Bringing Practice to Theory: A Case Study of Language Use in Jewish Feminist Worship

by Karen Englander

> "It is in this everyday world that I curt certain ideas and theories matter, because with each dirty dish that I wash as I talk and listen, I experience how they affect my life. "
> -- Irena Klepfisz

Feminism has affected North American religious practice for three decades, and as a result, the language of worship is being transformed. Practices in Judaism are no exception. While neither feminism nor Judaism is monolithic, the impact of the former on the latter is demonstrable. The more liberal denominations (Recontructionist, Reform, and Conservative) now accept women as leaders and rabbis within congregational life and so previously silenced and marginalized voices are now heard. Although Orthodoxy and Hassidism still offer women no such public role, "there is no going back on the feminist revolution" (Greenberg qtd. in Umansky 207). Several scholars have outlined the impact of feminist thought on the different Jewish denominations (e.g. Peskowitz & Levitt, Umansky). Jewish feminists have also produced important books of critique (Adler, Heschel, Plaskow), re-interpretations of sacred texts (Frankel, Goldstein, Gottlieb) and guides for whole new rituals (Adelman, Berrin). However, little has been written which explores how Jewish feminists actually use these new insights.

One phenomenon has been the creation of feminist women's only groups. These groups are formed by women from different denominations (typically Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and non-affiliated) who meet together to explore Judaism and worship as feminists.

Feminist activists "frequently... pursue two related goals - the privileging of previously silenced voices and the transforming of dominant representations that reproduce systemic inequalities" (Ashcraft 3). This paper presents a case study of the worship of one Jewish feminist group during one weekend retreat in which I was a participant. The two feminist goals of voicing and transforming are reflected in the language of worship. Feminist theory and dialogic construction interact on this occasion to manifest those feminist goals. "Language is not property of the individual, but of the community" (Labov 52) and so language as it is used in this particular community is the focus of this investigation. Language - who speaks, what is said, and who determines these things - is examined as voice and transformation.

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The Case: Jewish Women's Center of Pittsburgh

Jewish feminists who comprise the Jewish Women's Center (JWC) of Pittsburgh have been meeting for ten years, The JWC, like other Jewish feminist groups, is not affiliated with any denomination within Judaism. Because it is outside the sanctions of mainstream Judaism, the members hold a special social identity and they come together as a community of practice. Eight women, including me, came together one weekend in October, 2002, to engage with Judaism. They agreed to allow me to tape-record our activities and participate in the weekend's events as a case study. Three religious services were held:
Friday evening Kabbalat Shabbat,
Saturday Shabbat morning service,
and Saturday Shabbat evening service.
No rabbi or other sanctioned leader was present, only us as Jews and feminists, among our other identities in our professional and familial lives.

Constructing Worship

Each worship service is conducted with its own photocopied "prayerbook," which consists of a dozen or so pages containing songs, drawings, decorative designs, prayers (in English and Hebrew), and meditative and informative texts. The end pages in the Sabbath morning and evening prayerbooks contain a list of citations of the texts within. Women writers, rabbis, poets, and artists from disparate times and geographic locations contribute to the worship. The language of the prayerbook is not anonymous - as prayerbooks so often are, and where that anonimity lends an aura of truth and immutability - instead, it is a social construction via a collection of traditional and women's voices. One member of the group had created each prayerbook and made copies for us.

Despite the existence of the prayerbook, it was not wholly followed, as can be seen in the following instruction from Clara[1] who lead the Saturday morning Shabbat worship. As we gathered after breakfast, Clara said, "So what I was thinking we could do with the service this morning is, as a community, make our service." She divided us into two groups and each was to be responsible for half the service. To do so, we followed Clara's instruction, "incorporate some of [our] values into how we do the service this morning." She had prepared a prayerbook, but she told us, "you don't have to use it. You can pick some of the things to use, you can add other things that you want, you can take out; whatever you want to do... ."

Clara brought prayerbooks which adhere to the traditional structure of the Sabbath morning service including feminist renderings of those traditional elements. Nonetheless, she informed us that the prayerbook was not to be viewed as fixed. We were to "pick some", "add other things" or "take out" from that which was therein. Clara was asking us to fundamentally follow these questions:
"What does it mean to honor a text as sacred... What is the effect of a worshipful stance? Does it open the doors to wisdom -- or close the doors to some of our truths?" (JWC morning service, unpaginated).

In fact, when we reconvened our two groups to continue the morning service, we had already spoken deeply about the content of the prayers and service, added our own commentary, eliminated some text, and identified

[1]This and all other participants' names are pseudonyms

songs to sing. The group I hadn't been part of chose to open the formal worship service by looldng at and discussing a piece of artwork that was on the back page of our prayerbook. And so we did, much like the ancient rabbis said, "Turn it (the Torah], and turn it, for everything is in it" (Sayings of the Fathers V:26), but we also found that "not all is in it. We find we have more to add" (JWC morning service).

Naming History/Herstory

The notion of naming has deep significance for Judaism and for feminism. Judaism understands that the events from the past are not simply history, but have importance for the contemporary era of each generation. Because the power of the past shapes the present, naming our biblical predecessors is an integral part of worship. A prayer of traditional Sabbath services begins: "Praised be thou, 0 Lord, God of our fathers, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... ."

Feminists have pointed out that God is not only a God of our fathers but also our mothers. God is not only the God of the patriarchs, but also the matriarchs. Thus we read in the JWC Sabbath morning service, "Blessed are You, God of our mothers Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, and God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob[2].." This is consistent with Judith Plaskow's injunction that "we must render visible the presence, experience and deeds of women erased in the traditional sources" (28).

