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Hearing Hannah's Voice

The Jewish Feminist Challenge and Ritual Innovation



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An opportunity for Muslim, Jewish, and Christian feminists to come together in dialogue is a blessing, for it is a truism that when we hear the voice of an “other,” we learn more about ourselves; when we learn about an “other’s” journey, much about our own journeys becomes clearer to us.

As a Jewish feminist, I take one particular kind of feminist journey. I am a Jew who honors but does not consider herself bound by traditional *halakha* (Jewish law). Other Jewish feminists have elected to carve out a place for feminism in the ritual realm while remaining within the boundaries of traditional *halakha*.¹ Our approaches are quite different, but we share a commitment to giving voice to Jewish women’s spiritual concerns, and shaping a Judaism for the future that incorporates women’s voices and life experience as part of legitimate Jewish Tradition (with a capital “T”).

My comments will focus on ritual innovation characteristic of the way a significant number of contemporary American Jewish women have sought to add feminist content and values to the Jewish ritual heritage, a tradition conceived of and created exclusively by men.

For millennia, Israelite and Jewish women have cultivated a religious “folk” tradition replete with chants, songs, special recitations, and ritual objects such as amulets and prayer bowls. While kneading bread, or chopping vegetables, while giving birth and nursing their young, Jewish women called out to God, voices raised in supplication, dialogue, and communion.² Through the centuries, however, women’s heartfelt voices raised in song and celebration have generally been ignored by the male shapers of Jewish tradition, who have been indifferent (and sometimes hostile) to acknowledging women’s concerns and experiences as pertinent to communal prayer and Jewish ritual.

In the days of the first and early second Temple in Jerusalem, men and women celebrated and worshipped together. By the Talmudic era (fourth–sixth centuries C.E.), segregation was the norm.

This deepening gender segregation seems to be a logical outgrowth of the Talmudic-era rabbis’ preoccupation with discerning divine purpose and justification for the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. and the subsequent exile of the Jewish people from the land of Israel. In attempting to explain the calamity that befell Jewish Jerusalem, the exiled rabbis increasingly focused on the traditional notion that each human being holds within her- or himself two warring proclivities, the *yetzer tov*, the impulse toward good, and the *yetzer ra*, the inclination toward evil, and that it is the latter that is the source of the people’s collective calamity.

In interpreting the prophet Zechariah’s description of the apocalyptic “Day of the Lord”³ (in which good would ultimately triumph over evil), one Talmudic rabbi commented, about a time of celebration, that “[I]f in the future to come, when they will be engaged in mourning and the Evil Inclination has no power over them, the Torah says men apart and women apart, now that they are engaged in rejoicing and the Evil Inclination has power over them, all the more so” (should men and women be separated).⁴

In this regard, Rabbi Susan Grossman points out that “the concern with the Evil Inclination seems overriding. It sets a cultural context in which the [Talmudic-era] rabbis would have assumed that the separation of sexes, being a desirable method for overcoming the Evil Inclination, would have existed in the Temple.”⁵

Thus, in response to their conclusion that the *yetzer ra* had triumphed over good, and brought about the fall of Jewish Jerusalem and the beginning of a collective exile, the Talmudic rabbis sought to legislate Jewish life more strictly so that the people’s evil proclivities would more effectively be held in check. Within this increasingly rigid legislation, the

view that men and women had historically been separated in the Temple “served to underlie all later decisions to segregate men and women, especially during prayer and other ritual events.”⁶

As gender separation became increasingly enforced in Talmudic times, women's voices were dimmed, as they were relegated to more and more remote areas of the synagogue, distant from the center of religious activity. It became increasingly easy for the male shapers of Jewish liturgy to disregard women's voices altogether.

It is for this reason that I focus on a moment in the biblical narrative, the story of Hannah, who lived in the first Temple era (circa 1,000 B.C.E.), in which a woman's voice was still heard and still heeded. Hannah is the first woman mentioned in Hebrew scripture as raising her voice in prayer, the first woman to embody a new mode of communication between humans and God.

Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the Temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. She made this vow, “O Lord of hosts, if only You will look on the misery of Your servant, and remember me and not forget Your servant, but will give to Your servant a male child, then I will set him before You. . . . As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.” But Hannah answered, “No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation at this time.”⁷

According to Jewish tradition, the first instance of what we now think of as “personal prayer” occurred when the childless Hannah spoke in a direct and intimate way to God, asking the source of all life for the gift of motherhood. So unusual was this form of religious devotion that Eli, the high priest, could not comprehend it. Never before had he seen anyone speak so personally with God, and he concluded that Hannah's strange behavior was due to intoxication.

Hannah's response to Eli's accusation is revealing. She tells him that she is speaking to God out of her own painful experience: “I am a woman deeply troubled; . . . I have been pouring out my soul before the

Lord. . . . I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation at this time."

As Carol Gilligan pointed out in her landmark work, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*,⁸ men and women communicate differently, motivated by different social contexts. For females, Gilligan suggests, fluid, unrestricted relationships with others based on common experience and emotional connection is key, while for males a consensus-formed structure and framework (that is, a set of "rules") is central to relationships.

From this perspective, Hannah and Eli act in ways consistent with what Gilligan has identified as characteristic gender-related behavior: Hannah speaks as a woman to God out of her own very personal anguish. She prays in an unstructured way, sharing her emotional state of mind with God. Eli reacts as a man who naturally gravitates toward structure, that is, toward the ritual "rules" with which he is familiar and comfortable. This moment of conflict between Eli, a representative of the cultic "tradition," and Hannah, with her own idiosyncratic spiritual style, reflects a centuries-old reality: men and women experience and communicate with the Divine in very different ways. Here we encounter the crux of the feminist challenge to religious tradition.

A place must be carved out within tradition to acknowledge and accommodate a uniquely female experience of the Divine. Different ritual forms and formats must be created and woven into Jewish tradition so that voice may be given to varying modes of spiritual expression. Religious tradition must be open to acknowledging and affirming the very different ways in which men and women approach spirituality, theology, and prayer. New images for the Divine must be welcomed into the tradition, experimentation with new liturgical forms must be encouraged, and tradition must expand its liturgical repertoire to include and embrace ritual expression that reflects the uniqueness of women's and men's need to speak authentically with God.

Much of the feminist challenge to Jewish tradition has taken place on American soil in the past three decades. It is valuable to place our discussion in the context of the emerging feminist movement and of a consideration of the way feminism has impacted upon Jewish women and religious expression.

In the mid-1960s and 1970s, the feminist movement was most concerned with access to and inclusion within the traditional power structures of American society. Similarly, Jewish women, inspired by what has been called the secular "women's revolt"⁹ of this era, sought equal access to Jewish institutions and ritual life.

One of the first salvos in American Jewish women's struggle for parity with men came in 1972, when a group of ten female members of a New York *havurah* (religious fellowship) attempted to be placed on the program of the upcoming convention of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly. The convention chairman refused to reserve a time for the women to speak during the convention, stating that the program was already set, but that they could try again the following year. "But this was the 1970s," recalls Martha Ackelsberg, one of the group's leaders, "so we said 'to hell with you' and decided to go anyway."¹⁰

Calling the New York press, the women succeeded in having a story (complete with photos) printed about them in the *New York Post* on the day of their departure for the convention.

The group's agenda, outlined on a one-page flyer they distributed to the assembled rabbis (all male, since the Conservative movement had not yet taken up the question of female ordination), proposed an "equal access agenda" including rabbinical ordination for women and the appointment and election of women to leadership positions in synagogues and major national Jewish organizations.

In the realm of ritual life, the women (who by now had given themselves a group name, *Ezrat Nashim*, meaning "help for women"),¹¹ demanded that females be counted in the minyan, the quorum of ten required for communal prayer, and receive the honor of being called up to bless the Torah, a ritual distinction reserved for men.

Despite the convention chairman's rejection of their request to be placed on the program, the women were ultimately given room in which to speak—and it seems that they were in the right place at the right time.

