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## NOTES ON COMPOSING NEW BLESSINGS Toward a Feminist-Jewish Reconstruction of Prayer

Marcia Falk

I was quite young—maybe four years old—the first time I was told that God was neither male nor female, that *he* had no body at all: *he* was beyond the limitations of gender. This was a bewildering concept that I accepted to the extent that I could fathom it, which is to say, I *thought* I understood it. But at the same time, I was being presented with an image implicit in the pronoun “he” and depicted in nouns such as “lord,” “father,” “master,” “king.” Here was a verbal picture that was entirely genderful, entirely male, and this *picture* had far more impact than the *concept* of God’s genderlessness.

How was this image impressed on me? Mainly in two ways: through stories and through prayers. In Bible stories and in midrash (Rabbinic commentaries on the Bible), God was a character always referred to as “he,” no matter what God was doing. Of course, most of the time God was behaving much the way men did; but even when he was being motherly, or otherwise acting like a woman, God was always “he.” The implication was clear: *he* was big enough to play a feminine role on occasion. In prayer, it was much the same: God may have had a few feminine characteristics, but he was “really” a male. And prayer was even more effective than story in impressing God’s personality on me. Through story, God came dramatically alive, but through prayer, he became an intimate part of my life.

As a child praying, I never envisioned a female God; that was unthinkable. Which is to say, I did not *feel* my own likeness to God’s image, even though I was taught that I was created in it. The image of God that was with me all through childhood and adolescence was never that of a woman, not even that of a half-man/half-woman, certainly not that of a neuter (what would an image of a neuter person be?), but exclusively that of a man. I would not have said, in so many words, “God is a man,” because I knew that this was *conceptually* incorrect: Jews did not believe this. But I talked to him as though he were, as the Hebrew liturgy depicted him, which became the way I pictured him. God was an extremely knowledgeable, very intelligent old man—a genius, in fact. Of course, he was multilingual, but as he was particularly fond of being spoken to in Hebrew, I made a point of becoming conversant in his language.

I remember vividly the rather peculiar conversations I had with God

when I was a young teenager. I spoke to him in stereo, on a two-track sound system, or at least I tried to. My goal was to tell him what I was really thinking at the same moment that I uttered the set words of the Hebrew liturgy. Usually I settled for taking turns—a few words in his language, a few in mine—and secretly I doubted whether simultaneity was worth the effort, although my teachers had urged me to try. That was what they meant, I supposed, by achieving *kavvanah*, “spiritual focus”: making my meaning come through someone else’s words.

I had other doubts as well. I could not really believe that a genius like God would not get bored with all the praise in the prayerbook: did he really need so much positive feedback? My main problem with the prayers, though, was that I found myself tiring of the same words over and over, and I wondered: wouldn’t God enjoy some variation? After all, the world he made was full of variety, and surprise was one of his best inventions!

Nevertheless, I struggled hard with prayer to try and effect a meaningful relationship with this omniscient, omnipotent Other. Regularly I rehearsed the performance language of the Hebrew liturgy, so that its images became first familiar, then automatic, and finally indelibly impressed on my tongue. Through this liturgy I learned that the real “other,” in all senses, was me. It was not just that God was God and I was only human; it was clear that maleness was primary and femaleness secondary. What I did not realize at the time was that, through my efforts to relate to God, I was also working out and practicing my relationship to authority *in the world*. At this stage of my life, I hardly wondered that rabbis were men, that rulers and people of great importance were men. Though not God, they were surely more like him than I, or any female, could ever be. The male God legitimated men’s power, such that questioning their exclusive right to it was not yet thinkable for me.

And yet, there was much in the status quo that I did question at that stage, and the tradition itself encouraged me to do so—much as it taught me not just to read texts but to engage and debate with them. Indeed, although it posited a single absolute authority in God, Judaism also trained me to be suspicious of single-minded approaches to truth, and to appreciate the multiplicity of possibilities inherent in the interpretive process. More importantly perhaps, my earliest conception of justice came from traditional Jewish teachings, and the Jewish commitment to *pursue justice*—a commitment that applies the idea of a continuing process to the attainment of a transcendent ideal—was inspiring to me. So too today, this commitment continues to inform my work and my life, and to guide the way toward wholeness through the creation of feminist Judaism.

