

Roundtable on Feminist Spirituality

Tamara Cohen, Rabbi Laura Geller, Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, Blu Greenberg, and Rabbi Rachel Sabath

This roundtable began with two observations: first, that the burgeoning interest in spirituality today has been felt strongly in the Jewish world; and second, that this interest in the spiritual is gendered. Editors tell us that women buy more books on spirituality than men; rabbis tell us that women have taken the main role in pushing for spiritual practices such as meditation and yoga in their congregations; bookstores signal the unique path women take with special sections on "women's spirituality." So we asked our roundtable participants to consider how we should understand gender difference in contemporary manifestations of Jewish spirituality. —Jo Ellen Green Kaiser

TIKKUN: I'd like to start by asking what spirituality means to each of you personally, and why it matters to you?

BLU GREENBERG: Growing up female in an Orthodox family and community, prayer for me was not the most significant experience—I understood that because I was a woman I was at one remove from where the liturgical spiritual community was. But in its place, a sense of community became the definition of spirituality for me, and still is.

Most of my spiritual experiences have come through learning more than through prayer, through family and community, through Israel, through nature, and through ritual.

This year, though, I had a new experience in terms of my relationship to prayer—saying kaddish for my father who died eleven months ago. I am one of three sisters, and we had never discussed saying kaddish or going to the morning minyan—that was something I had never done in my life, and it's something I would never have considered doing five or ten years ago, but the model of women from other denominations doing this and some of the articles written by

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women who have experienced it and the halachic materials coming out now about women and kaddish, brought me to this recitation of kaddish. Now I'm sorry I never discussed it with my father, with whom I was very close. Just being in shul every morning and davening Shacharit [the morning prayers] and seeing my life and my father's life and our relationship through the prayers that were so important to him has been an altogether new spiritual experience for me.

RABBI LYNN GOTTLIEB: Spirituality to me is the miracle of having the consciousness to experience the interconnect- edness of and the aliveness of everything. Spirituality is our nature, stemming from our ability to be awake in the world. The spiritual traditions of the world, to me, are pools of wisdom through which we can more deeply connect to life through our community, through the vessels of ceremony and ritual. In particular, they help us to navigate the inevitable experience of death and loss, which I felt profoundly when I was twenty-one and lost my mother.

RABBI LAURA GELLER: I'm struck, listening to Blu and Lynn, by how we can't really separate personal story from spirituality. So I'll also tell a story. When I was a second year rabbinical student I remember our professor saying to us, "Divinity is present in every moment of Jewish life and the way we acknowledge that presence is by saying blessings. There is no important moment in the lifetime of a Jew for which there is no blessing."

I felt incredibly excited by that acknowledgment, and simultaneously I realized that it wasn't true, that there had been important moments in my life where there was no blessing. It brought me back to the moment when I was a thirteen-year-old girl and had just gotten my period. I remembered running to my mother and telling her and my mother said, "When I got my period my mother slapped me." I was confused and asked why and my mother said, "I don't know, go ask her." And I got on my bike and I went and asked her, "Why did you slap mom when she got her period?" and her response was, "She was losing blood, she was a little pale, she needed color in her cheeks."

I didn't think about that story again until I was sitting in that classroom and then I realized that what my professor said *needs* to be true, there should be no important moment in the lifetime of a Jew for which there is no blessing. What if my mother and I had said a prayer as simple as the

"Shehechyanu," thanking God for keeping us in life and bringing us to this moment—what an incredible impact that might have had on my sense of myself as a woman and my connection to the Jewish tradition. We need to create a Judaism that acknowledges that divinity is present in all of our experiences, and explore what kinds of blessings and ceremonies can help us do that.

TAMARA COHEN: I also feel that spirituality is about different ways of interacting with the divine presence in the world. I am interested in using and helping others to use both traditional and non-traditional tools for doing that. It's important to remember that for women in particular, some of the traditional tools for spirituality have not increased interaction with the divine presence but actually blocked it. Thus the need for new tools, new paths.

My personal connection with the divine can come from being alone; it can come from intense personal interaction with a beloved, or in a teaching situation around a text or around a question about our lives; or it can come from being involved in social justice work.