In her 1996 book, *Taking Judaism Personally*, Judy Petsonk describes the group's experience at the rabbis' convention:

A hundred rabbis showed up for one meeting. A hundred rabbis' wives for another. (The only slated activity for the wives was a fashion show.) . . . Some rabbis said calling women to the Torah would be the end of Judaism: men's lust would be aroused, and they would not be able to concentrate on prayer. But several rabbis said women in their congregations would be interested, and they asked to be put on *Ezrat Nashim's* mailing list. One older woman stood and said, "Where have you been all these years? We've been waiting for this!" *Ezrat Nashim* began receiving letters from all over the United States, with many people asking if they could join the organization. But there was no organization, just ten women with *chutzpah*.¹²

The times were clearly ripe for change. Soon this small group of Conservative-Jewish feminists was transformed into a national movement that over the years has secured equal access for women in a variety of areas of Jewish life. Only a year after their first action, the Conservative movement voted to count women in the minyan, and eleven years later the first Conservative woman rabbi, Amy Eilberg, was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Simultaneously with these events in the Conservative movement, progress in access to leadership was being made in the Reform denomination of Judaism. Indeed, in the same year that Ezrat Nashim was organized, Sally Priesand was ordained by the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, the Reform movement’s seminary.

Much Jewish feminist work in the 1970s also centered around halakha, Jewish religious law, and ways in which women might have access to, and be included more affirmatively within, the halakhic structure.

One of the pioneers in this area is Rachel Adler, who in 1973 wrote an important article entitled, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There.”¹³ In it she demonstrated that halakha had historically excluded women from the social, cultural, and ritual life of the Jewish people. “Ultimately,” Adler wrote, “our [Jewish women’s] problem stems from the fact that we are viewed in Jewish law and practice as peripheral Jews.”¹⁴ Noting that in halakha, women, children, and slaves are forbidden to participate in many areas of ritual practice and “have limited credibility in Jewish law,” Adler observed that only women can never transcend their circumscribed status: “only women can never grow up, or be freed, or otherwise leave the category” of limitation.¹⁵

At this point in the evolution of Jewish feminism, Rachel Adler and others who challenged the structures of halakha sought to repair, reinterpret, and expand the boundaries of the existing Jewish legal system in order to enfranchise women. Nonetheless (with the exception of Reform Jewish women, who reflected their denomination’s general lack of interest in halakhic issues), most Jewish feminists never sought to go outside the structure of existing religious law. They continued to work with the components of a centuries-old structure, never challenging the efficacy of that structure.

It is within this context that the first work written by an Orthodox Jewish feminist, Blu Greenberg, was published, some nine years after the birth of Ezrat Nashim. Greenberg’s book, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*, was “a sensitive attempt to reconcile the claims of feminists with complete observance of Jewish law.” Greenberg’s aim

was to maintain halakha as the guiding structure of Jewish life, but to find ways within it to ameliorate women's status and expand their participation in Jewish institutional, ritual, and cultural life. Most of Greenberg's efforts still fell into the category of the "equal access agenda," and her work contributed little to a search for new or different structures for Jewish communal life.

During these "equal access, civil rights" years, much was accomplished: rabbinic ordination for Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative Jewish women, reconsideration and reinterpretation of many specific *halakhot* (Jewish statutes) to improve and enhance women's place within the tradition, introduction of feminist concerns into university Jewish studies curricula, and much more.

This progress, however, reflects only a symptomatic, "band-aid" approach; these changes did not address the more deeply *systemic* feminist challenge of "liberation" that lay beyond simple inclusion. As Judith Plaskow, a pre-eminent voice in contemporary Jewish feminism, observed in 1983, "The Jewish women's movement of the past decade has been and remains a civil-rights movement rather than a movement for women's liberation. It has focused on getting women a piece of the pie; it has not wanted to bake a new one!"¹⁶

In 1995 we found ourselves in the second generation of the Jewish feminist challenge. The issues that Jewish women had struggled with two or three decades earlier were less central to the Jewish-feminist agenda precisely because so much had been accomplished in terms of equal access.

The issues of the 1970s and 1980s have given way to new challenges in the 1990s and into the new century. Jewish feminists seeking to "bake a new pie" have progressed from a primary focus on access and inclusion to a concentration on deeper issues that cut to the core of Judaism. Many have come to realize that underlying the entire system of the male-created halakha is an assumption of women's "otherness," an assumption that if women's situation within Judaism is to improve, they must fit into a male-designed structure rather than that the structure should be reshaped to respond more authentically to women's needs as well as men's. As Judith Plaskow has observed in her landmark work, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, "underlying specific *halakhot* and outlasting their amelioration or rejection is an assumption [that] . . . men are the actors in religious and communal life because they are the normative Jews. Women are 'other than' the norm; we are less than fully human."¹⁷

In an important and poignant article published in 1985, Reconstructionist Rabbi Joy Levitt asks whether victories on the equal-access front

are not just Pyrrhic victories.¹⁸ Noting that the first generation of women rabbis felt compelled to emulate their male colleagues' "navy blue suit model," Levitt observed that some more radical women rabbis sought to push the pendulum far in the opposite direction by advocating a "Goddess model," in which they sought to discover the roots of ancient Israelite women's power in the fertility cults of the ancient Near East.

