I also left all forms of Jewish life. But, ultimately, I reclaimed a Jewish way of life on my own terms – terms that would allow me, as a woman, to have a voice.

I encountered the feminist movement in my later high school years. It offered alternatives to getting married and having children at the age of 19, the only model I had grown up with. The notion that a woman could become a rabbi didn't enter my mind until I was in college. The American feminist movement, and ultimately Jewish feminism, gave me the strength and imagination to leave the Syrian community and create a new life.

However, in my journey through the Jewish Ashkenazic world and the Jewish feminist world, I often felt my own history eclipsed. Non-Western Jewish history and culture were largely invisible at the Conservative seminary I attended, as well as in the consciousness of most Ashkenazic Jews. Moreover, being a feminist made it difficult for me to bring the lives of generations of Syrian Jewish women – lives that consisted of creating, maintaining, and sustaining families as well as weaving familial and communal webs – into my own life and world. I believed I needed to reject those women and all they represented in order to become who I was: a woman who went to college, a single working woman living outside of the confines of the community, a rabbi, and a feminist.

This photograph was featured in an exhibition I worked on in the mid-1980s on Syrian Jewish immigration to this country. Taken by Judith Helfand, it features a woman stirring a pot in her kitchen. That is all: a Syrian Jewish immigrant woman stirring a simple pot in a simple kitchen in the heart of the community in Flatbush, Brooklyn. The second artifact [see *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* online exhibit] is an article I wrote during my first year at the Seminary about entering rabbinical school and the reactions of my parents, their friends, and a rabbi in the community. The distance from that pot to my own world is vast. Not easily and not often crossed. Jewish feminism provided the bridge from one shore to the other. Now my work is to stir.

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Dianne Cohler-Esses broke new ground as not only the first woman from the Syrian-Jewish community to become a rabbi, but also the first non-Orthodox rabbi from that community. Ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1995, Cohler-Esses has focused her work on education and outreach through Mishpacha, an online education and support program for Jewish families across America, and through teaching with programs ranging from CLAL, the Center for Leadership and Learning, to the Bronfman Youth Fellowship, where she served as co-director and senior educator. Cohler-Esses has written about her struggle for acceptance within the Syrian community, explaining her desire to become a rabbi to friends and family and describing the painful and surprisingly beautiful process of seeking permission to deliver her father's eulogy at his Orthodox synagogue.

To learn more about Dianne, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/feminism/cohler-esses-dianne>.

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Photograph by Judith Helfand

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Marcia Falk

The first time I presented my own blessings in public, I was daunted, and I might never have taken that step at all if not for something that happened in the summer of 1983, when I was teaching at the National Havurah Institute in Princeton, New Jersey. On Friday afternoon, my friend Arthur Waskow asked me to help him prepare the *havdalah* ritual, the brief but dramatic ceremony that closes the Sabbath. Art would be leading the recitation of the *havdalah*'s four blessings, and he wondered whether I would compose and read some introductory meditations. It was a moment of truth: I told Art what I had not yet told anyone – what I had not yet fully admitted even to myself – that I no longer prayed with the traditional liturgy. Hesitating at first, I explained how the words of those blessings stuck in my throat, how I could no longer pretend to worship God as lord and king.

"Fine," said Art, without skipping a beat, "so write your own blessings – we'll use those instead."

"My own blessings? Are you out of your mind? They'll stone me!"

Art looked down at me – he's a good-sized man – with a half-puzzled, half-exasperated expression. "Marcia," he sighed, "they won't stone *you*." I wondered at that moment whether Art had ever experienced the kind of intimidation that sometimes prevented me – and lots of other women, despite all the changes of the 1970s – from doing things my own way, convention be damned. But with him towering over me – daring me, so it seemed – I didn't have the heart to say no. Instead I took a deep breath, and agreed.

The next night, in a darkened hall lit only by the multi-wicked candle of the *havdalah* ritual, I recited four new blessings, in Hebrew and in English, before a community of 300 Jews of almost every religious persuasion, from atheist to modern Orthodox. I recited these blessings as though they had been written a couple of millennia ago by the rabbis, rather than the day before, by me. I offered no apology or explanation (I didn't dare to), and, to my puzzlement and disbelief, the community said Amen.

Word got out, and the next summer Rabbi Laura Geller asked if I would give a presentation on prayer at the conference "Illuminating the Unwritten Scrolls: Women's Spirituality and Jewish Tradition," to take place in Los Angeles that November. I decided to create a new *kiddush* (a sanctification over wine) and to present it as part of a speech that would take the audience through the why and how of its creation. The talk, entitled "A Blessing for This Day," received a standing ovation.

