Rethinking the Book of Esther: Feminist Hermeneutics and Shechinah

Theology in the Poetry of Amy Levy

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Abstract

In this essay, Amy Levy’s biblical hermeneutic on Esther 9:22 is examined. Levy was an acculturated Anglo-Jewish woman triply marginalized by the upper-middle-class community of which her family belonged and that afforded women little intellectual space, the conservative Reform Judaism of the period, and as an obviously Jewish woman socializing in predominantly Christian circles. In the process of reengaging with the biblical texts, Levy, by her own figuring an exile in every sense, develops relational theological perspectives through imagery and themes resonant of Shechinah, the presence of God in exile since the destruction of the Temple. By doing so, Levy’s poetry visualizes the eschatological prospect of return and restoration to come; these proto-feminist hermeneutics also insert the symbols and language of divine presence into the Esther narrative, which conventionally makes no direct reference to the divine. This is important as Jewish feminist theology is generally considered to be a Second-Wave phenomenon. Moreover, the recovery of the sacral elements of the Levy corpus is vital to our awareness of previously marginalized, and even forgotten, Anglo-Jewish women writing theology in the late-Victorian period.

Amy Judith Levy (1861-1889) was an Anglo-Jewish author, poet, and essayist whose reputation has only recently been restored following a century of obscurity. Levy is the author of three poetry anthologies and three novels, not to mention numerous short stories, and several articles for the Jewish Chronicle. Levy was born in Clapham, London into an affluent, upper-middle-class, acculturated family; she was a member of the West London Synagogue of British Jews, the product of a breakaway congregation from the Bevis Marks Synagogue. Levy received a secular education at both Brighton High School Girls’ Public Day School Trust and Cambridge University. Accordingly, Levy maintained longstanding friendships with many non-Jewish intellectuals, authors, and social activists. But in her own mind and in the eyes of others she was marked out as a Jew; many of Levy’s friends and colleagues held anti-Semitic opinions. Moreover, being both childless and unmarried she was marginalized in the Jewish community also, which traditionally has always placed emphasis on marriage, procreation, and the family. True, the tradition was on the wane in the acculturated upper-middle-class milieu of which the Levy family belonged, especially with the development of Reform Judaism. But the community, at least from Levy’s perspective as a career-minded New Woman determined to be financially independent of her parents,
afforded little intellectual and spiritual agency to women. Levy was estranged, however, not only by Christian society and upper-middle-class Anglo-Jewry, but also by the Reform Judaism of the period. Indeed, Anglo-Reformism had not upheld the proto-feminist pledges of classical German Reform Judaism, nor had it initiated meaningful transformation vis-à-vis the “Woman Question.” Thus, Levy, at least in her own mind, was an exile in every sense. The classically Jewish theme of exilic existence has been present since Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden. Ever since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE the feminine Shechinah, God’s presence in the world, has been present with the exiles, providing spiritual nourishment and protective immanence, nurturing the expectation of eventual restoration. It is the eschatological yearning of fulfillment to come and images resonant of the maternal and theological intimacy of Shechinah that enabled Levy to re-connect with her own sense of Jewishness and with the biblical tradition in ways that were not contemporaneously available to her, and other women, within Anglo-Jewry’s religious and communal institutions.

