Part VII Leadership and Social Justice

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Post-Triumphalism and the New Haskalah

ROSIE ROSENZWEIG

SOME YEARS AGO I began a workshop with a soulful recording of a wordless Hasidic tune, a niggun, sung by a male cantor. Upon hearing this, a female colleague admonished me: “That should be sung by a woman!” Afraid to be politically incorrect, I found a spirited female cantor to record it. She imbued the melody with a forceful joyousness; it didn’t work. And all the other female cantors that I knew, by happenstance, couldn’t intone that tearful catch in the throat so important to the teaching. Perhaps my friends channeled Miriam, happy and dancing, at the Red Sea, and not the suffering of our biblical foremothers.

My colleague’s ardently impassioned feminism led me to make a choice that was wrong both musically and ritually due to my fear of being labeled a weak feminist. Unfortunately, this incident demonstrates a disturbingly prevalent phenomenon: when a war has won some major battles, the combatants don’t move on, and minor skirmishes get mistaken for weapons of mass chauvinism.

Rigidity has, in some quarters, enslaved a liberating movement with fixated paradigms. Drunk with the exhilaration of achievement,
it seems that some Jewish feminists erected a new *mechitzah* and called it “Jewish feminism.”

We have to guard against losing the flexibility and feminist receptivity that has inspired Judaism with new rabbinical models, new rituals that speak to women with fresh insights about our foremothers, our liturgy, and our history. We must save ourselves for newer, less petty, and more expansive efforts. What will be those efforts?

**Jewish and Secular Feminism: Four Waves**

Jewish women have been in the foreground of each wave of the feminist movement since its inception. Ernestine Rose, a Polish Hasidic rabbi’s daughter, was a prominent first-wave Jewish feminist, with her stirring speech at the Seneca Falls convention for women’s rights. Jewish women also led the second-wave movement with its economic, sociological, and legal stance against other people’s expectations. To name only a few, Betty Friedan’s exposure of the *Feminine Mystique*; Tillie Olsen’s classical description of limited drudgery of women in “I Stand Here Ironing”; the Jewish founding editors of *Ms.* magazine; and the political clout of Bella Abzug.

In second-wave Jewish feminism, we saw the launch of a Jewish feminist magazine called *Lilith*; the establishment of New York’s Drisha Institute, where women can study advanced classical texts; Blu Greenberg’s founding of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA); and, according to Jonathan Sarna, “By the year 2000 ... [half] or more of both [Reform and Reconstructionist] ... ordination classes every year consisted of women.”¹

The secular third wave, born into awareness by Anita Hill’s sexual harassment case in the United States in the 1990s, is the youthful advocacy of openness in sex; acceptance of alternative lifestyles; opposition to race discrimination; political activism; reproductive rights; a focus away from upper-class white women; cyberspace usage; emphasis on each woman’s unique personal experience; and a celebration and ownership of the female body.²

Third-wave Jewish feminists include Helene Aylone, whose exhibit “The Liberation of God” highlighted, in pink, parts of the Torah that were patriarchal, misogynistic, violent, and cruel; Eve Ensler and her play *The Vagina Monologues*; and Judy Chicago and her art installation that used menstrual blood. Since third-wave feminism includes the acceptance of alternative lifestyles, the entry of gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual people into the ranks of rabbinical leadership in Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative movements exemplifies it as well.

Author Pythia Peay describes a fourth wave of mainstream feminism in an article in the *Utne Reader*:
At its heart lies a new kind of political activism that’s guided and sustained by spirituality. Some are calling it the long-awaited “fourth wave” of feminism—a fusion of spirituality and social justice reminiscent of the American civil rights movement and Gandhi’s call for nonviolent change.3

**The New Haskalah**

The factors of tikkun olam (repair of the world), a spirituality based on social action, have always been at the core of Jewish feminism. Jewish women’s spiritual paths may be beyond definitions because they embrace the source that commands all religious forces. Jewish feminists, either in the secular or spiritual realm, have always thought “out of the box.” The commitments of fourth-wave feminism may most accurately define the latest ventures for Jewish feminists, who are crossing denominational borders to bond with Jewish women of other movements, and also beginning to include women from other religious traditions. By this expansion, we can understand how universal the enlivening urge is, and how the divine experience for all is the same ineffable merging. This expansion has motivated a new religious broadening championed by Jewish feminists who explore how other religions can inform our own Jewish experience of divinity. When we reenter the religion of our practice, we take on paradigms with which we are comfortable: Shekhinah for Jewish women; Gaia for Hindu women; Avalokitesvara, bodhisattva of compassion, for Buddhists. The latest pathfinders use these sister experiences not to fully emulate non-Jewish experiences, but to inform their own Jewish feminist path.