Some have said that the presentation of that speech marked the beginning of an era in which Jewish women – and also Jewish men – would begin writing prayers of

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their own. For the most part, however, the new prayers that began to be written were in English; I was alone in composing *Hebrew* blessings. And as these became known in wider circles, they stirred up considerable controversy: vigorous – even vehement – debates began happening over whether we have the “right” to change the words of Hebrew prayer. Believing that we have not only the right but the responsibility to keep alive the Hebrew liturgical tradition by adding our own voices to it, I continued over the course of the next decade to write new Hebrew blessings for both the home and the synagogue.

In 1996, my new prayer book, *The Book of Blessings*, was published, and since that time, passages from *The Book of Blessings* have been reprinted in the prayer books of every major non-Orthodox movement of Judaism. Apparently – and to no one's surprise more than my own – new feminist prayer in Hebrew has started to become part of the Jewish mainstream.

Marcia Falk transformed the art of prayer with feminist blessings and modern translations of ancient writing. Falk, a Fulbright scholar with a doctorate in English and comparative literature from Stanford, won international acclaim for her first work of translation, The Song of Songs: Love Lyrics from the Bible, which used poetic techniques and vivid language to bring the book to life for modern readers. Falk was also quietly adapting Jewish liturgy for her personal prayers. At a National Havurah conference in 1983, she was invited to share some of her blessings by Arthur Waskow, and soon was asked to create more prayers for other groups, which led to her writing The Book of Blessings, a bilingual set of Jewish prayers with gender-inclusive language and inventive, non-hierarchical images for God. Falk has also been praised for her own poetry and for her translations of the Yiddish poet Malka Heifetz Tussman and the Israeli poet Zelda. She has been a professor of literature and creative writing at several universities and continues to write, teach, and lecture.

To learn more about Marcia, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/feminism/falk-marcia>.

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Debbie Friedman

It was *kol isha* (the voice of women) for *col isha* (every woman) that inspired me to write inclusive music. It is beneficial not only for women, but for men and children as well. Singing helps us learn how to be vocal. Ultimately, the voices of women, their sense of empowerment, can be borne from song, which can form the core of political, spiritual, and economic transformation. The more our voices are heard in song, the more we become our lyrics, our prayers, and our convictions. Then every woman will be heard, and every voice will be heard: *kol isha* for *col isha*.

Debbie Friedman's music transformed prayers for Jews across the movements. Growing up, Friedman often felt disconnected from synagogue prayers, and began using her gifts as a singer and songwriter to blend traditional prayers and biblical passages with English translations and moving folk music to bridge that gap. She wrote many of her early songs while working as a song leader for various Jewish youth camps around the country. Her prayer for healing is used in hundreds of congregations around the country, and many of her songs have become so well known that they are considered "traditional." Friedman served as cantor at the New Reform Congregation in Los Angeles and directed the music program and annual music workshop at Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin throughout her career. In 2007, Friedman accepted an appointment to the faculty of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's School of Sacred Music in New York; the school was renamed in her honor after her death.

To learn more about Debbie, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/feminism/friedman-debbie>.

Blu Greenberg

This artifact [article Greenberg wrote about Jews and feminism; see *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* online exhibit] summons to memory an event that was a turning point in the life of American Jewish women – the first National Jewish Women's Conference, held at the McAlpin Hotel, February, 1973. Skillfully organized by a handful of young women, the conference placed the broad feminist agenda at the heart of contemporary Judaism and community consciousness. It attracted 500 women (and one man) from across the entire spectrum of Jewish life.

The artifact also represents a turning point in my life: It represents my first foray into the dialectics of religious feminism, my first major public address, and my first published article on a subject that would engage me for the next 32 years.