In seeking a more "integrated model," Levitt argues that female rabbis must liberate themselves from an internalized sense of "otherness" in which "normative" (to use Plaskow's word) means male. If this is indeed achieved, the entry of women into the rabbinate will not have been a Pyrrhic victory after all. Ultimately, the Jewish feminist struggle of our time centers around eradicating the deeply rooted historical Jewish notion that woman is "other," thereby restoring women's full humanity.

In this regard, let us return for a moment to Hannah's prayer and Eli's reaction. The reason that Eli was so puzzled and outraged by Hannah's devotional style was that it was so radically *outside* the Jewish "normative" mode of prayer of Eli's time. Hannah was doing something that had never been done before (at least, never officially or publicly as part of Jewish worship), and it did not fit into the male-conceived and -designed cultic ritual: it was profoundly "other."

Hannah's intimate conversation with God, and her bold defense against Eli's accusations, touch at the edges of the contemporary systemic challenge of Jewish feminism. I have my *own* way of speaking with God, Hannah tells Eli. I *am* free to pray in this way! I am (to use Plaskow's metaphor) baking a new pie. Similarly, Jewish feminists today make an equally bold statement: We have our *own* way of engaging with Judaism. And in approaching Judaism in our own way, we bring about our own liberation. The Jewish "pie" must be baked anew to combine the ingredients of a millennia-old tradition with a deep, contemporary feminist consciousness. What has been normative until now must be redefined and reconstituted to include within it both female and male perceptions of reality, both female and male experiences of religious life and spirituality.

So, how *do* Jewish feminists "bake a new pie?" Judith Plaskow is again most helpful in charting our course: "The need for a feminist Judaism," Plaskow states, "begins with hearing silence. It begins with noting the absence of women's history and experience as shaping forces in Jewish tradition. . . . Confronting the silence raises disturbing questions and stirs the impulse toward far-reaching change. What in the tradition is

ours? What can we claim that has not also wounded us? What would have been different had the great silence been filled?"¹⁹

Hearing silence. This is our first (and most crucial) step in moving toward meta-level liberation for Jewish women. Contemporary Jewish feminism approaches the challenge of hearing the silence in a variety of ways.

First, much serious historical research is now being done to discover the lost voices of Jewish women who through the centuries contributed to our theological and devotional literature, who acted as communal leaders, and who helped keep alive a folk tradition of Jewish ritual observance alongside the official religion formulated and executed by men.²⁰

A second way of hearing the silence is represented by the new exegetical work being done by women (and feminist men) to add to the corpus of Jewish midrash interpretive engagement with sacred Jewish texts. New questions are being asked about biblical stories and the women whose lives were so profoundly affected by events, yet whose voices are rarely heard as the narratives unfold. What did Sarah think, for example, when Abraham, himself perhaps "intoxicated" with God's word, takes Isaac, the child of Sarah's old age, up to the mountain of the Lord for sacrifice? What did Dinah think or feel after she was raped, and did she really want her brothers to slaughter all her rapist's male kin? What pain must Hagar have felt at her banishment into the desert with her son Ishmael? Did Sarah really want Hagar's death? What was Sarah really afraid of? Why was Miriam punished for demanding her rightful place of leadership alongside her younger brother, Moses? The questions are endless as women's life experiences, emotions, and responses are being woven back into the sacred text, rethreaded into the fabric of Jewish exegetical tradition.²¹

A third and very important way in which Jewish feminists are filling the "great silence" is by focusing attention on the personal and spiritual dimensions of Jewish women's life experiences. Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell has said that "Jewish women are writing the *new* Torah text with our own lives" (personal communication), meaning that our experiences as women, as Jews, and as human beings provide the new stories that inform and shape our evolving Jewish tradition. Thus, in addition to an increasingly rich feminist midrashic tradition, new and creative work is being done in the realm of Jewish ritual to incorporate and honor Jewish women's lives.