Another blessing in the JWC prayerbook reads, in part:

"May God bless you
With the strength and vision of Sarah,
With the wisdom and foresight of Rebecca,
With the courage and compassion of Rachel,
With the gentleness and graciousness of Leah."

In this case, the biblical women are called upon as exemplars, furthering the notion that supplementing the prayers with women's stories makes the connection between the past and the present real for worshippers today. Through the prayer, we are attempting to fulfill another supplication, "Refine our appreciation of the models who preceded us" (Agus, unpaginated).

Reference specifically to Jewish women's contributions in history occurs in the evening Sabbath prayerbook where five women are named who died during that month in previous years, including Rachel, the biblical wife of Jacob; Rachel Yanit Ben-Tzvi, founder of Israel's women's labor movement; and Anzia Yezierska, an American novelist of the early 20th century, A feminist critique of traditional Judaism points out that "the recording of Jewish pasts has transmitted the texts and experiences of male authors and actors" (Peskowitz 22). The JWC prayerbook engages in the important task of recovering and honoring Jewish women's history.

God is spoken of in new terms as well in the JWC prayerbooks. Instead of

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[2] The inclusive language which is discussed, in some cases, can also be found in the congregational prayer books of the principle denominations which have been issued since the 1970s. However my interest here is to examine the JWC prayerbook in light of more traditional observance as a reflection of how feminist women pray together.

referring to God as Lord, Almighty, King and Father which denote maleness and domination, God is called The Eternal, or simply You. God is attributed with feminine qualities. For example, the prayerbook says, "Yours are the cradling Arms of our life and the Womb of our safe deliverance" (JWC morning service, 16), which is distinct from a traditional prayer which reads, "Thou art the Strength of our Life and our saving Shield" (Birnbaum 356).

The traditional blessing form begins, "Blessed are You, lord our God, king of the universe," which some feminists abhor because it is "sexist, hierarchical, and idolatrous in its fixedness" (Plaskow 142). The JWC instead adopted the blessings created by Jewish scholar Marcia Falk. They begin, "Let us bless the source of life." With this phrase "the act of blessing [refers] to the community of human beings that blesses, at the same time the community acknowledges its connection to a deeper, underground reality" (Plaskow 142). The relationship between the congregation and God is emphasized as life-giving rather than controlling.

One Voice among Many

The prayerbook we used are compilations from many sources and many eras. There are prayers, songs, poems and commentary. This variety creates a dialogue among many disparate voices within the worship service itself.

At one point in the Sabbath morning service Rivka stopped to ask what was the source of a piece of artwork. Clara responded that she had been "at a women's psychology conference and there was a group of Jewish women who met for (worship] services Friday night and this is from the [prayerbook] that one of them put together... and it was like this, a homemade thing." We continue to add to each new experience, in part, by including meaningful elements from previous ones, creating a new legacy for feminists.

In the context of worship, we have not only a listener in God, but we listen to each other, and respond. There is a line in a piece of the liturgy that reads that we "shall keep the Sabbath, observe it in a way which befits each person's needs" (JWC 15). During a discussion that took place during the worship service, Sarah commented on that statement saying, "I think what it's saying is wrong. I know we have choices, but... ." The following exchange ensued:

> Clara: I see. We have choices but we don't have every choice. We have a number of choices.
> Sarah: Yeah, we still need to adhere to the tradition. I know that the commandment says to rest on the Sabbath, and if you exercise the right discipline you can observe the commandment.
> Moira: Pm not a hundred percent sure that discipline is the right virtue.

In worship we hold conversations which keep our personal practices vibrant.

Integrating Feminism and Judaism: A Continuing Discourse

A feminist first must "critique the masculine origins of received texts and traditions" writes Peskowitz (26). Although she is writing of Jewish women's history, surely her demand is relevant to creating Jewish women's ritual when she says that the feminist critic must then "reconstruct... with new sources or through new readings of old sources" (26). The prayerbooks of the JWC fulfill this requirement by

reinterpreting and privileging the biblical women through feminist eyes and by including writings by other women who had never entered the mainstream Jewish worship texts.

Further, Bekerman states that Judaism must alter efforts from the "inculcation or transmission of values, historical facts, ritual knowledge and social purposes to their *production in social settings and through discourse*" (Bekerman 469, my emphasis). The worship service leader made this transformation possible by giving to us the responsibility for creating the service using the material she provided as a resource. We created "the shared experience of intimacy in women's prayer community" (Breitman 77) by making a communal prayer service. All the JWC worship services were variously interrupted, discussed, questioned, and instantaneously and collaboratively created. The format of a leader-led service with a compliant congregation as occurs in most synagogues was wholly transformed to right systemic inequality and domination. In the JWC worship all the participants had voice, opinions, experiences, contributions and insights. Individuals' voices were valued and they counted in the discourse of worship.

When women make a place for themselves in an androcentric tradition such as Judaism, there are "roughly three possibilities," says Tamar El-Or. "They can accept and internalize male-defined practices; they can reread, deconstruct, and read again; or, they can resist and reject them altogether" (El-Or 65). To a great degree, the women of the JWC have abandoned the first, embraced the second, and refused the third. I, and others at the Jewish Women's Center of Pittsburgh, am much like those "many individuals [for whom]...the only way back into the Jewish liturgical cycle is through experimentation -- by including new prayers or revising old ones, through song and dance and... by expanding Our images of God" (Staub qtd.in Zaidman 62). The JWC is a case where the practice of worship uses language to amend who gets to speak and what gets said. It seems this is a useful case for considering how the feminist goals of voicing and transforming are realized in practice.

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