The extant scholarship has interpreted Amy Levy’s biography and career through a multiplicity of perspectives. Scholars have understandably analyzed Levy’s work as minority discourse; homoerotic and Sapphic themes have been read into her poetry, as well as New Woman and social Darwinist perspectives; there has also been focus on Levy’s aestheticism, and even atheism, the influence of Christian Evangelicalism, and of classical Reform Judaism. Indeed, the Levy scholarship has been rich and varied. However, the understandable emphasis on secular, acculturated, and First-Wave feminist themes, along with assumptions regarding Levy’s atheism, has hindered any investigation into the Jewish spiritual and theological aspects of the corpus. Alternatively, this analysis will look at Levy’s hermeneutical poem, “The Lost Friend,” through which she sets up an exegetical dialogue with the book of Esther. In the process, Levy is able to implant proto-feminist and theological imagery into the biblical narrative. This is significant, for one, given that the name of God is not mentioned at all in Esther; second, because Jewish feminist theology is generally considered to be a product of Second-Wave feminism in the United States, and third, for the reason that the recovery of the esoteric and sacral aspects of the Levy corpus are vital to our understanding of Anglo-Jewish women’s religious experience and theological writing in the late-Victorian period that might otherwise have been consigned to history.
In 1889 Amy Levy committed suicide by charcoal asphyxiation and was subsequently buried by a Reform rabbi at the Balls Pond Cemetery, London. She had been depressed for many years; the condition was extenuated by physical ailments including neuralgia, eye infections, abscesses, and deafness. Moreover, from her time at school in Brighton Levy had become increasingly aware of anti-Semitic prejudice. Even though she was assimilated and had been born in England, her surname and appearance, at least by her own self-perception, marked her out as Jewish and different. And in terms of the communal, legal, liturgical, and practical application of her faith, Levy was estranged by the lack of intellectual and spiritual liberty allotted to women in the Anglo-Reform congregation. That women were precluded from the study and authoritative interpretation of the sacred texts must have been a bugbear for Levy, as well as the exemption of women from time-bound positive mitzvot. More so, the exclusion of women from the minyan, the segregation of the sexes in the synagogue, women’s inadmissibility as legal witnesses, the inability to be called up to read the Torah (aliyah), and the prohibition on women holding communal positions of authority over men would have been equally limiting for a woman already feeling peripheral. It was through her poetry that Levy found a spiritual outlet and a means of conscious and unconscious re-engagement with images and language resonant with recurrent and traditional Jewish imagery.

“The Lost Friend” is a hermeneutic/midrash that looks at the book of Esther, or Megilah. It is plain to see why Amy Levy was fascinated by the biblical narrative. It was in the Victorian period that the figure and iconography of Esther began to appear in popular fiction, including in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Mary Barton (1848), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter (1850), George Eliot’s Adam Bede (1859), and Felix Holt (1866); Israel Zangwill’s Children of the Ghetto: A Study of a Peculiar People (1892); and in proto-feminist biblical biography, such as in Grace Aguilar’s Women of Israel (1851), and in Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s The Woman’s Bible (1895, 1898). This is not to mention the many novels that explore and appropriate themes and characters from the book of Esther. Indeed, in George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda (1876) Ezra Mordecai Cohen is seemingly based on the biblical character of his name. We know that Levy read Daniel Deronda because in “The Jew in Fiction,” an article for the Jewish Chronicle, she calls on writers to present a more realistic appraisal of the Jewish community. Moreover, Levy’s novel, Reuben Sachs, is a response to the Zionist
overtones present in *Daniel Deronda* and its romanticized assumption that Anglo-Jews, despite their assimilation, intended to “return” to Palestine.⁶ Levy might have read the Megilah during the feast of Purim. It is a mitzvah that the victory of Haman be publicized; therefore, the reading must be in public and each religionist, both men and women (even given their exclusion from the *minyan* and the prohibition on hearing a woman’s voice in public, *kol isha*), must read the text aloud. Esther, like Levy, is an exile living in the midst of a foreign nation (the Persian Empire); she too experiences the issues of assimilation and potential social absorption; Jewish identity is under threat and survival is not guaranteed. Reflecting her acculturation, the name Esther is taken from a Babylonian goddess, even though she was born Hadassah. Indeed, “this is the virtuous Esther who is called Hadassah” (Megilah 10b),⁷ “Why then was she called Esther? Because she concealed … the facts about herself, as it says, Esther did not make known her people or her kindred” (13a).

The book of Esther has been interpreted as a work of fiction and was probably written during the late Persian to early Hellenistic period. The biblical narrative most likely seeks to encourage exilic Jews that they too, like Esther and Mordecai, can prosper in the Persian realm.⁸ In short, the book of Esther is the story of how a young Jewish woman, Esther, becomes the wife of Ahasuerus, the Persian king, and is able to save the Jewish people from a genocidal massacre at the hands of the evil Haman. Unaware of her Jewish heritage, Ahasuerus selects Esther, an orphan, for his new wife following Vashti’s disobedience in refusing to dance for him. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister, Haman, equally ignorant of Esther’s Jewishness, plots to obtain a decree from his king permitting the wholesale murder of the Jews. Following persuasion from her guardian-cousin, Mordecai, Esther warns Ahasuerus of Haman’s despicable scheme and reveals her own crypto-Jewish ancestry. Ahasuerus retires to the gardens of the palace only to return and find Haman sat suggestively on the bed with Esther. Thus, Haman is executed and Mordecai is elevated to Prime Minister.

It is in Amy Levy’s novel, *Reuben Sachs*, that the author first demonstrates a fascination with the book of Esther. Indeed, the character Esther Kohntal reveals her own “theory” on Esther’s marriage to Ahasuerus when Reuben reveals that the dilettante convert to Judaism, Bertie Lee-Harrison, idealizes the protagonist of the novel, Judith Quixano, as a modern incarnation of “Queen Esther”:

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⁶ Daniel Deronda, copyright 2012, Women in Judaism, Inc.
⁷ Megilah 10b, copyright 2012, Women in Judaism, Inc.
⁸ Megilah 13a, copyright 2012, Women in Judaism, Inc.
“Yes it is Bertie.” Reuben looked straight in Judith eyes. “He says you exactly fulfill his idea of Queen Esther.”

“Ah,” cried Esther Kohnthal, “I have always had a theory about her. When she was kneeling at the feet of that detestable Ahasuerus, she was thinking all the time of some young Jew whom she mashed, and who mashed her, and whom she renounced for the sake of her people”!

A momentary silence fell among them, then Reuben, looking down, said slowly: “Or perhaps she preferred the splendours of the royal position even to the attractions of that youth whom you supper her to – er – have mashed [fancied].”

Esther Kohnthal’s lament reminds that even though Esther is the hero of the biblical narrative, she must marry a non-Jew to ensure the preservation of her people, eschewing her own personal feelings and aspirations. Certainly, it is Esther who takes the risks; it is Esther who informs Ahasuerus of Haman’s evil plot not knowing how he might react; it is Esther who reveals her Jewish ethnicity to an unaware Ahasuerus; and it is Esther who persuades Ahasuerus to allow the innocent Jews to defend themselves (7-8). Yet, it is Mordecai who is rewarded with promotion to Prime Minister (10:3), while alternatively Esther is condemned to a loveless marriage with a non-Jew. Certainly, Esther did not choose of her own freewill to marry Ahasuerus (2:8); she reveals her Jewish ancestry only when completely necessary (7:3-4), and only after considerable pressure from her cousin-guardian (4:4-16). Megilah 13b is clear: “Esther did the commandment of Mordecai.” Because of this, contemporary feminist analyses of Esther have been in the main, though not exclusively, both cautious and negative. Indeed, while Esther is beautiful and valiant, it is Mordecai who saves the life of the king, it is he who learns of Haman’s evil plot, and it is he who instructs Esther to conceal her Jewish ancestry while at the same time loudly proclaiming his own Jewishness. Accordingly, while it is Esther who takes the risks for the sake of the Jewish people, her resistance and actions are effectively passive. The feminist implications of the story are undergirded by patriarchal structures and the fixed biological stereotypes assigned to women in the biblical period. Indeed, Vashti, who refuses to dance, is demonized because she attempts to usurp the patriarchal order, while Esther is “acceptable” because she conforms to Mordecai’s wishes. It was not lost on Levy that Esther’s subjective agency is subsumed by both Mordecai’s advice and her desire to appease the king. In Reuben Sachs it is Judith who like Esther can save the Jewish people, but in the end they are both consigned to loveless marriages with non-Jews. Moreover, while Judith’s intellectual and spiritual potential is suppressed by upper-middle-class economic acquisitiveness, Esther too, who is similarly gifted, is merely Mordecai’s
vessel. Thus, rather than being interested in the feminist implications of Esther, it is the preclusion of any theological elements that drives Levy’s hermeneutical poem, “The Lost Friend.” Levy’s poem will fill in a missing scene that will account for the absence of the divine.

“The Lost Friend,” which appears in Amy Levy’s final poetry collection, A London-Plane Tree, begins with an epigraph:

The people take the thing of course,
They marvel not to see
This strange, unnatural divorce
Betwixt delight and me.

I KNOW the face of sorrow, and I know
Her voice with all its varied cadences;
Which way she turns and treads; how at her ease
Thinks fit her dreary largess to bestow.

Where sorrow long abides, some be that grow
To hold her dear, but I am not of these;
Joy is my friend, not sorrow; by strange seas,
In some far land we wandered, long ago.

O faith, long tried, that knows no faltering!
O vanished treasure of her hands and face!
Beloved – to whose memory I cling,
Unmoved within my heart she holds her place.

And never shall I hail that other “friend,”
Who yet shall dog my footsteps to the end.12

The poem is replete with biblical images and symbols, through words such as “joy,” “faith,” “sorrow,” “treasure,” and “heart.” The passage: “In some far land we wandered, long ago,” places the poem within an exilic tradition, while the line, “And never shall I hail that other ‘friend,’” hints towards rejection of the Christian theological tradition that will “dog my footsteps to the end.” Had the word “friend” been capitalized the reader might have inferred reference to Kadosh Barukh Hu, the Holy One, blessed be He, similar to that which also appears in Reuben Sachs. Indeed, Esther Kohnthal refuses to attend synagogue and it reads (note the capitalization of “Friend”) that “Esther was not in synagogue. She had had a sharp wrangle with her mother the night before, which had ended in her staying in bed with Good-bye, Sweetheart! for company. She, poor soul, was of those who deny utterly the existence of
the Friend of whom she stood so sorely in need.”¹³ Esther’s spiritual alienation is reflected in Johann Goethe’s epigraph that in its original German Levy includes in Reuben Sachs, here translated: “Who ne’er his bread in sorrow ate, / Who ne’er the mournful midnight hours / Weeping on his bed has sate, / He knows you not, ye Heavenly Powers.”¹⁴ Even so, the novel imitates that the narrator maintains a modicum of faith in the divine, the “Friend.”

In the first verse of “The Lost Friend” Amy Levy connects exilic themes with feminine presence, known retrospectively as Shechinah. Even in the diaspora Jewish men and women can enjoy the protection of the “wings of the Shechinah” (Shabbath 31a), no matter where they might be geographically. In the poem, it is an image resonant of Shechinah that is the “face of sorrow,” saddened by the physical and spiritual exile of her children; with “Her voice” she “turns and treads … at her ease”; she can bestow her gifts (“her dreary largess”) and her generosity, she is a physical manifestation; her “face,” “voice,” and “hands” are perceivable. In contrast to the radical separation of the individual and the unknowable, the feminine presence of the divine, Shechinah, is non-hierarchical and experienced by humans; she is immanent. Shechinah is the way that the aloof, indefinable, and incomprehensible deity can relate to the Jewish people in exile. In fact, Shechinah is one in the same with “glory” (kavod) and with the Holy Spirit. This is the aspect of God that human can experience, as they can never know divine reality. Thus, Shechinah is a synonym for God rather than a challenge to the all powerful Kadosh Barukh Hu.¹⁵ Shechinah is both accessible and feminine; she is, as Melissa Raphael points out, not a separate goddess but symbolic of the maternal intimacy of the divine presence and an aspect of God that can be reclaimed from patriarchy.¹⁶ Indeed, Shechinah has been appropriated by contemporary feminist theologians as an alternative to the hierarchical and aloof nature of Kadosh Barukh Hu, though primarily interest has been in the Kabbalistic tradition rather than the rabbinic. Theologians have particularly associated with Shechinah’s exile. In the classical Kabbalah, Shechinah occupies the bottom rung (Malkuth) of the Sephirot (emanations); she is the female element of the divine, while in the Lurianic tradition Shechinah is the last of the modified partzufim (countenances), Nukvah, who continues to be in exile following Adam’s sin and must re-unite with Little Face, named Zeir Anpin. In each tradition, the feminine Shechinah is alienated from the masculine; in the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria the reunion of the masculine and the feminine will bring about tikkun: repair and restoration.¹⁷ Shechinah is the connector
between the earthly and the divine realms; she is the perceivable manifestation of God in this world. It is the relational and non-hierarchical aspects of the Shechinah, her exile and even her subordination that has been taken on by Jewish feminist theologians who see their own experience and that of Jewish women in general reflected in her. This is not to say that Levy’s imaging of exilic and feminine symbols and the allusions to Shechinah somehow makes her a precursor, or progenitor, to contemporary feminist theologians; rather, it is more that “The Lost Friend” is an early proto-feminist effort by a Jewish woman both alienated by and unfamiliar with the specifics of classical Jewish theology to distinguish between the feminine presence we know and experience and the unknowable and un-relatable Kadosh Barukh Hu. This places Levy within a historical community of Jewish women both estranged by, and in the main untrained in, traditional theology, though intent on forging connections with feminine and relatable images of deity beyond the masculinist imagery and symbolology of the divine present in the biblical and rabbincic texts.

In the second verse it is “sorrow” that is countered with imagery resonant of Shechinah, who mourns her exile; she is “Joy”; “In some far land” the speaker recalls, “we wandered, long ago.” It is too difficult for the speaker to accept their spiritual exile; the incessant yearning for homeland is too much. Thus, “Joy is my friend, not sorrow.” “Joy” is the prospect of return, as in Isaiah 35:10: “the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” Indeed, with the restoration of Zion “everlasting joy shall be unto them” (61:7). The speaker can only imagine what this “far land we wandered” might look like given that it is “long ago.” The exilic theme of wandering is integral to Jewish self-understanding and diasporic experience and can be traced back to Genesis: Adam and Eve become exiles when they are expelled from the Garden of Eden; when Cain murders his brother, as punishment, he becomes the first archetypal wanderer; the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are nomads, the promise of a homeland is not fulfilled in their lifetime; the fledgling nation of Israel wanders the wilderness in between their escape from Egypt and the quest for the Promised Land. In fact, wandering is a theological image of God’s judgment. The speaker’s attachment to their exile and to the prospect of endless wandering, as well as to the comforting visions of feminine presence interpretable as Shechinah, are reassuring connectors to the ancestral tradition and to the inclusiveness of
collective memory and shared experience; it is “we” who “wandered” “by strange seas” in a distant land, “long ago.”

In the third verse, the speaker acknowledges that the “Joy” of return and the prospect of spiritual reengagement with Jerusalem are impossible; rather, it is the eschatological possibility of restoration that is nourishing. The narrator’s faith “knows no faltering”? She longs, incessantly, for the “vanished treasure of her [Shechinah’s] hands and face”? The experience of exile and the feminine imagery are one in the same, conjuring images of the Temple’s destruction and the release of the Shechinah; she too is in exile with the diasporic communities. The speaker clings to the memory of her “Beloved.” This feminine presence will hold “her place” – “Unmoved within my heart” – the engine of desire and yearning. This is in contrast to the Christian theological tradition, the “other ‘friend’” referred to in the closing lines, and the threat of assimilation, even conversion that will be ever present in Amy Levy’s personal exile. Indeed, the speaker of the poem laments that the exile is permanent; the experience of “Joy” – the concept of restoration that will bring “everlasting joy” to the exiles (Isaiah 35:10) – will never be reality. This is the sorrowful countenance of Levy’s feminine presence, “the treasure of her hands and face,” that recalls Shechinah and her presence among the exiles. This is the spiritual connection with the divine that the speaker craves within her “heart,” it is inclusive and inspiring; “faith, long tried” has been rewarded.

In “The Lost Friend,” Amy Levy focuses on Esther 9:22: “As the days wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day; that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor”; it could be seen in the push and pull between the polarizing concepts of “sorrow” and “joy” in the poem, figured in the biblical text as the moment when the terrible situation is “turned upside down,” or “ve-nahafokh hu” (9:1). Equally, 9:22 is significant because it can be interpreted as revealing the indirect presence of God in the words: “the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day.” As seen earlier, “The Lost Friend” is a see-saw between the biblical imagery of “sorrow,” which is the experience of exile, and “Joy” which is the product of return and restoration to Zion, the “land we wandered,” and the “vanished treasure of her hands and face,” the Shechinah. It is in Esther that the reader has a window into life in exile: the Jewish minority group has few rights; they are continually under threat from the
imposition of non-Jewish and pagan religious practices; they are vulnerable to the dominant political structure, and they are continually yearning for return to the homeland. Certainly, Esther speaks to Levy’s own sense of marginality. But it is the nonappearance of God in the biblical text that is the cornerstone of the hermeneutic. The absence of the divine in Esther has been explained in a number of ways. According to Megilah 7b religionists should be suitably intoxicated so as not to be able to tell the difference between Mordecai and Haman. For those Jews afraid of violating the prohibition on mentioning the name of God, the reading of Esther while under the influence of alcohol is a dangerous process; hence, the references to the divine were removed, or so the explanation goes. In fact, there are possible hints towards God’s presence in the mysterious reference to deliverance arriving from another place (4:14). But at least directly, God is absent from the biblical narrative. In “The Lost Friend” Levy is figuring concepts of exile, femininity, and divine presence that retrospectively can be associated with Shechinah. She is “the face of sorrow,” in the exile “Where sorrow long abides” that can become “Joy” in the “far land”; the “beloved – to whose memory I cling, / Unmoved within my heart she holds her place”; she can fill the theological void of the biblical text.

It was in the final few weeks of her life that Amy Levy corrected the proofs for the poetry collection, *A London Plane-Tree*. The final entry into her diary, written on September 8, merely states: “alone at home all day.” In the months prior to her suicide Levy’s creativity seems to have been at its greatest. Indeed, in 1888 *Reuben Sachs* was published, along with *Romance of a Shop* and in 1889 “Cohen of Trinity,” “Readers at the British Museum,” *Miss Meredith*, and a number of short-stories, essays, and poems. But despite the productive output, Levy’s friend, Bella Duffy, observed a marked deterioration in her mental and physical state: “I had miserable scraps of notes from her all the time I was at Brighton, telling me she was ill, but just at the last, speaking of herself as very ill. Her last note … told me she had been for three days at the seaside with Olive Schreiner, but feeling no better, she had returned [to] London and “crept back into her hole.” In a letter, Olive Schreiner also mentions Levy’s unstable state of mind and that she was unable to help her:

> I should have written yesterday but I had a blow that somewhat unfitted me. My dear friend Amy Levy had died the night before. She killed herself by shutting herself up in a room with charcoal. We had been away together for three days last week. But it did not seem to help her; her agony had gone past human help. The last thing I sent was the “Have Faith”
page of *Towards Democracy*. She wrote me back a little note, “Thank you, it is very beautiful, but philosophy can’t help me. I am too much shut in with the personal.”

The exact reasons for Levy’s suicide, however, can never be known given that the majority of her personal papers were destroyed by the family in the weeks following her death. Evidently, suicide was a factor in Levy’s thinking when she completed her final poetry anthology, *A London Plane-Tree*, as is apparent in “The Promise of Sleep,” one of several poems in the Levy corpus that approaches issues of death and suicide:

All day I could not work for woe,
I could not work nor rest;
The trouble drive me to and fro,
Like a leaf on the storm’s breast.

Night came and saw my sorrow cease;
Sleep in the chamber stole;
Peace crept about my limbs, and peace
Fell on my stormy soul.

And now I think of only this,—
How I again may woo
The gentle sleep – who promises
That death is gentle too.

Poems such as this one, in retrospect, read as prophetic, but they reveal only an obsession with suicide, pessimism, and depression, not the root causes. In the final weeks of her life Levy became increasingly interested in notions of the soul; she discussed the matter with a former member of the Society for Psychical research. It is in “The Lost Friend” that Levy reaches out to both the ancestral faith and to the thematic of divine intimacy. It is possible to speculate that there is a correlation between the poem and Levy’s suicide by way of a last effort to re-engage with the divine in the only way she knew how, through poetry.

Amy Levy was a marginalized figure in both the Jewish community and in Christian society. This estrangement was extenuated by her status as a single, childless unattached woman, and by the limited intellectual space available to women in the upper-middle-class, acculturated milieu. In secular intellectual and bohemian circles, Levy was acutely aware of her Jewish identity, appearance, and faith, which in her own mind, and in the eyes of others, marked her out as different. It was in her poetry that Levy concretized and responded to her feelings of alienation. In “The Lost Friend,” Levy is able to reengage with her Jewish identity.
through a limited understanding of the classical exilic and theological traditions, leading to an encounter with feminine divine presence, figured retrospectively as Shechinah. In the process of connection, Levy amplifies the theological possibilities of Esther 9:22. By doing so, Levy unconsciously joined a growing list of contemporary feminist theologians who have turned to the maternal and feminine aspects of the divine, known popularly as the Shechinah.

ENDNOTES


3 Hunt Beckman, Amy Levy, 92.

4 Traditionally, three positive mitzot are assigned to women: neroth: the lighting of candles; challah: separating a portion of dough; and niddah: ritual immersion following menstruation.


Rethinking the Book of Esther: Feminist Hermeneutics and Shechinah Theology in the Poetry of Amy Levy

canon was initially a source of division among the ancient rabbis; a number expressed disdain for the feast of Purim given that there was no legal sanction for the festival. Moses Maimonides, however, among others, recognized that the boisterous celebrations were popular among exilic Jews. His support guaranteed the story’s inclusion in the canon. Consequently, by using Exodus 17:14 the rabbis were able to connect Haman’s ancestry to the Amalekites, a classical enemy of the Jewish people to justify the book’s inclusion.

9 Levy, Reuben Sachs, 114.
10 See my From Anglo-First-Wave, 188-89.
11 See Celina Spiegel, “The World Remade: The Book of Esther,” in Out of the Garden, Women Writers on the Bible, eds. Christina Buchmann and Celina Spiegel (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 192, 196. According to Aviva Cantor Esther is an “altruistic-assertive enabler.” Indeed, Esther’s becoming queen and at the same time surviving as a crypto-Jew is all because Mordecai thought it best (which reflects her altruism), while asking the king to spare her people is “assertive.” By contrast, Vashti, who refuses to dance for the king and is stripped of her crown, is counter to the altruistic-assertive enabler. The punishment of Vashti implies, according to Cantor, that Jewish women must “be enablers … or else” (“The Lilith Question,” in On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader, ed. Susannah Heschel (1983; rpt. New York: Schocken Books 1995), 47).
12 Levy, A London Plane-Tree, 71. According to Linda Hunt Beckman, “The Lost Friend” is neither difficult to interpret nor is it multi-tenored, although it is far more anguished than the majority of Levy’s poems and is explicitly figurative (metaphorical). Hunt Beckman argues that the lover whose loss the narrator laments is the vehicle and joyful element of her personality, the tenor of this metaphor. Thus, Levy personifies both joy and sorrow, insisting that “Joy is my friend, not sorrow,” and that “In some far land we wandered long ago.” For Hunt Beckman, the poem then goes on to exude “joy” in an outburst of passion: “O vanished treasure of her hands and face!” In sum, Hunt Beckman argues that Levy, particularly in “The Lost Friend,” writes poetry in which the author/speaker is giving voice to her own inner sense of alienation (Amy Levy, 195-96; see also Hunt Beckman’s “Amy Levy: Urban Poetry, Poetic Innovation and the Fin-de-Siècle Woman Poet,” in The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio UP, 2005), 224).
13 Levy, Reuben Sachs, 93.
14 Levy, Reuben Sachs, 195.
15 In the Talmudic codices, Shechinah is frequently interpretable as an independent presence. Indeed, in Sukkah 5a: “the Almighty spread some of the radiance of his Shechinah and his cloud upon him,” while in Sotah 5a: “the Holy One, blessed be He, ignored all the mountains and heights and caused His Shechinah to abide upon Mount Sinai.” These examples suggest that Shechinah is an entity separable from the Ultimate. In the Midrashic literature Shechinah becomes an autonomous feminine entity capable of challenging Kadosh Barukh Hu, as Rabbi Aha implies: “The Holy Spirit [Shechinah] comes to the defence … saying first to Israel: ‘Be not a witness against thy neighbor without a cause,’ and thereafter saying to God: ‘Say not: I will do to him as he hath done to me.’” In another source, Rabbi Aha refers to a specifically feminine presence: “When the Shekhina left the Sanctuary, she returned to caress and kiss the walls and columns.” Similarly, the literature tells of two rebellious contemporaries of Moses named Nadab and Abihu who “feasted their eyes on the Shekhina, but had no enjoyment from her; Moses, on the other hand, did not feast his eyes on her, but enjoyed her”; see Raphael Patai, The Hebrew Goddess (1967; rpt. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 96, 99, 103-108.
17 Lynn Gottlieb argues that Shechinah imagery can become a wellspring of feminine and theological inspiration: “Waxing and waning moon, evening and morning star, mirror, well of waters, primordial sea, rose amid the thorns, lily of the valley, Mother Wisdom, the oral tradition of the Torah, Womb of Emanations, gateway and door, house and sacred shrine, doe, dove, mother eagle, serpent, the soul of women ancestors, the community of Israel, the Sabbath Queen and Bride, the Tree of Life, the menorah, and the earth itself belong to the poetic constellation of the Shechinah” (She Who Dwells Within: A Feminist Vision of a New Judaism (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 22).
18 In her feminist theology of the Holocaust, Raphael images the Shechinah’s presence with the victims: “In Auschwitz, in her grief, Shechinah would have drawn her scorched, blackened wings around her and seemed, therefore, to disappear. But she was still there, because there is no place where she is not” (The Female Face, 154).
Christine Pullen, “Amy Levy; Her Life, Her Poetry and the Era of the New Woman” (Ph.D. diss., Kingston University, 2000), 158, 182.


23 Bella Duffy, quoted by Hunt Beckman, Amy Levy, 200.

24 Olive Schreiner, quoted by Hunt Beckman, Amy Levy, 201. According to Hunt Beckman, Levy’s unstable emotional life might have been a causal factor; thus, “Levy found it much easier to achieve literary success than to establish an enduring attachment that might have stabilized her emotional life. Her shyness and hearing loss are probably factors, but these did not keep her from establishing deep and durable friendships” (Amy Levy, 202-03). Similarly, Gail Cunningham suggests that Levy’s “outsider” status, as well as paranoia regarding her physical appearance, might have been the cause: “Set apart from societal norms by race, education, gender, political conviction, and perhaps sexuality, the conditions of both body and mind encouraged her self-construction as the paradigmatic outsider. Acutely sensitive to physical appearance, she clearly felt that her classically Jewish features rendered her unattractive in the largely gentle, intellectual circles to which her education introduced her” (“Between Two Stools: Exclusion and Unfitness in Amy Levy’s Short Stories,” in Amy Levy: Critical Essays, eds. Naomi Hetherington and Nadia Valman (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 72-73).


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