From the conference, I learned many things:

- Probing an issue directly through the original sources and not relying on pre-digested information was essential. Preparation for this talk – my first systematic look at the issue – turned up some interesting correctives. The accepted notion in Orthodoxy was that women were on a pedestal, hierarchy did not exist, and gender differentiated roles/status were from Sinai, thus unalterable. True, Jewish women were protected and respected, valued and honored in the tradition. But there were also areas of closed access, unequal dignity, and outright disabilities for women. Furthermore, over time, change had come – especially religious education for women and attempts to ameliorate the plight of the *agunah* (literally, “chained wife” – a woman whose husband won't grant her a religious divorce). All this had to be addressed.
- Feminism was an entry point for many women into Judaism and not an exit as other modern social movements had been.
- There was enormous value and power in cohorts.
- The difference between knowing a thing by observing others perform and knowing through first-hand experience had significant implications for women's ritual.
- One could critique the tradition from within yet remain a faithful daughter; one could make tradeoffs and compromises to remain within community yet not lose one's feminist aspirations or credentials.
- Feminists could be as Orthodox in their beliefs as traditionalists were in theirs. My critique was two-pronged: what Orthodoxy and feminism could learn from each other. Some in the audience welcomed the critique of Orthodoxy, but bristled at the

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critique of feminism. Happily, there has been great change in each sector during these past 30 years. Feminism yielded its radical edge, turned unqualifiedly family friendly, and became more inclusive of men. Orthodoxy has integrated values of gender equality to an extent unimaginable three decades ago.

The conference changed my life. How fortunate I was to be part of an incredible historical moment!

Arguing that feminism could become a way into Judaism instead of a reason to leave the faith, JOFA founder Blu Greenberg created new possibilities for Orthodox feminist Jews. The daughter of an Orthodox rabbi and the wife of another, Greenberg was deeply involved in the Jewish community but concerned by the lack of opportunities for women to engage in ritual and study. At the First National Jewish Women's Conference in 1973, Greenberg argued that women should take part in ritual and synagogue leadership to the fullest extent within Jewish law, and that to claim that halakhah could not adapt to feminist concerns was to ignore the long history of Jewish tradition. Greenberg went on to become founding president of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) in 1997 and to develop a gender and Judaism curriculum for Orthodox day schools. Greenberg has also taken on a leadership role in a variety of Jewish organizations, serving on the boards of organizations including Project Keshet and Lilith Magazine, as well as her work as a founding member of the Dialogue Project, which helped create discussion groups between Israeli and Palestinian women to promote peace.

To learn more about Blu, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/feminism/greenberg-blu>.

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Paula Hyman

A small Jewish feminist group, which we called Ezrat Nashim, presented the "Call for Change" to the Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative movement on March 14, 1972 and disseminated it to the press. The rabbis received it in their convention packets, but we managed to arrange a face-to-face session with the rabbis' wives. Ezrat Nashim grew out of a study group on the status of women in Judaism that formed in the fall of 1971 in the New York Havurah, a countercultural community of young Jews who studied, observed Judaism, and engaged in politics together. (Not all members of Ezrat Nashim, however, belonged to the Havurah.) We were all well-educated, in both Jewish and secular terms, and had been deeply affected by the nascent American feminist movement in which we participated. Within several months we determined that if any Jewish issue required political action, it was this one, the status of women. At the time we were ten women, the oldest of whom was 27. We chose to target the Conservative movement because most of us had grown up in its ranks, and because the Reform movement was already moving on the issue while Orthodoxy presented too many obstacles.

The "Call for Change" represents a liberal feminist stance, arguing for equal access to positions of leadership and religious participation from which Jewish women were excluded because of their gender. We recognized that the subordinate status of women was linked to their exemption from positive time-bound *mitzvot* (commandments), and we therefore accepted increased obligation as the corollary of equality. We were not yet able to articulate the ways in which women might seek to transform the Judaism that had marginalized us.

Ezrat Nashim responded publicly, through a press release on October 24, 1983, to the decision of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), the central educational institution of the Conservative movement, to accept women into the Rabbinical School. Two members of Ezrat Nashim, Judith Hauptman and myself, participated in the vote as members of the JTS faculty. For Ezrat Nashim, the vote marked the culmination of achievement of almost all that we had lobbied for over the course of more than a decade. (It should be noted that women still do not have the right to initiate divorce within Judaism, the source of the problem of the *agunah*, the chained wife who cannot remarry.) It seemed like a prolonged struggle, but I remember pointing out to my "sisters" that in the context of Jewish history 11 years was like the blink of an eye. The evening of the vote, we had dinner together to celebrate.