RABBI RACHEL SABATH: Spirituality is indeed a combination of numerous mutually reinforcing elements. Ideally, our prayer, our study, our ethical actions, our work, our relationships serve to center and challenge us. Thus our spiritual lives are always in flux, deepening with every experience. My own spirituality is eclectic; it is decidedly liberal and traditional and pluralistic and post-feminist all at the same time.

One central component of my spiritual life is serious engagement with texts. This is how I not only attempt to meet the minds and souls and struggles of our ancestors but it is also often the source of inspiration and a sense of closeness with the divine.

I also try to learn from other spiritual traditions aspects which call to my attention aspects of Jewish spirituality that I was unaware of, or that make me realize ways in which Judaism has always been in a productive conversation with the world.

TIKKUN: Your comments about what other traditions can offer Judaism lead me to ask what Jewish spirituality, and Jewish women's spirituality in particular, can add to the growing discussion of spirituality in America?

GELLER: Jewish spirituality is grounded deeply in both a historical tradition and in the experience of the lives of contemporary people. Sometimes it feels to me that certain other expressions of popular spirituality flow from modern experiences but are not so grounded. We Jews reckon not only with the Torah of our own lives but also with the Torah of tradition. The tension between those two Torahs is the ground out of which Jewish spirituality grows.

GOTTLIEB: Living in New Mexico has given me a really interesting perspective about that, because we are neighbors and friends with indigenous American and Chicana women who have that same profound historical memory

and cultural grounding. They also have something which perhaps Jewish culture lacks in America, which is a relationship to place (though maybe that's not true of New York City Jews!)

A conversation that you have with anyone from another tradition is going to be enlightening. As Laura says, we can offer our historical memory, and I would add our language, Hebrew, and our imagination and our traditions of creativity and story, and our dancing and our music and our food and our way of studying Torah and our relationship to family and community: all of these distinguish us as a people.

GREENBERG: I agree that historical memory is essential to what we are all about, but I would add two other features. As Lynn suggests, one of these is the centrality of family, the celebration that takes place in the home. I think it is unique to Judaism, and Jewish women have been undervalued in the central part we have played in that arena—just Shabbat alone, which I would say is the organizing principle of Jewish life, is due to a great extent to Jewish women's participation throughout the millennia in making it holy. The celebration of Shabbat allows us to connect, not only horizontally to our family and Jews all over the world, but vertically, through the generations.

The second feature is the way that ritual brings you to spirituality. Certainly, in Judaism, there is an extraordinary emphasis on ritual, and the theology that ritual carries along the spirit is a theology that works. This is not to say that it doesn't also work the other way around, and most likely it's supposed to be that the spirit takes you to the ritual, but I think in fact that, as I speak out of my own experience, it's usually that ritual brings the spirit along. Jewish women have had a great deal to do with the creation of the structure in which ritual is performed.

COHEN: I think we can each take something from each other's traditions. In Judaism ideally there is a kind of balance: Jewish spirituality is not a separate topic in Judaism, as if there is the rest of your life and then there is spirituality. It's a very engaged spirituality and it's very attached to actions. There's room for meditation and silence, but there's also a core sense that spirituality emerges out of engagement in the work of the world as opposed to detachment from it.

In Judaism, holiness is something to be constantly acquired instead of something that we just naturally are. Judaism demands that we make holiness manifest in the world through our everyday lives.

SABATH: Speaking of the wholeness of our lives, we have not yet spoken of the possibility that men and women have—until quite recently—played quite different roles in Jewish life. With the turn toward modernity, Judaism has been able to respond to different historical contexts and yet to retain a very, very powerful identity from the ancient period to the rabbinic and through the different phases of the modern era. Now, it's unclear how that wrestling is

going to turn out—it's clear that today we are in an experimental phase, a phase of transition and transformation.

TIKKUN: I would like to pursue the connection you raise between gender and spirituality. An exciting aspect of contemporary Judaism has been the explosion of new ritual, prayer, and midrash by, and sometimes for, women. At the same time, as Blu reminded us earlier when she discussed saying kaddish for her father, we are still learning how women and men in Judaism can participate in prayer and ritual together. Is the goal of Jewish feminist spirituality to get to a place where men's and women's spirituality is integrated, or will we always need to acknowledge and respond to fundamental differences between the genders?