There are many women operating in this dimension who are part of an emerging consciousness, which I call the New Haskalah. The eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, which seeded the first haskalah (a word whose root is saychel, meaning “common sense, reason, or intelligence”), was characterized by “the rise of the bourgeoisie and the influence of modern science; it promoted the values of intellectual and material progress, toleration, and critical reason as opposed to authority and tradition in matters of politics and religion.”4

Moses Mendelssohn, a German Jew known as “the Jewish Socrates,” epitomized the “Jewish community’s knocking at the gate of the modern world.”5 With more exposure to the secular scientific and humanistic education of the 1800s,6 the haskalah was set against blind faith, rigid parochial superstitions, and the mysteries of the kabbalah. This movement advocated more integrative education in secular studies and the rejection of Yiddish. Expanding Jewish presence in realms formerly restricted to Jews, it influenced nineteenth-century Zionism, as well as some twentieth-century secular movements. Now, with the twenty-first century of spiritual expansion, we can define a New Haskalah, a product of the interdependent global village that we inhabit. This historical junction is
marked by the exponential growth of ideas, spreading democratization, and a global village that influences the political, religious, and spiritual lives of women. Global feminism is being transformed by sister liberation movements throughout the planet; Jewish feminism is likewise expanding to see the commonalities in other religions. The contemporary word *enlightenment* is assuming a meaning

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derived from Eastern spirituality and is usually associated with Buddhism. With over 500 million followers, Buddhism has found its way into countless avenues of life. According to Mircea Eliade’s *Encyclopedia of Religion*, in the Asian context, *enlightenment* “typically refers to that existentially transformative experience in which one reaches complete and thorough understanding of the nature of reality.”

Going beyond the material objects of mind and body, the path of enlightenment fosters spiritual emptiness that opens a compassionate doorway for all living beings.

In Judaism, the enlightenment of Eastern spirituality can be likened to a Jewish state called *devekut*, a *unio mystico* with the Divine, a state that has influenced the Jewish Renewal movement and Jewish feminism in particular. Buddhism has already affected Judaism in the later twentieth century; many, if not a majority, of the new Buddhist teachers in the West are Jewish. It is not uncommon to hear the term *JuBu* used to describe a Jewish Buddhist, and many of these JuBUs are women. So boundaries are being pushed into the area of blended religious approaches, influenced by a break from triumphalism and a corresponding acceptance of multiple truths. This is a characteristic of the consciousness that permeates the New *Haskalah*: a phenomenon wherein all theological approaches are considered to be of equal merit. No theological viewpoint is triumphant over any other. Jewish Renewal rabbi Rolando Matalon of the B’nai Jeshrun Synagogue in New York describes post-triumphalism as follows: “We all have pieces of the complicated truth. Who can deny someone else’s connection to God? God is not a follower of any of the religions created by his followers.”

Consequently, the New *Haskalah*, as a post-triumphal expansion of the original *haskalah*, seeks to embrace more than a narrow Judaism of fixed rules, superstitions, and beliefs based on male authoritarianism. In this contemporary Jewish Zeitgeist, the expansion is not toward a secular knowledge and away from Jewish tradition, but is a renewal of the old tradition enlightened by other viewpoints. The New *Haskalah* has enormous implications for

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Jewish feminists, in that the philosophy courts, honors, and uses the female point of view.
The New *Haskalah*’s embrace of non-Jewish spiritual experiences where the divine experience is the common factor among seekers parallels the paradigmatic expansion of the first *haskalah*, with Jewish ideas being assimilated into the secular world. The differences occur when different faiths use familiar paradigms to describe divine experiences. The New *Haskalah*’s essential prerequisite is a flexible mindset. Creative Jewish feminists understand that these other paradigms are metaphors approximating *devekut*, the inward, basically individual experience involving the body and soul.

As a Jewish mother with a Buddhist son, my personal experience is not so unique among Jewish mothers with children who haven’t found what they need in the Jewish religion. Receiving a consciousness-changing transmission from a Tibetan Rinpoche motivated me to enroll in the Jewish meditation teacher’s ordination program in Berkeley. I believe that we are at the new dawning of “the Age of Aquarius,” in which the New *Haskalah*, with Jewish feminism at its heart, will help to find the commonality in all religions. The Enlightenment, by the very word embedded in its center, means to lighten yourself internally, by the flexible freedom of your heart and mind, by education, and by allowing these to spiritually expand in a Jewish context. The New *Haskalah*, as I am defining it, has Jewish feminism as an integral part of world religions.

Additionally, this new consciousness of our twenty-first-century global village seeks a sisterhood in all things spiritual. It is a guard against rigid paradigms; it is essential in this new post-triumphal world of spirituality to help us learn from one another about enlivening the spirit. Sandra Lubarsky, of the Department of Religious Studies at Northern Arizona University, has invented the term “veridical pluralism, the position that there is a multiplicity of traditions that ‘speak truth,’ that are legitimate forms of truth-bearing ways.” When delving into other traditions to cross-pollinate with our own flowerings, grounded feminists assert that no one is leaving Judaism; we are only informing our own tradition of *devekut*. Jewish feminists can create and adapt ritual, learning, and Torah to embody mysticism with enhancement, self-improvement, movement, and feminine meaning.

Author Carol Lee Flinders, who has included in her writings women mystics such as Saint Teresa of Avila, and Jewish women such as Etty Hillesum, declares that: “Feminism catches fire when it draws on its inherent spirituality.” At a Women and Power Conference with a meeting place called the “Red Tent,” she added: “When you get Jewish, Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu, and Sufi women all practicing their faith in the same room, another religion emerges, which is feminine spirituality.”

With this idea in mind, we can progress toward a true “Age of Aquarius,” when these past struggles will all be viewed as antiquated. We can strive toward an era when even the word *feminism* will become obsolete. Then, maybe, the paradigm that Judaism has named the Messiah will actually arrive.


5. Ibid., 109.


11. Peay, “Feminism’s Fourth Wave.”