Paula Hyman's work as a historian recovered the stories of Jewish women's pasts, while her work as a member of Ezrat Nashim helped create new possibilities for their future by pushing the Conservative Movement to ordain women rabbis. Hyman's Columbia University doctoral dissertation formed the basis for her first

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book, From Dreyfus to Vichy: The Remaking of French Jewry, 1906–1939, a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award. She then collaborated with Charlotte Baum and Sonya Michel in writing The Jewish Woman in America, which formed the basis for her later encyclopedias on Jewish women in America with Deborah Dash Moore and her comprehensive encyclopedia of Jewish women's history with Dalia Ofer. She helped found Ezrat Nashim, which lobbied the 1972 Rabbinical Assembly Convention for full participation of women in synagogue life and the opportunity for women to become rabbis. Eleven years later, as a faculty member of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Hyman took part in the historic vote to allow women to become Conservative rabbis. She served as the first female dean of the Seminary College of Jewish Studies at JTS before becoming professor of modern Jewish history at Yale.

To learn more about Paula, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/feminism/hyman-paula>.

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JEWISH WOMEN CALL FOR CHANGE

The Jewish tradition regarding women, once far ahead of other cultures, has now fallen disgracefully behind in failing to come to terms with developments of the past century.

Accepting the age-old concept of role differentiation on the basis of sex, Judaism saw woman's role as that of wife, mother, and home-maker. Her ritual obligations were domestic and familial: *herot*, *shallah*, and *kaharat ha-mishbachah*. Although the woman was extolled for her domestic achievements, and respected as the foundation of the Jewish family, she was never permitted an active role in the synagogue, court, or house of study. These limitations on the life-patterns open to women, appropriate or even progressive for the rabbinic and medieval periods, are entirely unacceptable to us today.

The social position and self-image of women have changed radically in recent years. It is now universally accepted that women are equal to men in intellectual capacity, leadership ability and spiritual depth. The Conservative movement has tacitly acknowledged this fact by demanding that their female children be educated alongside the males--up to the level of rabbinical school. To educate women and deny them the opportunity to act from this knowledge is an affront to their intelligence, talents and integrity.

As products of Conservative congregations, religious schools, the Ramah Camps, LTR, USY, and the Seminary, we feel this tension acutely. We are deeply committed to Judaism, but cannot find adequate expression for our total needs and concerns in existing women's social and charitable organizations, such as Sisterhood, Hadassah, etc. Furthermore, the single woman--a new reality in Jewish life--is almost totally excluded from the organized Jewish community, which views women solely as daughters, wives, and mothers. The educational institutions of the Conservative movement have helped women recognize their intellectual, social and spiritual potential. If the movement then denies women opportunities to demonstrate these capacities, as adults, it will force them to turn from the synagogue, and to find fulfillment elsewhere.

It is not enough to say that Judaism views women as separate but equal, nor to point to Judaism's past superiority over other cultures in its treatment of women. We've had enough of apologies; enough of Bruria, Dvora, and Esther; enough of *shukh*!

It is time that:

women be granted membership in synagogues
women be counted in the minyan

women be allowed full participation in religious observances--

(אנשים נשים מלאים חברים במנין)

OVER

(Statement, EZRAT NASHIM, page 2)

women be recognized as witnesses before Jewish law
women be allowed to initiate divorce
women be permitted and encouraged to attend Rabbinical and Cantorial schools, and to perform Rabbinical and Cantorial functions in synagogues
women be encouraged to join decision-making bodies, and to assume professional leadership roles, in synagogues and in the general Jewish community
women be considered as bound to fulfill all *Mitzvot* equally with men.

For three thousand years, one-half the Jewish people have been excluded from full participation in Jewish communal life. We call for an end to the second-class status of women in Jewish life.

פ'ת"ג ש"ס

EZRAT NASHIM

411 Avenue N
Brooklyn, New York 11230

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Sharon Kleinbaum

I believe in cosmic influences: I believe that we influence the cosmos, that we influence the world. I believe that what we do matters. Our lives, our actions, our words, even our thoughts can make a difference. Together we can change the world.

I did not become a rabbi to sell Judaism. I became a rabbi because I believe in the meaning and power of prayer and the presence of God in our lives. I did not become a rabbi to be a politician or social worker. I became a rabbi because I believe in the power of religious community to overcome the culture in which we find ourselves, the culture of despair.

I certainly did not become a rabbi as the result of positive childhood experiences. After eight years of three-days-a-week Hebrew school, I was still ignorant of Jewish history and experience, illiterate in Torah, and distant from God. With bat mitzvah I was given no sense that Judaism had anything meaningful to do with the adult world, that Judaism might inform my decisions or provide comfort or inspiration. In later years, brilliant teachers revealed to me the profound depth of Jewish tradition. I became a rabbi because I believe in the power of teaching to change a life and to change the world.