COHEN: This is a conversation that Ma'yan has every year. We host women's seders, large ones, and every year there's a conversation about whether it is time yet to more actively include men. Is the ultimate goal that we won't have to have feminist seders, because every seder in every house will be feminist? I think that our goal is to integrate men and women but I don't look forward to a time when we will have to stop, also, having women's space. What that space is and how we will use it will change, as the integrated space changes, but I don't see that there won't be any need for also having women's space on our own. There are things that happen differently when women are together as women.

GREENBERG: Orthodoxy has stayed on the course from where it was three to four thousand years ago, at a time when the differences between men and women were global. Men's spirituality was expressed in the house of study and the house of prayer, and women were either not present in those places or at the periphery. And that's undergoing revolutionary change in our time.

On the other hand, the idea of distinctive but equal in ritual and spiritual life is going to be a mainstay of Orthodoxy, and I'm actually quite comfortable with that. I think that men and women are different. Some of it is conditioning, but I believe that there are differences beyond biology not due to conditioning. I think obliterating all differences other than biological might not be so great for society.

GOTTLIEB: In my congregation there are gay families with kids, lesbian families with kids, and I've been experimenting with rituals that include everyone and don't distinguish between genders, ages, or anything else. Instead, we celebrate our multiplicity.

GREENBERG: I don't think that blurring all the lines and making no distinctions is a necessary part of equality and spirituality. The issue is not to say there is no gender but to make everyone feel they are part of the whole. There are differences and they should be celebrated, not obliterated.

COHEN: I don't think we will ever really know whether there are essential differences or not (at least while society remains intact). In my experience working with Jewish women, some are happy doing what's grown out of male experience and don't feel essentially different, and some

women do. I'm less concerned with why than with learning what women feel they want and with helping them find it.

GELLER: I agree with Tamara that perhaps we don't know enough. We don't know what a transformed Judaism would look like that really had a place for women's voices and experiences. I don't think we can even imagine that yet and so we can't formulate what our goal will be. But I think there is some danger in a distinctive but equal position, as we've seen in other social movements.

GREENBERG: You mean the argument that you can't be separate but equal.

GELLER: Right. I do think that one of the dangers in talking about gender and spirituality is a kind of essentialism which argues that men and women are fundamentally different beyond biological differences, and that certain expectations flow from that fundamental difference. My view is that women's spirituality comes out of an experience of marginality which isn't biological but societal. It comes from their recognition that some of the structures of Jewish tradition have ignored much of women's life. And out of that marginality has come an attention to our own experience and the creation of rituals to relate to the holiness that is present in our experience.

In my view, the focus that Judaism has now on spirituality and on theology is really a gift of Jewish feminism. What has happened is that these innovations turn out to not just be about women at all but about modern Jews taking seriously the Torah of their own life and asking where are the moments when divinity is present and where we need to acknowledge that presence. Once the questions of equality have been answered, we are free to ask questions of spirituality. For example, once it became clear that women could be counted in a minyan, it freed us to ask the question: what is the nature of prayer, how can we speak about God, what metaphors, images, languages can help us speak toward the God that we are praying to? And those questions blew open the issues of theology and spirituality.

SABATH: That these differences between men and women can marginalize us, as Laura just said, or prevent us from assuming certain roles, is the problem, not the difference itself. We are all created in the image of God, and each of us, however we define ourselves, represent some aspect of God. Our covenantal responsibility is to live out our unique aspects of Godliness and our unique identities as fully as possible.

COHEN: There is a big difference, though, in acknowledging the holiness that comes out of the fact that every individual is different and in trying to suggest that certain categories of difference are holy. Blu cautioned us about blurring the lines between genders; I think we are learning that the lines are more blurry than most of us are comfortable living with on a daily basis. We have given the categories of "men" and "women" meaning, but those categories may not be the most important or holiest or

meaningful ways of understanding difference for us.

GOTTLIEB: What we are recognizing in Judaism is that we need to find a way for women to manifest our assertiveness, so that women's power can find a role in the public world. We need to become clan mothers, like Deborah on the hill. Whereas men's spirituality, which is also Jewish men's spirituality, has had a lot to do with overcoming ego, becoming nothing.