In "normative" (that is, male-designed) Jewish tradition, ritual serves

a communal purpose, bringing together individual Jews for celebration and faithful devotion. Additionally, traditional Jewish life-cycle rituals honor the individual Jew at key moments: birth (Brith Milah/circumcision), adolescence (bar and bat mitzvah), marriage, and death. Beyond this limited repertoire, however, other significant transitional moments have not found expression in our ritual tradition. Where, for example, is the Jewish ritual sanctification of a young woman's emerging procreative power with the arrival of her menstrual cycle? Where is an *honoring* of, instead of a grieving for, the biological changes that occur for women at menopause? Where is a Jewish ritual acknowledgment of the pain and sadness of infertility, or the grief of miscarriage? And beyond the biological life cycle, where are the rituals that mark in a significant and spiritually compelling way the changing seasons of our lives, such as parent- or grandparenthood, adjustment to an empty nest, widowhood, or the transitions brought on by divorce, shifting professional realities, and other life circumstances?

Jewish women and men alike are in need of far more ritual acknowledgment and sanctification of key life moments. Rabbi Debra Orenstein points out in her 1994 book, *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones*,

feminist Jews have been instrumental in expanding the definition of life cycle in four ways: (1) By including women in the observance of passages that formerly spoke only to and of men—e.g., establishing Bat Mitzvah (for girls) along with Bar Mitzvah celebrations and covenant ceremonies for baby girls, along with those for boys; (2) by supplementing or altering traditional rituals related to life cycle—e.g., supplemental divorce rituals or alternative marriage contracts; (3) by valuing as sacred and sometimes ritualizing the events of women's biological cycle—e.g., menarche, menses, childbirth, miscarriage, menopause; and (4) by sacralizing non-biological passages and milestones not contemplated by the tradition—e.g., through ceremonies celebrating elder wisdom or healing from sexual abuse. In a sense, this listing occurs in ascending order of innovation. The first category adheres most closely to the tradition and seeks both parity and uniformity in communal observances. The last uses individual lives—not tradition—as its starting point and does not necessarily entail or expect community-wide norms.²²

Each category of ritual innovation reflects the feminist orientation—to address the meta-level, systemic structure of Jewish ritual life.

In recent years, I have been deeply involved in the creation of new Jewish rituals with a feminist perspective. One such ritual is described in detail below. It emerged from the painful, real-life experience of a young woman whom I call Rachel, a victim of sexual abuse. Speaking at a workshop on spiritual healing, Rachel said,

I am a survivor. I have endured the terror of a man who sexually abused me and forced me to keep the filthy secret. I have endured the shame, the near-annihilation of my soul, the terror of being touched, and the invasion of all my sacred spaces. Sometimes I feel as if I have gone through the Holocaust along with six million of my people. And each year, when those who have died are remembered, I consider it to be my day of remembrance as well. But unlike them, I am still alive. I have survived. I am strong, unashamed, and undefeated—and I want a celebration!

Rachel added that “for many years, I felt like a pariah, outside the tent of my people, in exile.”²³

A ritual for women survivors of sexual abuse, in particular, may serve to “gather in the exiles.” For far too long, victims of sexual violation have been isolated or even banished because of a “dirty, shameful secret” that is not theirs. It is hard to acknowledge that sexual abuse happens within one’s own community, and perhaps even harder for Jews who carry a pride of peoplehood based on exemplary ethical behavior. Yet we Jews must acknowledge the dark side that resides among us. When the Jewish community engages in collective denial, the victims remain in spiritual and emotional exile.

When we welcome survivors of sexual abuse home from exile, we ease their aloneness and affirm their place within the collective Jewish family. We also offer a clear and unequivocal message that a sexually abused Jewish woman is not a pariah, cut off from the life of her people, for she bears no responsibility for the abuse. Any ritual becomes more compelling if it is deeply rooted in the authentic experience and feelings of its participants, and if it resonates authentically with the sacred text, liturgy, language, music, and modes of ceremonial expression of the faith tradition from which it emerges. In short, a ritual “feels” Jewish if it reflects Jewish cadences, textures, and prayer modalities. A new ritual that resonates in this way with ancient Jewish ceremonies has a better chance of standing the test of time and becoming part of an evolving liturgical tradition.