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Fortunately, my journey has not been a solitary one. The recent past has seen amazing breakthroughs in Jewish ideas and practices, brought about in large part by the emerging feminist-Jewish community. Inevitably, theology

has been the focus of some of the most profound changes. Jewish-feminist theologians such as Judith Plaskow and Rita Gross have called for new God-language; and in many circles, Jewish women have been emending the prayerbook and even structuring whole new services to replace the traditional ones.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the enormous power of God-talk to educate and shape our lives, feminist Jews in our time are taking back the power of naming, addressing divinity in our own voices, using language that reflects our own experiences. We do this because we take theology seriously and we want to affirm ourselves back into the place from which, we deeply intuit, we have been erased. We have begun with relatively small amendments, such as introducing the pronoun “she” to refer to divinity. With this change we have started to uproot the “he” that has been so deeply planted in us, the all-pervasive “he” that blocks our attempts to read ourselves, in any satisfying way, into the theological relationship. With this small change we are redeeming the forgotten half of the all-inclusive monotheistic divinity. Yet when we do so we are frequently accused of the deeply threatening heresy of “paganism.” From a purely rational viewpoint, this reaction is ridiculous. As other feminists have pointed out, if God is not really male, why should it matter if we call God “she”?<sup>2</sup> Clearly, it is not the inclusive “one God” that is being threatened. The ultimacy of an exclusively male God has come into question, and his defenders are ready to attack.

This is a crucial point, for nothing less than monotheism, Judaism’s original *raison d’être*, is at stake. So let us think carefully: what is it we are affirming with a monotheistic creed? I think monotheism means that, with all our differences, I am more like you than I am unlike you; we share the same source, and one principle of justice must govern us equally. Monotheism means that if we are all created in the image of divinity, the images with which we point toward divinity must reflect us all.

But what *single* image can do this? All images are necessarily partial. “Man” is no less partial than “woman” as clearly as “white” is no less partial than “black.” It would seem, then, that the authentic expression of an authentic monotheism is not a singularity of image but an embracing *unity* of a *multiplicity of images*, as many as are needed to express and reflect the diversity of our individual lives. Indeed, much more than a feminine pronoun is needed; we must seek out a wide range of verbal imagery with which to convey our visions.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Rita Gross, “Steps Toward Feminine Imagery of Deity in Jewish Theology,” *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), pp. 234-247; Judith Plaskow, “Language, God, and Liturgy: A Feminist Perspective,” *Response* 44 (Spring 1983): 3-14; Naomi Janowitz and Maggie Wenig, “Sabbath Prayers for Women,” *Womanspirit Rising*, eds. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 174-178; *Vetaher Libenu* (Sudbury, MA: Congregation Beth El, 1980). Much of this literature is circulating privately or is simply undocumented.

<sup>2</sup> Rita Gross, “Female God Language in a Jewish Context,” *Womanspirit Rising*, p. 170f.

The search for theological imagery is a journey whose destinations are rarely apparent at the outset. As many feminists have discovered, it is not merely a matter of changing male images to seemingly equivalent female ones: the relatively simple (though still courageous) act of “feminizing” the male God has proved, to many of us, to be inadequate and often absurd. For a feminized patriarchal image is still patriarchal, though now in transvestite masquerade. The process has been instructive, however, in clarifying our theological concerns: in translating the king into a queen, for example, we realize that images of domination are not what we wish to embrace. We find instead that our search for what is authoritative leads us to explore more deeply what is just, and that the results of these explorations are not well represented by images of a monarch, either female or male. And so we find we must create new images to convey our visions, and to do so we must be patient (though not passive), for images will not be called into being by acts of will alone. Rather we learn what artists know well: authentic images rise from our unconscious as gifts; out of our living, from our whole, engaged selves, with the support of our communities, the images that serve us will emerge. We must trust the journey.