SABATH: Both men and women need to fulfill our greater potentials, to live out the masculine and the feminine in each of us.

GOTTLIEB: Yes, so given where we are, for everyone to attain their own fullness without imposing on them some constructed notion of gender, it's interesting to look at the thousands of years of men's spirituality and then to get a glimmer of women's spirituality in cultures where women were trained for leadership positions. I don't think we've really begun to learn how to shape a community which is not divided in its tasks along gender roles.

GREENBERG: I want to come back to the issue of conditioning. Over the last twenty-five years, with a measure of ambivalence and confusion, I have come gradually to the conclusion that gender difference is much more a matter of conditioning than I had thought. But I have also come full circle and realized that this very conditioning is what society deemed best to serve human beings, and I see this in terms of halachic issues in Orthodoxy too.

I don't want to throw away what the rabbis created. They were geniuses in human psychology, and they had, over the course of thousands of years of observing society and human nature, learned something about what serves us well. One of the problems is that only they made decisions, no women sat in on the deliberations. Another is that they were operating under a model of hierarchy. And one of the revolutionary gifts of feminism is doing away with hierarchy. Yet, I think you could cut away the hierarchy but keep an understanding of differentiation.

One way Orthodox feminists have addressed this is through women's *tefillah* [prayer groups]. Since women aren't counted in the minyan and don't have public liturgical roles to fulfill, women's *tefillah* groups are being formed in which women lead the entire service, read from the Torah, etc. It's a powerful spiritual experience. Yet I must also confess to a bit of ambivalence about them, because they address the needs of women who want to do more but abandon the majority of women in the mainstream.

Here's an interesting story. Three weeks ago, the rabbi in my shul announced that women would be permitted to carry the Torah through the women's section when it is being returned to the ark. Well, the earth could have opened up and swallowed him. There was so much opposition that three weeks later, he had to change the decision. When I spoke to him, he said the most opposition came

from the women themselves.

I could not understand the men's opposition, because they know how sweet it is to carry the Torah and they all heard the rabbi explain how it was halachically permissible. But the women were conditioned to a different reality ...

GELLER: to be marginal ...

GREENBERG: and they felt uncomfortable.

TIKKUN: What do we make of these situations where it appears that women are choosing not to empower themselves in the spiritual world, where women are finding it comfortable to choose not to have a certain type of authority?

GELLER: I deal with this all the time, the tension between people's desire for comfort and the fact that one of the goals of Jewish tradition is to challenge—that the way things are is not necessarily the way God wants things to be. I feel this in the attempt to create meaningful prayer experience. Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "Prayer is nothing if it is not subversive." But the majority of the people who come to my shul come for comfort.

GREENBERG: I think you have to get them in there with comfort and then challenge them.

GOTTLIEB: The majority of Jews in America are unaffiliated, and I think we have to be aware that there are an equal number of people who don't step into shul because they don't find it comfortable.

COHEN: Also, Blu, what happened in your synagogue didn't surprise me because there was no engagement with the women in a conversation, no attempt at creating a safe space for those women to explore what holding the Torah would mean to them. For them, for their whole lives, carrying a Torah wasn't ok, and now suddenly it is—they might need a safe place to first hold a Torah or to touch it outside the context of regular services.

SABATH: Liberal Jewish women can be particularly helpful in these areas of changing roles because of our experiences of being peripheral. Often encountering other women in important spiritual roles is what enables more traditional women to feel more comfortable not only with proximity to the inner sanctums of sacred Jewish life, but also with the roles they might assume as leaders in our respective communities.

GREENBERG: That's very true, but it's also kind of sad that many young women growing up today don't give credit to feminism for any of the things that they are experiencing, and for the vast arrays of models before them in society.

GELLER: That's true, but then these women often have an experience later in their lives which makes them realize that there is still a lot of work to do.

GOTTLIEB: This weekend, we had a bat mitzvah for a young girl and her aunt. The aunt had become a Sikh because she had been excluded from Judaism. It was so moving to see the niece bringing along the forty-year-old aunt, to be the role model for her. To me this is the essence of Jewish feminism. □