Feminism had a huge impact on my choice to become a rabbi. When I became bat mitzvah in 1972, no women had yet been ordained as rabbis. Thirteen years later, when I entered rabbinical school, a generation of women had broken those barriers. I stand on their shoulders and on the shoulders of many others who demanded that Judaism listen to women's voices. I believe that Judaism was diminished without the religious leadership of women. I believe in the power of women to change an often-stubborn religious tradition. I believe in the power of women to change the world. But women must do more than repeat what men have been doing all along. Feminism requires me to ask the harder questions about the very nature of Judaism. I never wanted to be simply a female rabbi. I want to be a part of a Judaism that is transformed by feminism.

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Sharon Kleinbaum's longtime leadership of Congregation Beth Simchat Torah and her outspoken activism have made her a powerful voice for GLBTQ rights and human rights in America and around the world. Kleinbaum's activism began in college, protesting for divestment against South Africa. Ordained as a Reconstructionist rabbi in 1990, Kleinbaum became senior rabbi of CBST in New York, the largest gay and lesbian synagogue in the country, in 1992. Speaking out for the rights of gays and lesbians, immigrants, Palestinians, women, and people of color, Kleinbaum was repeatedly arrested and jailed for her beliefs, but was also hailed by the Huffington Post, Newsweek, the Forward, and the Jewish Week in their annual lists of the most influential rabbis in the country. She was part of Mayor Bloomberg's Commission on GLBTQ Runaway and Homeless Youth, the NYPD's GLBT Advisory Committee, and Mayor de Blasio's Transition Committee. When New York ruled in favor of gay marriage, Kleinbaum set up just across the street from the courthouse to offer couples the chance for a religious marriage ceremony.

To learn more about Sharon, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/feminism/kleinbaum-sharon>.

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Judith Plaskow

The founding letter of the Jewish Feminist Spirituality Collective B'not Esh provides some of the context for our first meeting in 1981. Individual Jewish feminists had recognized the need for an independent feminist space before the summer of 1980, but the first National Havurah Summer Institute that year provided the catalyst for making concrete plans for a meeting. The feminist courses at the Institute generated such interest and excitement that it became clear that feminists needed a context to explore the feminist transformation of Judaism in an intensive and sustained way.

In the fall of 1980, a small group of women met in New York to think about the agenda for a meeting and to draw up a list of possible participants. We were looking for women who were a) committed and literate feminists, b) committed and literate Jews interested in spirituality, and c) committed to exploring and creating a Jewish feminist spirituality. The founding letter went out to about 50 women, 16 of whom gathered at the Grail in Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, over Memorial Day weekend in 1981.

The group did not meet again in 1982, but it met in 1983 and has been meeting annually since – still over Memorial Day and still at the Grail in Cornwall. In 1983, 26 women came, many of whom are still members or were for many years.

A number of the parameters outlined in the founding document have stood us in good stead over the last 23 years. Our meetings still combine text study, discussions of feminist theory and practice, prayer, and planning for the future. Although our understanding of what it means to re-vision Judaism and create community has evolved, these are still our goals. Celebrating Shabbat together remains a central piece of what we do and a crucial site for the enactment of what it means to be feminist Jews. Babies who are breastfeeding are welcome at our meetings, but not other children, and we still share travel costs.

B'not Esh has remained small, but it has had an impact on the development of Jewish feminism disproportionate to its size. It seeded two other groups, one of which (Achyot Or) has been meeting for many years. It has sparked numerous Jewish feminist projects, conferences, lectures, classes, articles, and books. I could not imagine having written *Standing Again at Sinai*, for example, without B'not Esh. In many ways, B'not Esh has provided a model for how separatist feminist spaces can generate ideas and energy that spill over into a larger community.

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Judith Plaskow created a new Jewish feminist theology through her scholarly masterwork, Standing Again at Sinai. Plaskow earned her doctorate from Yale Divinity School, where she joined the Yale Women's Alliance and co-chaired the newly formed Women and Religion Section of the American Academy of Religion, later serving as AAR's president. This intersection of feminism and religion was central to Plaskow's life both inside and outside the academy as a founding member of B'not Esh and the cofounder of the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, which she coedited for ten years. In Standing Again at Sinai, the first-ever work of Jewish feminist theology, Plaskow offered context for the ways in which women have been marginalized in Jewish law and tradition, as well as in the modern Jewish community. At the same time, she pointed out ways in which those laws and traditions could be adapted, and offered precedents for times when rabbinic authorities radically reinterpreted Jewish law, as well as showing ways in which a feminist theology could enrich Jewish practice. Plaskow continues to write and teach as professor of religious studies at Manhattan College.