There are no shortcuts. The few female images already available in the tradition do not in themselves provide an adequate solution. The much-touted Shekhinah, used to placate uppity Jewish women these days (as in, “The tradition *has* a feminine image of God, what more do you want?”), will not suffice. The Shekhinah was not originally a female image; it did not become so until Kabbalistic times. And when it became explicitly associated with the female, it did not empower women, especially not in Kabbalistic thought, where male and female were hierarchically polarized. Nor has the Shekhinah fared much better in our century. I, for one, cannot think of the Shekhinah without recalling her burning tears as they fell on the young poet Bialik’s Gemara page. In Bialik’s poem, the Shekhinah was a pitiful mama bird with a broken wing, invoked to portray the frailty of Jewish tradition in Bialik’s time. “Alone, alone,” was her cry, for all had abandoned her.

Not that tears are not valid. Not that our images of divinity should exclude solitude and suffering; these are indeed important aspects of our experience which need expression in our theology. But should images of isolation and vulnerability alone be identified as the fundamental representation of God’s “female side”? Do we wish to divide experience along these classically sexist lines? Sad as it is, I cannot help but feel that, far from redeeming women, the image of the Shekhinah has, until now, only supported the male-centered vision. In Jewish tradition, the Shekhinah has never been on equal footing with the mighty *Kadosh Barukh Hu*, the “Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He,” her creator, her master, her groom, the ultimate reality of which she was only an emanation. And while I like the name itself—Shekhinah, from the Hebrew root meaning “to dwell”—I would like to see in-dwelling, or immanence, portrayed in ways that are not secondary

to transcendence. So too, I would like to see autonomous female images, not ones that imply the essential otherness of women. *In the name of monotheism*, for the sake of an inclusive unity, I would like to see our God-talk articulate mutually supportive relationships between female and male, between immanence and transcendence, between our lives and the rest of life on the planet. It comes down to this: what I would like to see, I must help bring into being.

And so, for the past four years, I have been composing *b'rakhot*, new "blessings" in Hebrew and in English, as vehicles for new theological images, steps toward creating feminist-Jewish theology and practice. I have already indicated the importance of prayer as a didactic instrument of Judaism, and this is part of the reason why I have chosen to write prayers as a way to "do" theology. But prayer is of course much more than a didactic tool: as both a form of religious expression and a means of building community, it has great power in Jewish life. In my own life, I feel a strong need for prayers to mark specific moments, and for this reason more than any other, I am impelled to write them. It may be helpful if, before presenting some of these new compositions, I explain further why I have chosen to focus my efforts specifically on blessings—what roles blessings play and what significance they have in Jewish life.

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A blessing is an event; a blessing is also that which turns a moment into an event. In Jewish tradition, blessings mark both extraordinary and ordinary occasions. A Jew blesses when she sees a rainbow, or meets a wise person, or hears good news—occasions that take her of a sudden or by surprise. A Jew also blesses before she eats, and at the onset of every Sabbath—occasions that come with accustomed regularity. Jews are fond of making blessings; blessings enhance life, increase our awareness of the present moment. So Rabbi Meir tells us that we should utter daily a hundred blessings; and, indeed, the Hebrew liturgical tradition has produced a great number of benedictions with which to mark and sanctify the events of our lives—though, sadly and strikingly, few blessings exist for female life-cycle events such as the onset of menstruation or menopause, or even the miracle of childbirth.

The traditional Hebrew blessings with which Jews today are most familiar all have essentially the same form. They consist of two parts: the opening address of divinity as that which is "blessed," and a phrase or phrases, varying in length and complexity, which relate to the specific occasion of the blessing. Thus, for example, the blessing over bread reads: *Barukh atah adonay eloheynu melek ha-olam / ha-motzi lekhem min ha-aretz*, "Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the world, / who brings forth bread from the earth." It is in the latter halves of the blessings that the Hebrew poetic imagination has flourished; here, the liturgists have explored with verbal

imagery a wide variety of life experiences. The first part of the traditional Hebrew blessing, on the other hand, is a strict formula: *barukh atah adonay eloheynu melekh ha-olam*, “blessed are you (masculine singular), Lord our God, king of the world.” And this formula never varies, no matter what occasion is being marked, no matter what words comprise the rest of the speech. To the traditional Jew, this formulaic opening is so absolute, so powerful, that, once it is said, it must not go to waste; it must never be said in vain. So, for example, when I utter the blessing over bread quoted above, I must immediately follow this speech-act with the real act of eating bread. And without the formulaic address of divinity (an address referred to as *shem umalkhut*, “name and sovereignty”) the traditional Jew considers there to have been no blessing at all—nothing that is, that bears the same kind of spiritual authority.

Criticism of this formulaic address of divinity will not sound surprising to feminist Jews. As I said earlier, it is obvious to many of us that no single set of names and images ought to monopolize religious authority, claiming the exclusive right to evoke monotheistic divinity, the exclusive power to make a moment sacred. Thus the formulaic opening of the traditional blessing, precisely because it is formulaic and unalterable, feels idolatrous to many feminist Jews. It seems to us that through the repeated utterance of this phrase which is so indelibly fixed in the performance language of our liturgy, Jews come to worship the partial images themselves, rather than the inclusive monotheism for which these images are supposed to stand. And any worship of the partial in place of the whole, any equation of signifier with the ineffable that is signified, is nothing less than idolatry.

The way to avoid verbal idolatry is to keep reminding ourselves that *all* theological naming is really a naming-toward; all honest talk about divinity has an “as if” embedded in it. And when we recognize the naming of divinity for what it is—the act of *metaphor-making*—we approach it with a new freedom, a new power that gives voice to our theological visions. For a metaphor is a transforming thing: it bridges and it leaps; it points out likeness even as it affirms difference; it connects without assimilating, without blurring distinction. But the empowering quality of metaphor exists only as long as we remember that it is metaphor we are speaking, not literal truth and not fiction. When a metaphor is treated as literal truth, it becomes a lie.

Theological language that is so overused as to be absolutely predictable, so entrenched that it no longer reminds us that it is metaphorical, language that is so canonical and automatic that we forget the “as if” originally implied in it, is dead metaphor—in other words, a lie. Such is the case with the Hebrew words *adonay eloheynu melekh ha-olam* (“Lord our God king of the world”)—as it is the case with the Hebrew and English masculine pronouns when used to refer to the divine, or, as feminists in other traditions have noted, with the English word “God” itself. All these terms have ceased to remind us that divinity is not really male, not really human at all.

Dead metaphors make strong idols. Dumb as stone, they stand stubbornly in the way; like boulders jutting up in the desert, they block our view of any oasis that may lie ahead.

What shatters a verbal idol? Not hatchets, and not concepts—not the abstract idea that God is neither male nor female—but new, living metaphors, verbal images possessing powers of transformation. In its uneasiness with the arts, especially the visual arts, Judaism tacitly acknowledges the power of imagery. But there is no stopping the imagination from doing what it will do, and if as Jews we decline to make theological images out of clay or canvas, we must realize that we make them just as surely—perhaps even more effectively—out of words. (I say “more effectively” because I share the view of the child who preferred radio to television, finding that “in radio, the pictures are better.”) And this is an important part of why I compose new blessings. There is perhaps no vehicle in Jewish life more effective than the oft-used and much-loved form of the blessing for conveying metaphors, verbal images of the divine.

When choosing new metaphors for my blessings, I try to confront the full extent of our liturgical idolatry. It is not just the exclusive maleness of our God-language that needs correction, but its anthropocentrism in *all* its ramifications. For as long as we image divinity *exclusively* as a person, whether female or male, we tend to forget that human beings are not the sole, not even the “primary,” life-bearing creatures on the planet. We allow our intelligence and our unique linguistic capabilities to deceive us into believing that we are “godlier” than the rest of creation. And in so doing, we neglect the real responsibility attendant upon the gift of human consciousness: to care for the earth in ways that respect all human and non-human life upon it.

For this reason, when I compose my blessings, I draw my metaphors not just from the human realm but from all aspects of the creation (as did the biblical poets who created the metaphors *tzur yisrael*, “rock of Israel,” and *etz khayyim*, “tree of life,” both of which phrases were adopted by later liturgists for prayers that eventually became part of synagogue services). I try to choose words whose meanings will expand in context, opening in more than a single direction. Recognizing that, no matter how resonant my language, any image I choose or create will necessarily be limited, I try to use theological metaphors that connect to the particular occasions being marked. I try also to draw inspiration from the traditional versions of the blessings (when they exist), using their expression of occasions as stimulus to my own *kavvanah*, “spiritual focus.”

Thus, for example, when I set out to compose a blessing to be said before eating, I considered the traditional blessing over bread: (See Diagram 1 on p. 50.) The phrase *ha-motzi lekhem min ha-aretz*, “who brings forth bread from the earth,” seemed especially powerful to me, because the picture it presented of bread being drawn from the earth was reminiscent of the biblical



story of our own origins, so that, subtly but profoundly, a whole network of connections was being suggested here: between our food and the earth, ourselves and the earth, our food and ourselves. So rich was this phrase, I wanted not only to preserve it in my blessing but to let it inspire a new image.

In contrast to this phrase, the formulaic God-images opening the traditional blessing struck me as particularly inappropriate to the occasion. For it was not as “lord” or “ruler” that I apprehended divinity at the moment before beginning a meal, but as nurturer, the source of all nourishment. And so I sought a metaphor that would embody this feeling in a vivid way, and I let the phrase *ha-motzi lekhem min ha-aretz* guide me toward it. I searched until I came upon the following descriptive passage in Deuteronomy 8:7: *eretx nakhaley mayim ayanot ut’homot yotz’im ba-bikah uva-har*, “a land of watercourses, fountains, and depths springing from valleys and hills.” In the fountains that rise from and flow back into the land I found the image I was looking for: *ayin*, “fountain” or “well,” with the figurative meaning of “source.” In the springing-up of the fountains, I had found an image to suggest the motion of bread being drawn from the earth: the image of a rising-up from under, suggesting a deep ground-of-being, divinity as immanent presence. And out of this image, I made the metaphor *eyn ha-khayyim*, “fountain/well/source of life,” to use for my blessing over bread: *N’varekh et eyn ha-khayyim / ha-motziah lekhem min ha-aretz*, “Let us bless the source of life / that brings forth bread from the earth.”

The phrase *eyn ha-khayyim* (as the diagram indicates) is grammatically feminine, although the image itself cannot be said to have gender, being nonpersonal and inanimate (in Hebrew, all nouns have grammatical gender, though not necessarily semantic gender). Therefore, the verb in the second phrase also takes the feminine form: *ha-motziah*. You will also notice that I have changed the opening of the blessing from *barukh atah*, “blessed are you,” with both “blessed” and “you” specified as masculine singular (in Hebrew grammar, the second person is always gender-specific), to the gender-inclusive first person plural verb *n’varekh*, “let us bless.” This change allowed me to open up the speech of the blessing form and freely use images of both genders. It also had the secondary effect of emphasizing the “we” who are blessing, thus placing responsibility back on the community of living human speakers. *Lo ha-mettim yehalleluyah*, says the psalmist: it is not the dead but the living who will sing of God. As soon as I made this change to *n’varekh*, I realized that I had been uncomfortable with the passive “blessed are you” of the traditional blessing not only because it is gender-restrictive but also because it is disempowering. With *n’varekh* we reclaim our voices, take back the power of naming. So that when we say *n’varekh et eyn ha-khayyim*, we are reminded even as we speak that *eyn ha-khayyim* is our metaphor, our naming toward the ultimately unnameable. And because our names and images can now take many forms, we begin to hear all the words

of our sentences—verbs and adjectives as well as nouns—occurring in both genders, and in plural as well as singular constructions (for the many can represent the One in metaphor). And so in this new blessing we hear the grammatical shift from *ha-motzi* (masculine singular), “who/that brings forth,” to *ha-motziah* (feminine singular), “who/that brings forth”; and to many of us this small change in sound, the introduction of this tiny “ah,” is refreshing, even liberating.

The blessing over bread was one of the first I grappled with when I began writing my own blessings. It was an obvious place to begin, since it was the prayer I used most frequently in my daily life, and the traditional version was fairly easy to adapt, once I had found what felt to me like an appropriate theological image for it. But when I tried to adapt the blessing over wine, another prayer uttered frequently in Jewish life, I quickly discovered that finding a new image for divinity is not always enough.

As with the blessing over bread, I considered the traditional version of the blessing over wine to see what in it was meaningful to me (see Diagram 2, p. 51): *Barukh atah adonay eloheynu melekh ha-olam / bore p'ri ha-gafen*, “Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the world / who creates the fruit of the vine.” And although once again I found the formulaic opening unsatisfying, I felt that the closing image, “the fruit of the vine,” was full of resonance. To me, the vine was an image of interconnectedness, suggesting the intertwining paths of life; its fruit, then, might be seen as a metaphor for community. This, I speculated, might be part of the reason why Jews use “the fruit of the vine” to make a *kiddush*, a “sanctification,” on occasions like the Sabbath and holidays, which unite the community.

I did not have to search long for a theological metaphor for this blessing: the image of *eyn ha-khayyim*, which I had used in my blessing over bread, seemed fitting here too, for wine, like bread, has its origins in the earth. And I knew that I wanted to connect this theological image with the image of *p'ri ha-gafen*, “the fruit of the vine,” understood literally, as a part of the botanical world, and metaphorically, as a symbol for human community. But when I looked at the verb connecting the two images in the traditional blessing—the verb *bore*, “create”—it seemed wrong. For *bore* means to “create” as the God of Genesis created, making, as the Rabbis explain it, “something out of nothing,” and this image of creation did not feel true to the experience my blessing was trying to evoke. Nothing in nature arises out of nothing; everything emerges from form to form, from seed to flower to fruit. So too, communities are not created full-blown out of nothing; they evolve gradually out of bonds sustained over time. Thus the power I wished to invoke at the moment of my blessing—the flow of energy connecting the divine realm with the realms of nature and humanity—was not a force that came down from above to zap the fruit of the vine into being. Rather, it was a nurturance that enabled the vine’s fruits to grow, allowing and helping them to ripen. And so I substituted for *bore* the verb *l'hatzmiakh*, “to cause to

grow,” from the root *tzamakh*, meaning “grow from the ground”—and I created the following blessing: *N’varekh et eyn ha-khayyim / matzmikhat p’ri ha-gafen*, “Let us bless the source of life / that ripens fruit on the vine.”

The journey to create authentic feminist-Jewish prayers that will feel appropriate to their occasions has taken many turns, few of which I have been able to anticipate. With each new blessing I approach, I confront and often wrestle with a different aspect of theology, and this grappling leads to linguistic variations. For example, in my *havdalah* blessings which mark the separation of the Sabbath from the week, I have experimented with the opening verb, substituting for *n’varekh* words such as *n’hallel*, “let us praise,” and *n’vakkesh*, “let us seek” (see the “New Blessings,” p. 52). In other blessings, I have varied syntactic structures, so that images of divinity appear in unexpected places, or sometimes appear only in a veiled way (see, for example, my candlelighting blessing, in the “New Blessings” below). My idea here was to suggest, through syntax as well as choice of vocabulary, that divinity is not necessarily to be found in predictable places; sometimes we must search for it where we do not expect it; often it is encountered not “out there,” but deep within.

In my blessing after the meal (see the “New Blessings” below), I replaced the lengthy series of paragraphs that comprise the traditional grace after meals with three statements: an acknowledgment of the source of our nourishment; a commitment to work in protective partnership with the earth so that it may continue to provide for us; and a promise to pursue social justice, to end hunger among members of the human family. While the structure of my blessing after the meal is not based on the traditional blessing, much of its phrasing is traditional, and some of its ideas are inspired by traditional phrases. For example, *al ha-aretz v’al ha-mazon*, “for the earth and for nourishment,” is taken from the traditional blessing. I wanted to use this phrase because, like the phrase *ha-motzi lekhem min ha-aretz* in the blessing over bread, it makes an important connection between the earth and our food (although, in the context of the traditional blessing after the meal, the word *aretz*, “earth” or “land,” seems to refer specifically to the land of Israel—nevertheless, the echo of the larger meaning is certainly there). And I liked the idea of thematically linking the blessing before the meal with the blessing after the meal, so that the meal itself becomes part of an extended spiritual (as well as physical) act.

Thus whenever I can, I try to preserve meaningful links with the traditional prayers, sometimes by treating them as the text to which I write a form of new midrash. At the same time, I depart quite deliberately from the traditional prayers in as many ways as I need to, *and I depart from my own departures, break my own forms*, as often as I have to, because I believe that no element of liturgical form or content ought to become completely automatic, even when the material is innovative. One of the deepest challenges to feminist liturgy, I believe, is to keep our speech, like our thoughts,

constantly evolving and responsive to change, even as we create forms to be used repetitively to build community and a sense of tradition. How to do this successfully—how to create an exciting balance between spontaneity and repetitive form—is a question that religious feminists, both “traditional” and “post-traditional,” inevitably grapple with. This grappling best takes place in the context of practical experimentation within communities. With Jewish feminism, as with other feminist religious contexts, this is happening in informal groups all over the country, and in national conferences and collectives that meet for retreats, such as that described in Martha Ackelsberg’s article “Spirituality, Community, and Politics: B’not Esh and the Feminist Reconstruction of Judaism.”<sup>3</sup>

And when, as inevitably will also happen, critics question our authenticity, deny our right to call our creativity and our creations Jewish, we—the members of the feminist-Jewish communities that help comprise *klal yisrael*, “the community of Israel”—need to remind them that Jewish prayer, like all of Jewish practice and belief, all of Jewish life, has never been finally “fixed”; rather, it has evolved, adapted, and changed throughout Jewish history. It is only recently, in fact, that the Hebrew liturgical tradition has ossified; it is not too late, we hope, to revive it. As we compose new prayers today to affirm diversity within unity, to express our visions of a true monotheism and our dedication to *tikkun olam*, repair of a fragmented world—as we compose and say such prayers, we place ourselves firmly *in the tradition*—a tradition that is still, always, in the process of becoming. We need to remind our critics, and ourselves, that tradition is not just what we inherit from the past; it is also what we create and pass on to the future. Tradition necessarily implies process, the continual forging of links on an unending chain. And the challenge to keep growing and changing even while forging an identity, to stay true to the present moment even while nurturing a sense of continuity with the past and the future—is this not at the core of authentic living?

<sup>3</sup> *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* II, 2 (Fall 1986): 109–120. Much activity is also taking place in the Havurah and “Jewish-renewal” movements, which include feminist concerns in their creative agendas.

**DIAGRAM 1**  
**Blessing over Bread**

*Traditional Version*

Barukh	atah	adonay	eloheynu	melekh	ha-olam
Blessed [are]	you	Lord	our God	king [of]	the world
(ms. sg.)	(ms. sg.)	(ms.)	(ms.)	(ms.)	
ha-motzi	lekhem	min	ha-aretz.		
(ms. sg.)					
[who/that] brings	bread	from	the earth.		
forth					

*New Blessing*

N'varekh et	eyn		ha-khayyim
Let us bless	the fountain/well/source [of]	life	
(gender-inclusive)	(fm. sg.)		
ha-motziah	lekhem	min	ha-aretz.
(fm. sg.)			
[who/that] brings	bread	from	the earth.
forth			

*English Version of New Blessing*

Let us bless the source of life  
that brings forth bread from the earth.

DIAGRAM 2  
Blessing over Wine

*Traditional Version*

Barukh	atah	adonay	eloheynu	melekh	ha-olam
Blessed [are]	you	Lord	our God	king [of]	the world
(ms. sg.)	(ms. sg.)	(ms.)	(ms.)	(ms.)	
bore	p'ri	ha-gafen.			
(ms. sg.)					
[who/that]	[the] fruit [of]	the vine.			
creates					

*New Blessing*

N'varekh et	eyn	ha-khayyim
Let us bless	the fountain/well/source [of]	life
(gender-inclusive)	(fm. sg.)	
matzmikhat	p'ri	ha-gafen.
(fm. sg.)		
[who/that]	[the] fruit [of]	the vine.
ripens, causes		
to grow		

*English Version of New Blessing*

Let us bless the source of life  
that ripens fruit on the vine.

## NEW BLESSINGS\*

## Kabbalat Shabbat (Welcoming the Sabbath)

*Hadlakat Nerot*

Yitromem libbenu,  
t'shovav nafshenu  
b'hadlakat ner shel shabbat.

*Candlelighting*

May this Sabbath  
lift our spirits,  
lighten our hearts.

## Blessings for Leyl Shabbat Meal (Friday Evening Meal)

*Kiddush L'leyl Shabbat*

N'varekh et eyn ha-khayyim  
matzmikhat p'ri ha-gafen  
un'kaddesh et yom ha-shabbat  
zekher l'maaseh v'reshit.

*Sanctification over Wine*

Let us bless the source of life  
that ripens fruit on the vine  
as we hallow the Sabbath day  
in remembrance of creation.

*N'tilat Yadayim*

Tizkor nafshenu et k'dushat ha-guf  
bintilat yadayim.

*Washing the Hands*

Washing the hands, we call to  
mind  
the holiness of body.

*Ha-Motziah*

N'varekh et eyn ha-khayyim  
ha-motziah lekhem min ha-aretz.

*Blessing over Bread*

Let us bless the source of life  
that brings forth bread from the  
earth.

*Birkat Ha-Mazon*

Nodeh l'eyn ha-khayyim  
al ha-aretz v'al ha-mazon:  
nishmor al ha-aretz  
v'hi t'kay'menu,  
un'vakkesh mazon la-sova  
l'khol yoshvey tevel.

*Blessing after the Meal*

Let us acknowledge the source of  
life  
for the earth and for nourishment.  
May we conserve the earth  
that it may sustain us,  
and let us seek sustenance  
for all who inhabit the world.

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## Blessings for Havdalah (End of Sabbath)

*Kiddush La-Shavua*

N'varekh et eyn ha-khayyim  
matzmikhat p'ri ha-gafen  
un'kaddesh et y'mey ha-khol  
zekher l'toldotenu.

*B'samim*

N'hallel et nishmat kol khay  
un'varekh al miney b'samim.

*Esh*

N'vakkesh et nitzotzot ha-nefesh  
m'khayot m'orey ha-esh.

*Havdalot*

Navkhin beyn khelkey ha-shalem  
v'al ha-hevdelim n'varekh:  
navdil beyn shabbat l'shavua  
v'et sh'neyhem n'kaddesh.

*Sanctification for the Week*

Let us bless the source of life  
that ripens fruit on the vine  
as we hallow the days of the week  
in remembrance of our history.

*Spices*

Let us celebrate the breath  
of all living things  
and praise all essences.

*Fire*

Let us seek the unseen sparks  
that kindle the greater lights.

*Distinctions*

Let us distinguish  
parts within the whole  
and bless their differences.  
Like Sabbath and the six days of  
creation,  
may our lives be made whole  
through relation.  
As rest makes the Sabbath holy,  
may our work make holy the  
week.  
Let us separate Sabbath from  
week  
and hallow them both.

## A Blessing for the New and for Renewal

*Shehekheyanu*

N'varekh et maayan khayyenu  
shehekheyanu v'kiyy'manu v'higgianu  
la-z'man ha-zeh.

*Renewal*

Let us bless the flow of life  
that revives us, sustains us,  
and brings us to this time.