This is what I have attempted to accomplish in the ritual described below.²⁴

A Ritual for Healing from Sexual Abuse

Step 1: Creating supportive space. A circle of women gather around the woman for whom the ritual is being enacted (hereafter referred to as the “focus” woman). She begins with the word *hineni*—“here I am”—the Hebrew word Abraham used when God called to him and instructed Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac.²⁵ The focus woman acknowledges her aloneness, and the depth of her pain, the uniqueness of her anger. She is reassured by her friends that she is no longer alone. With the use of the word *hineni*, a famous and charged word for Jews acquainted with the story of the binding of Isaac, there is a hint that in the abuse she suffered, the woman was an innocent victim, just as Isaac was an innocent tool of God’s testing of Abraham.

Everyone present sings a Hebrew song attributed to Reb Nachman of Bratslav, one of the greatest of the Hassidic masters. “*Kol ha-olam kulo gesher tzar me’od*”—“all of this world is a very narrow bridge”—and the main point is not to fear at all. These words help to create a contemplative mood through a traditional Jewish musical form, the traditional Hassidic melody.

Step 2: Acknowledging anger. A survivor’s poem is read,²⁶ and the focus woman speaks of her own anger. She is given free rein to express the full range of her emotions. In response, her friends assure her that she is “loved by an unending love”—God’s love. The words her friends speak are from an interpretive version by Rabbi Rami Shapiro of the traditional Ahavah Rabbah prayer: *ahava rabbah ahavtanu Adonai eloheinu*—“with abounding love, You have loved us, Adonai, our God.”²⁷

Step 3: Survival and gratitude. The focus woman reads from Psalm 147:3, “The Holy One heals the broken in heart and binds their wounds,” and she continues: “I have survived a sad journey—with peril to body and soul. I thank You, God, for sustaining me and bringing me through the peril in wholeness.” Here she reads or sings (in Hebrew or English, as is comfortable for her) a new musical version of the traditional Birkat ha-gomel prayer, in which one thanks God for helping to sustain one through danger: “I shall bless the Source of Life who fashions good and evil. I shall bless the Holy One who brings dark and light to all people. For I have walked in the valley of the shadow of death, and You, and you were with me then with every painful breath.”

In this new prayer, traditional resonances abound. First, reference is made to the Yotzer blessing in the Sabbath liturgy that speaks about God’s creation of dark and light. Second, reference is made to Isaiah 45:7, in which God is described as *yotzer tov u-voreh rah* (the one who

fashions good and creates evil). Third, Psalm 23 is echoed ("yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me"), and finally the new prayer echoes the Modeh Ani, a meditation recited by observant Jews upon awakening that is based on the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 60b: "I thank You, living and eternal God, for restoring my soul to me in compassion."

Step 4: Seeking healing. The focus woman's friends encircle and embrace her, and chant (in a mantra-like fashion) Moses' poignant prayer for his sister Miriam's healing (based on Numbers 12:13)—"*El na refana la, El na refana la*" ("Please God, heal her.")

As the chanting subsides, the group sings a musical adaptation of the *Mi-sheh-beirach*, the traditional prayer for healing:²⁸

Mi sheh-beirach imoteinu, mekor ha-bracha l'avoteinu—

(May the One who blessed our mothers, source of blessing to our fathers)

May the source of strength

Who blessed the ones before us,

Help us find the courage

To make our lives a blessing—and let us say, amen.

Mi sheh-beirach imoteinu, mekor ha-bracha l'avoteinu—

Bless those in need of healing

With *refuah shleymah*,

The renewal of body,

The renewal of spirit—and let us say, amen.

Step 5: Self-affirmation. The words spoken by the focus woman are taken directly from the traditional Jewish morning liturgy (based on the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 60b): "*Elohai neshama sheh-natata bi tehorah hi*"—"My God, the soul you have given me is pure. You created it, You formed it. You breathed it into me."

The focus woman continues: "I know that I am created *b'tzelem Elohim* (in the image of God), that a divine spark resides within me. *Hineni*: here I stand, no longer alone, on my way to becoming fully unafraid, knowing that I can create safe space for myself, knowing that I have a circle of loved and loving ones who will support and protect me, knowing that I am sheltered beneath the wings of the *Shekhina*, knowing my own power."

Here the focus woman expresses her direct connection to the *Shekhina*, the traditional name for the in-dwelling presence of God, associated with the feminine aspect of the Godhead. She concludes with a final

prayer (taken directly from the daily dawn blessings, which are based on the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menakhot 43b): “*Baruch ata Adonai, sheh-asani isha, Baruch ata Adonai sheh-asani bat horin*” —“I bless You, Holy One, who has made me a woman. I bless you, Holy One, who has made me free.” This affirmation is particularly empowering since in the traditional “normative” liturgy, only a man was expected to recite the dawn blessings in which he specifically thanked God for *not* making him a woman: “*sheh lo asani isha*.” The ritual concludes with a moment of silent reflection—and embraces.

And so I return to where I began, with Hannah and the deepest devotions of her heart. I am convinced that were she with us now, she would rejoice in the journey her Jewish sisters have taken. I am convinced that she would delight in the emerging new possibilities for her own spiritual expression. And perhaps even Eli would not be so astounded to see a woman praying to, and directly talking with, her God. In our time, in a Judaism powerfully informed by feminism, the silent season of Hannah’s own experience, the pain of her infertility, would find eloquent and empathic expression.

A final desideratum, a final prayer: May the time come, speedily and in our days, when every season and every purpose under heaven in Jewish women’s (and men’s) lives will be embraced by an evolving Jewish tradition. May the time come, speedily and in our days, when the seasons of Jewish women’s lives will no longer be silent and when the most profound moments of our life experiences will no longer be absent from the liturgical repertoire of the Jewish people.

Notes

1. See, for example, Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981).

2. For information on Jewish women’s folk religion, see Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, eds., *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992); Susan Starr Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of the Elderly Women of Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Dianne Ashton and Ellen Umansky, eds., *Four Centuries of Jewish Women’s Spirituality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). See also Nina Beth Cardin, ed., *Out of the Depths I Call to You: A Book of Prayers for the Married Jewish Woman* (Livingston, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1992).

3. Zechariah 12:12.

4. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sukkah 51b.

5. Susan Grossman, “Women in the Jerusalem Temple,” in Grossman and Haut, *Daughters of the King*, 29.

6. Ibid.
7. 1 Samuel 1:9–16, *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (NRSV) (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).
8. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1993.
9. Jacob R. Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman, 1654–1980* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1981), 149.
10. Quoted in Judy Petsonk, *Taking Judaism Personally* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 106.
11. The group's name contained a clever double entendre, since the term *ezrat nashim* was also the traditional name for the women's section in the courtyard of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem and was also used historically to indicate the section of the synagogue in which women were segregated from men.
12. Petsonk, *Taking Judaism Personally*, 107.
13. Adler, "The Jew Who Wasn't There: *Halakhah* and the Jewish Woman," *Response* 7, no. 22 (Summer 1973): 77–82, reprinted in *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 12–18.
14. Adler, "The Jew Who Wasn't There," in Heschel, *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, 13.
15. Ibid.
16. Judith Plaskow, "The Right Question Is Theological," in Heschel, *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, 11.
17. (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 224.
18. Levitt, "Women Rabbis: A Pyrrhic Victory?" *Reconstructionist* 50, no. 4 (Jan.–Feb., 1985): 19–24.
19. Plaskow, *The Right Question*, 1.
20. See footnote 1 above.
21. For recent examples of feminist Jewish *midrash*, see Judith Antonelli, *In the Image of God: A Feminist Commentary on Torah* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1995), and Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1996).
22. Orenstein, ed., *Lifecycles* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), xviii.
23. Workshop for survivors of sexual abuse, Philadelphia, 1991, transcript of tape-recorded session.
24. A caveat: the ritual's "feel" and mood cannot be adequately communicated in writing. One must actually experience the ritual in its fullness, in the authentic context of a healing moment.
25. Genesis 22:1 and 22:11.
26. See poem by Marta Metz in Leila Gal Berner, "Our Silent Seasons," in Orenstein, *Lifecycles*, 133–34.
27. In the traditional Jewish prayer book, preceding the central declaration of faith, "Sh'ma Yisra'el" (Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One).
28. This contemporary version is by Debbie Friedman.