To learn more about Judith, go to her page in the *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution* exhibit: <http://jwa.org/feminism/plaskow-judith>.

Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution
Exploring Identities, Accomplishments, and Challenges: PART 2

Excerpted from the Jewish Women's Archive's online exhibit at <http://jwa.org/feminism>

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1. daily programming - text study, Jewish/feminist theory and practice, Jewish women's theology, etc.
2. daily tefillah
3. Shabbat - preparation, celebration, resolution
4. retreat evaluation - Sunday morning; where do we go from here?

These areas provide a general framework for the activities of the retreat. We urge you, therefore, to add your own ideas to, and to suggest changes in, this general outline. In order to be a success, this retreat must be a cooperative venture in conception, design, and realization.

A few other thoughts. (1) Early deliberations about childcare have led us to conclude that the intensity of such a gathering would be undermined by the presence of young ones, and that others should share nurturing. What is your response to such a proposal? (2) About money. We are investigating possible sources of funds to help defray the cost of attendance. If anyone has suggestions or ideas about that, we would appreciate hearing from you as soon as possible. Even in the absence of outside funds, however, we could set up a kind of "travel kitty," in which those who are coming from nearby could contribute some money toward the transportation of others, and those coming from farther away (and incurring greater expense) could then be partially reimbursed. Again, we would appreciate responses to these ideas.

As mentioned above, room and board for the retreat will cost \$80. In addition, we have begun to incur operating expenses, e.g. sending you this letter. In order to cover these and future costs, we must assess an additional \$10 per person fee. Total retreat costs (excluding travel), therefore, come to \$90. To reserve a place, please send a check for ten dollars made out to Myra Rosenhaus, 922 Maxwell Terrace, Bloomington, IN 47401, no later than April 17.

We look forward to hearing from you with suggestions, wishes, even your caveats. Finally, Myra Rosenhaus at Indiana University has agreed to serve as coordinator of the retreat. Questions, suggestions, etc. should be directed to her. We hope to hear from you soon.

B'shalom,
Martha Ackelsberg
Sue Elwell
Judith Plaskow
Myra Rosenhaus
T. Dvora Setel

March 30, 1981

BEYOND HALACHA: JEWISH FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

Dear Friend,

Three of the courses offered at the 1980 National Havurah Summer Institute last August provided the opportunity for a number of women to come together and explore sources for Jewish women's spirituality, Jewish women's history, and feminist theology. The enthusiastic response to the readings and the intensity of the class discussions convinced several of us who attended the Institute that the quest for an authentic Jewish women's identity has just begun.

While acknowledging the gains made over the past ten years (since the founding of Ezrat Nashim in 1971), we moved on to re/discover the depth of our shared experiences, and the pain -- and ambivalence -- of confronting Judaism as feminists, and feminism as Jews. Our conversations were far-ranging, but all seemed to return to the shared sense of longing that was, in turn, urgent and vital for a Judaism -- and a Jewish community -- which reflects and informs our sense of ourselves as heirs to and shapers of a tradition that celebrates both human and divine femaleness, and encourages exploration of the implications of such cosmic re/visioning for our relationships to one another, and our relationship to God.

Several of us have been considering ways in which we might continue and expand the discussions begun in August. We are proposing a 5-day retreat to explore these issues further. We want to gather together a small number of Jewish women who are literate in the areas of feminist spirituality, women's history, and Jewish studies to begin to work through what may challenge modern Jewish thought and practice as significantly as the deliberations at Tavneh challenged, and ultimately transformed, Biblical Judaism. Feminism requires (and inspires) re/vision, and we want to begin to re/vision Judaism using the insights of feminist theology and our experiences as Jewish feminists.

We plan to meet in a secluded retreat, the Grail, in Cornwell-on-Hudson, from Wednesday, May 27 through Sunday, May 31. Accommodations will be simple. The setting should be suitable to light and conversation (there are 30 acres with woods and walks, and there is a lake in forest quarters). They will provide food (vegetarian, fish) and sleeping and meeting quarters for 24 people at a per diem cost of \$20 (\$80 total person for the five days). As we believe that the process is intrinsically bound to context we will strive to become a community. In preparing for and celebrating Shabbat together, we will begin a new kind of tikva, beckoning Hashiah to join our songs.

This is to be a conference of all of us; we do not presume to try to plan it all ourselves without significant input from you. We have enclosed a form on which you can indicate the areas you are most interested in planning. We need women who will arrange: