

MEMORY & RECLAMATION: JEWISH FEMINISM REMEMBERED, 1967-1994

by

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## I. INTRODUCTION

“In general, Jews are left out of the bigger story,” noted Rabbi Rebecca Alpert [1950-].<sup>1</sup> Although the Feminist Movement from the 1960s to the 1990s saw a disproportionate number of Jewish women participate, rarely does the Feminist Movement analyze or acknowledge the Feminist Movement as a Jewish led movement. Leaders of the Women’s Movement such as Betty Friedan [1921-2006], who helped kick start the movement with the publishing of her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963, and who helped found the National Organization of Women (NOW), in 1966, Congresswoman Bella Abzug [1920-1998], and emerging feminist theorists and activists like Susan Brownmiller [1935-], Alix Kates Shulman [1932-], Heather Booth [1945-], Ruth Bader Ginsberg [1933-2020], and many other women are frequently celebrated in the historiography of Women’s Liberation.<sup>2</sup> Yet rarely are their contributions to the movement and women’s equality identified or understood as having something to do with their Jewish identities and cultures.

In Judaism, *tikkun olam*, meaning ‘repair of the world,’ means that Jews may not be able to solve all of the problems that exist, but there is an obligation to acknowledge the injustices witnessed and attempt to address and attempt to fix that problem. This socially minded religious idea makes the presence of Jews in social activism understandable. “They were so involved in protests, and activism, from the labor strike to the birth control movement, to the Communist Party, to Civil Rights, Anti-Fascism, feminism,” Jewish historian and professor Joyce Antler remarked on the presence of

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom, January 13, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Pamela Nadell, *America’s Jewish Women: A History from Colonial Times to Today*, W.W. Norton Company, 2020, 314-440.

Jewish individuals within social movements in the United States during the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Despite their activism, Jewish narratives within social movements remain largely silent. It could be argued that the Jewishness of an individual remained silent in part because of anti-Semitism within the country throughout the twentieth century. While the earlier social movements had Jewish leaders such as Emma Goldman, who identified as an atheist but still spoke to many crowds in Yiddish because the audience largely consisted of Jewish immigrants, for the most part the Jewishness of activists remained invisible.<sup>4</sup> While the United States classified Jewish as ‘Other’ for many decades and often categorized them in a non-white category, over time the Jewish physical characteristics that once alienated the group simply became part of the ‘Caucasian’ classification.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the ‘Caucasian’ labeling, the religious and socially minded idea of *tikkun olam* persisted. As a group of historically oppressed people who faced discrimination, they found oppression and discrimination unacceptable. Jewish activism carried on within the Feminist Movement. However, identifying oneself as only a woman, rather than a Jewish woman, created issues and led to the creation of a Jewish Feminist Movement.<sup>6</sup> Jewish Feminism sought to challenge women’s status within Judaism in the social, religious, and legal realms. Feminist ideology from the secular Feminist

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<sup>3</sup> Joyce Antler interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom, February 8, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> David Waldstreicher, "Radicalism, Religion, Jewishness: The Case of Emma Goldman," *American Jewish History* 80, no. 1 (1990): 74-92.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Looking Jewish, Seeing Jews," in *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Harvard University Press, 1998, 171-201. Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, New York University Press, 2018.

Movement heavily influenced many Jewish feminists to change Judaism to become more inclusive. This work focuses on the religious aspects of the Jewish Feminist Movement, which took place roughly between 1970 and 1994.

Within Judaism, there are four branches: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. Jewish feminists from all branches were involved in the Jewish Feminist Movement. The smallest portion came from the Orthodox branch, in part because Jewish Orthodoxy demands strict observance of the commandments and customs of Judaism. Conservative Judaism, which is not as strict as the Orthodox but follows Jewish practices closely, made up a bigger portion of Jewish feminists, in part because Conservative Jews allowed some participation for girls, allowing them to learn and then later on question Judaism and push for more egalitarian practices. The Reform branch of Judaism believes in the reinterpretation of Jewish religious laws, practices, and life to fit with the modern world. Lastly, and the most recent branch of Judaism that originated as a break with the Conservative branch, Reconstructionism, is similar to Reform but more egalitarian and prioritizes voluntary participation.<sup>7</sup>

This thesis seeks to highlight the Jewish community and the struggle of Jewish women's fight for religious equality and accountability through a feminist ideological lens. The suspicion of religion within a progressive society dimmed or restricted the discussion of religious influence and change, especially within Judaism. Additionally, progressive social movements, influenced by Jewish values, led to a theological discussion about *halachic* studies and the utilization of *midrash* in Judaism that brought into question Jewish rituals using a feminist lens. Jewish feminist ideology also studied

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<sup>7</sup> Adam Lewinsky, *Judaism*, Major World Religions, Philadelphia: National Hights Inc, 2017, 20,44. Jacob J. Staub, *Judaism*36, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 195.

and argued a Jewish female precedence existed through Jewish female figures, which helped establish women in the religious and leadership settings.

## **Historiography**

The history of feminism and women's push for acknowledgment and equality is not a new phenomenon in the United States. The Women's Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s is known as the continuation of what started in the early twentieth century when suffragists fought for the right to vote, commonly thought of as first wave feminism. The study of the mid-twentieth century Women's Movement, known as the second wave, occurred during an era of cultural change in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement and groups like Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), prepared many young people on how to address social injustice. The emergence of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) with their opposition to the Vietnam War also trained young college students how to organize and protest. In a time of great social change, women working within these organizations realized their oppression and lack of authority. Eventually breaking away from these groups to establish their own, the beginning of this Women's Movement emerged.

Historians examining the rise of the 1970s Women's Liberation Movement initially focused on ideological differences among feminists and favored uncovering the history of radical feminism. Alice Echols, author of *Daring to be Bad*, originally published in 1989 and republished for its thirtieth anniversary in 2019, made the important distinction between radical feminists, politicians or socialist feminists, and

cultural and liberal feminists. Politico feminism, which blamed capitalism for male supremacy and oppression, started as the major ideology of feminism. Radical feminism proclaimed male supremacy was the beginning of all forms of discrimination, capitalism simply adhered to the rules of male supremacy. Radical feminism rejected the mainstream male supremacy and desired a more utopian community. Echols notes the success of radical feminism, but also claims that the radical feminism focused so much on the idea that gender created more commonalities than class and race divided, that the fear of differences between women would weaken the movement.<sup>8</sup> Understanding radical feminism history, Echols argues, goes a long way to understanding the trajectory the movement took into the 1970s and how the less abrasive liberal feminism won out in the end and how understanding these ideologies could help create more discussion on the past and how to revitalize the women's movement for the time in which Echols originally wrote the book—at the beginning of what would be known as the third wave of feminism in the 1990s.<sup>9</sup>

Historians of the Women's Liberation Movement have attempted to understand how race, class, and sexuality differences shaped the movement. Ruth Rosen countered the whiteness of Echols' account by including women of color and other minorities that strove to have their individual voices heard to push for change within their respective communities – whether that be Asian Americans, Chicano women, African American women, and lesbian feminist groups.<sup>10</sup> Sara Evans' 2003 book, *Tidal Waves: How Women Changed America at Century's End*, also confronts the narrative that the

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<sup>8</sup> Alice Echols and Ellen Willis, "Introduction," In *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975, Thirtieth Anniversary Edition*, University of Minnesota Press, 2019, 3-22.

<sup>9</sup> Echols and Willis, "Introduction," *Daring to Be Bad*, 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, Viking, 2000, 400-430.

Women's Movement consisted of only white middle-class women. Evans sheds light on the myth that the movement left out minority women in both organizational work and as voices for change.<sup>11</sup> While Evans suggested cooperation existed between feminist groups, Benita Roth and her book, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*, claims that rather than cooperation between groups, several formed during the same period but within their own ethnic groups. Rather than white feminism being the beginning of the Women's Movement, simultaneously other women's groups formed because of the unrest and political activism occurring within cultural communities.<sup>12</sup>

In her essay 'Living a Feminist Lifestyle: The Intersection of Theory and Action in a Lesbian Feminist Collective,' Anne M. Valk, author of the 2008 book *Radical Sisters: Second Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington D.C.*, argues that lesbian feminists fought to be heard by fellow feminists and eventually attempted to push their ideologies into the mainstream through specific media outlets.<sup>13</sup>

Much of the work produced by historians of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s discussed so far focused on radical feminism (socialist, nationalist, anti-imperialist, lesbian), yet recently historians have contended with the legacy of liberal feminism. Historian Kirsten Swinth does not just examine the conflicting groups within feminism, but rather explores one of the most pivotal agendas across all women's groups – not just equality in the workplace but equality at home. Swinth's 2018 book,

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<sup>11</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*, Free Press, 32-38.

<sup>12</sup> Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Anne M. Valk, "Living a Feminist Lifestyle: The Intersection of Theory and Action in a Lesbian Feminist Collective," In *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, Edited by Nancy Hewitt, Rutgers University Press, 2010, 221-245.

*Feminism's Forgotten Fight: The Unfinished Struggle for Work and Family*, examines the family centered agenda of the Women's Movement. In order to access the workplace, many women needed childcare, and if pregnant at work they needed protections to ensure termination did not occur simply because of a pregnancy, and employers did not support the idea of paid family leave. Even in the household, family units needed to reimagine the home not as a woman's place to raise and care for children and home, but as an equal responsibility for both spouses.<sup>14</sup> Swinth's examination of the reconceptualization of family in the US political economy by liberal feminists joins other historians like Susan M. Hartmann and Dorothy Sue Cobble in arguing that the Women's Liberation Movement challenged the primacy of the breadwinner political economy from liberal organizations such as labor unions, non-profits, and church groups.<sup>15</sup>

The role of Jewish women in the Women's Liberation Movement has recently become a topic of investigation for historians. One such historian, Joyce Antler, sought to unveil how Jewish women's background, consciously or unconsciously, influenced their actions within the movement. Her 2018 book, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*, analyzes the disproportionate number of Jewish women who participated within the women's movement. While many during their activism rarely considered their Jewish roots as it related to their feminism, interviews conducted by others and Antler revealed how looking back, many of these women acknowledged their Jewishness influenced their social justice ideology.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kristen Swinth, *The Forgotten Fight: The Unfinished Struggle for Work and Family*, Harvard University Press, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Hartmann, Susan M. *The Other Feminists: Activists in the Liberal Establishment*. Yale University Press, 1998. Cobble, Dorothy Sue. *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*. Princeton University Press, 2005

<sup>16</sup> Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 1-28.

The first half of Antler's book delved into the Feminist Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which consisted of many prominent Jewish women like Alix Kates Schulman, Shulamith Firestone, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and known advocates like Congresswoman Bella Abzug. However, early feminist history left out women's Jewish backgrounds in the analytical exploration of feminism, and how this background played a role in women's social activism. The backgrounds of these women, no matter how diverse, all agreed to an extent that their Jewish identity played a role in their lives, especially in their views of oppression and inequality. The second half of Antler's book discussed the Jewish identified feminists in the 1970s and 1980s seeking to use the momentum of the Feminist Movement to create a new feminist ideology to effect change within their Jewish secular and religious communities. Women like Judith Plaskow, Martha Ackelsberg, Susan Weidman Schneider, and Aviva Cantor, from varying levels of religious backgrounds, sought to implement change in a religion that seemed inherently masculine but in reality had the ability to become more inclusive and egalitarian.<sup>17</sup>

This work differs from that of Antler and previous historians because of the added cultural intellectual history that highlights Jewish feminists creative re-imagining and critical engagement of Jewish cultural women. Lilith and Miriam represent strong Jewish women through the tales of Jewish lore. Miriam's symbolic importance in rituals and celebrations signify the longevity of Jewish women's participation in practices largely associated with only men up until the 1970s. Lilith, a figure demonized for centuries by rabbinical scholars, provides a symbol of an independent woman who defied her role as a submissive partner, and gave Jewish women a heroine within Jewish folklore.

Additionally, this work also includes the interviewees' insight on the memory of the

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<sup>17</sup> Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 1-28.

Jewish Feminist Movement, outcomes, lingering issues, and how the history of the Movement has been remembered. Lastly, this work continues to address and fill the gap of academic work that addresses the religious reform that occurred because of the emergence feminist ideology of the 1960s and 1970s during and the Women's Movement.

## **Methodology**

This work relies on a multitude of sources written by many of the Jewish feminists who formed organizations and posed theological questions and suggestions to push for their rightful place within the Jewish religious community. This includes works written by co-founders of the Jewish feminist magazine, *Lilith*, Aviva Cantor [1940- ] and Susan Weidman Schnieder [1944-], in addition to Jewish feminist theologian, Judith Plaskow [1947-], and Jewish feminist writers like Rachel Adler [1943-], Orthodox Jew Blu Greenberg [1936-], in addition to female rabbis like Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, and Rabbi Chai Levy [1972]. Through academic works and oral histories, these women contributed to the analysis and discussion of the theological discussions and opinions regarding Jewish women's place within the religious community.

Additionally, I conducted interviews with the following: Judith Plaskow, Susan Weidman Schneider, Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, Rabbi Chai Levy, and Joyce Antler. Oral history, especially within the field of Feminist Studies, are valuable in part because they fall under the necessity that feminism does— filling in the gaps of history through a feminist lens. Oral history itself is an important tool because interviewees have their own perspectives and memories of past events, and it is important to document the beliefs,

ideas and memories of others to get a microscopic idea of past historical events. Jewish Feminism, like other off shoots of feminist groups, are valuable in that they cover an area of history often left out of the general feminist narrative. While there are studies and publications, the voices of the women who participated in the movement itself are worth noting because they took part in the event itself. One of my interviewees, Joyce Antler, conducted dozens of interviews for her book, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, in addition to consulting dozens more conducted by others.

While issues exist on how to have shared authority between an interviewer and interviewee, and properly conveying thoughts from an interview to paper can cause tension, the idea is to accurately capture the sentiments from those who are being interviewed, and to hear their take on the history they took part in<sup>18</sup>.

## **Thesis Chapters**

Throughout this work, three sections seek to break down the Jewish Feminist Movement by discussing the feminist theological discussions that occurred, by analyzing and contributing to the rediscover and creation of new Jewish rituals, and the discussion and reclamation of Jewish female figures. It also seeks to discuss the importance of the Jewish Feminist Movement within the religious community and its lack of remembrance within both the mainstream Feminist Movement and by the Jewish religious community itself.

Chapter one discusses the origins of Jewish feminism as a sub-group of the mainstream Feminist Movement in the 1970s created in response to the anti-Semitism

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<sup>18</sup> Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* Routledge, 1991, 1-4.

occurring throughout the New Left, especially when addressing the anti-Zionist sentiment. Anti-Zionist rhetoric sought to diminish the legitimacy of Israel as a country, but the anti-Semitic remarks about the Jewish people as a whole created a different type of discomfort. The emergence of Jewish theology and its place within feminism sought to reconcile the twentieth century ideology of feminism with the centuries of religious tradition that makes up Judaism. This section also gives a understanding of the issues that Jewish feminists sought to rectify within their religious communities. This included women's participation, or lack thereof, in religious practices and rituals such as ordination of female rabbis and the discussion of allowing women to take part in the *minyan*, which is required by most Jewish congregations to hold a service, and traditionally occurred when ten men joined together, and entirely excluded women.

With the forming of *Ezrat Nashim*, a religious study group that confronted Conservative Rabbis at Rabbinical Conference in New York, the Women's Jewish Conference in 1973 came together to discuss the demands of Jewish women. The words of Judith Plaskow and her essay, 'The Coming of Lilith,' would help spark the reclamation of the *midrashic* character of Lilith as Adam's first wife who refused to submit and be anything but Adam's equal.

Additionally, the remembrance of these women and their work to push for changes within their religious community gets discussed by several women who took part in this change, including Judith Plaskow, Susan Weidman Schneider, and Rabbi Rebecca Alpert. Their opinions on how Jewish feminism remains largely absent in the discussion of feminist history and even within the Jewish community is explored.

The second chapter of this work breaks down the history of the Jewish figures of Lilith, previously mentioned in section one, and Miriam of Exodus. Though the two women differ from each other, both become reclaimed by Jewish feminists as a way of proving that female presence in Judaism has a precedence. Miriam in particular becomes utilized as a nurturing figure by feminists, and pushes the symbolic importance of water, life, and rebirth. Miriam's importance, according to scholars and writers such as Rabbi Susan Schnur [1951- ], Rebecca Schwartz, and Alicia Ostriker [1937 -], helped push Jewish women to argue for their rightful place beside rather than behind Jewish men. As Miriam also obtained the status as Prophet, Jewish women have a precedence of holding leadership roles in Judaism.

Miriam also symbolized the erasure of the female story in Judaism. As a woman who existed and helped her people through the desert, her status as an adored Prophet endured despite the erasure of some of her story in Exodus. Her endurance, despite erasure and the attempt to write her off as a wife, her strength as a Prophet and a nurturer to her people gave rise to the notion that Jewish women also have the potential to be Jewish leaders despite the ideas placed on them by male members of the Jewish community. Miriam always gets mentioned at Passover, but her story awakened the idea of a female Haggadah and including Miriam's cup on the seder plate as a reminder of women's permanent presence within Judaism despite the attempts to push them into the peripherals.

Lilith – much more controversial than Miriam, also plays a role in the Jewish Feminist Movement. Reclaimed and written about by Judith Plaskow, Plaskow wrote 'The Coming of Lilith' to represent the 1970s consciousness-raising group and to reflect

the sisterhood when Plaskow places Lilith and Adam's first wife, Eve, into close proximity together.<sup>19</sup> Having the two realize they share more commonalities with each other than with God or Adam, Plaskow's narrative turns Lilith into the first independent woman rather than the demoness rabbinical scholars turned her into during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Lilith's importance to Jewish feminists become apparent not only with Plaskow's 1973 essay, but with the establishment of the Jewish feminist magazine, *Lilith*, in 1976, with Lilith on the cover and as the namesake of the magazine. To Jewish feminists, Lilith pushes the narrative, similar to Miriam, that women stood behind the scenes and remained subservient to men. Rather, Lilith's symbolic importance as the first wife of Adam and the first independent woman, helps Jewish women with the idea that women with authority exist, and though sometimes they become villainized, they always existed and continue to do so.

The last chapter deals with the accomplishments and the continuing theological discussion on feminist ideologies bringing about change within the Jewish religious community. Breaking down the demands of *Ezrat Nashim* in dealing with ordination of female rabbis and cantors, wide acceptance of the *bat mitzvah*, in addition to rediscovering and utilizing feminine observant holidays like Rosh Chodesh, the last chapter analyzes women's growing place in Judaism. Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, who became one of the first Reconstructionist female rabbis, gives her take on the challenges of being one of the first female rabbis in a time when previously men dominated the profession. Additionally, Rabbi Chai Levy, ordained more than twenty years after the first female rabbis entered congregations, gives her twenty-first century view of how things have progressed yet stayed the same for female rabbis. Additionally, struggles that remain,

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<sup>19</sup> Judith Plaskow, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom, November 7, 2021.

such as the religious divorce, and how women who traditionally held no power over the religious proceedings to divorce deal with the issue.

New ceremonies that remind Jewish communities of Jewish girls also gets analyzed. Naming ceremonies incorporate girls into the community to counter the ritualistic *bris*, or circumcision that boys have to become part of the religious community. While not new, putting more emphasis on the *bat mitzvah* becomes another progressive change occurring within Judaism. Though technically occurring for a century, the limitations girls faced when preparing or having the *bat mitzvah* created the sense of inferiority compared with the Jewish boy counterpart. These changes to include more women in rituals and leadership roles, pushed forth by women like Rabbi Alpert, Judith Plaskow and others, signified the positive change feminist ideology brought to Judaism. Despite hesitancy or resistance, those changes are ongoing to improve the lives of Jewish women and fulfilling the ideas of *tikkun olam*.

## II. BEGINNINGS AND IDEOLOGY OF JEWISH FEMINISM

“There really isn’t awareness,” remembered Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow [1947-] when asked about the intersection of feminist activism and Jewish identity.<sup>1</sup> A cultural revolution swept through the United States in the 1960s and into the 1970s. The Civil Rights Movement, the Gay Rights Movement, and the Second Wave Feminist Movement progressed, with other groups learned the techniques and ideology of the larger movements to demand rights and equity within their own communities. One such minority group had existed in the United States for centuries: Jews. However, these were not the stereotypical Jewish ‘black hatter’ that comes to mind for most Americans. Rather, this group consisted of Jewish women, such as Blu Greenberg [1936- ], Judith Plaskow and Rebecca Alpert [1950- ], women who learned from feminist theory and sought to apply it to Judaism, though in rather diverse ways.<sup>2</sup> Collectively, these women and others like them worried about the relationship of their feminist ideals and its relationship to their Jewishness.

Curious to understand how feminism had influenced their beliefs or how Judaism, as a whole, could benefit from the feminist ideology, women like Plaskow, a Reform Jew, and Greenberg, an Orthodox Jew, sought to reconcile the two beliefs: their Jewish faith and their commitment to women’s equality. This movement should not have been a total surprise to the Jewish community. Judaism’s survival resulted from centuries of adapting to the constant changes in society and even borrowing from the world at large. Judaism itself traditionally stayed a fluid culture that historically changed to

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Plaskow, Interview by Megan Schwab, Via Zoom, November 7, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, New York University Press, NY, 2018, 205-243.

accommodate the alterations in the general society around them.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the liberation movements occurring in the second half of the twentieth century, Jewish women's long history of activism and pushing for reform in a variety of ways and from a variety of platforms well before these decades. The United States felt the pressure from the predecessors of these Jewish women during the Progressive Era.<sup>4</sup> When trade unionists, garment workers, suffragists, those advocating for reproductive rights and accessible birth control, or even the socialists and communists of the day participated in strikes for their rights, many of the faces in the crowd were Jewish immigrants or the daughters of immigrants who came to United States in search of a better future.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout this work, I intend to show how the evolution of feminism and its ideology, sparked a movement within Judaism to inspire change. Jewish women entered this political age as feminists first and only came to embrace their Jewishness upon realizing they could better their community and themselves by embracing both aspects as a feminist and as a Jew. Through secular influences and reexamining and altering traditional Jewish beliefs and practices, Jewish women could embrace their religion while promoting gender equity within Judaism. Through theology and approaching Judaism with a critical lens through academic and rabbinical studies, Jewish women such as Plaskow, a pioneer in Jewish feminist theology, carved a space for women within their religious community.

Those within the Jewish Feminist Movement, promoted their respective opinions and discussed ways of creating positive change within the Jewish community. While

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism From a Feminist Perspective*, Harper One, 1990, 229.

<sup>4</sup> Source on Progressive Jewish women (Joyce Antler...) Nadell, *America's Jewish Women* and Linda Gordon Kuzmack, *Woman's Cause*.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 5. Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire, Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965*, University of North Carolina Press, 1995, 15-36.

heavily influenced by the secular Feminist Movement, unique obstacles arose from Jewish practice and ritual. Equal pay and childcare, while important to feminists on a broad scale, did not necessarily help when focusing on practices in synagogue and in the home, nor the notion of a woman's obligation or lack thereof on the Sabbath. While Jewish women identified with the struggles of being women, the question of religious change within the Jewish community became an agenda separate from the secular Feminist Movement.

These Jewish feminists aligned with the ideas of *tikkun olam*. This translates from Hebrew as 'repair or healing of the world.' *Tikkun olam* often references actions that lead to positive change within society, whether that be in the secular or religious realms.<sup>6</sup> For the specific purpose of Jewish feminists, their desire meant leaving their mark on the rituals of Jewish religious communal life. To some, like Judith Plaskow, it meant finding a balance and a sense of equality in all things while creating new rituals that incorporated the previously silenced female population within Judaism.<sup>7</sup> Others, like Blu Greenberg, sought to implement their own sense of equality with the notion that, "From the perspective of Judaism there can be separate, clear-cut roles in which men and women may function as equals without losing separate identities."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Jewish feminists sought to empower the one half of the population that birthed the next generation of Jews but who traditionally remained left out of the affirmative *mitzvahs* (religious duty or commandments) of Judaism.<sup>9</sup> The idea that Jewish women were given

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<sup>6</sup> Dany Rutenberg, et. al, *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*, Seal Press, 229.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, xiv-xvii.

<sup>8</sup> Blu Greenberg, "Feminism: Is It Good for the Jews?," *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Blu Greenberg, "Feminism: Is It Good for the Jews?" in *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*, The Jewish Publication Society of American, 1981, 3- 20.

less religious responsibility and in religious law held little say over things like divorce, or received minimal education of the Talmud, became a rallying point for many of those women who chose to participate in their religious communities and desired to be truly included.

Traditionally men and women held different religious obligations within the Jewish family unit. Part of the role the husband required devoting as much time in the day as possible to Jewish texts and temple rituals. As the husbands spent their days in temple, it became the belief that women's purpose revolved around raising their children, keeping a kosher household, and performing the minimal number of rituals, such as lighting the Sabbath candle. Traditional Jewish practice did not require women to attend Sabbath eve service because a woman's attendance meant less than that of a man's.<sup>10</sup>

Jewish women contributed to countless social movements that all sought to improve the lives of American citizens. Despite their desire to help others, many times the very group of Jewish activists that contributed to social justice faced sexism, not only because they were women participating in movements dominated by men, but because of their religious backgrounds. Despite the fact that a large portion of activists in these secular social movements gained support by and even contained Jewish women as founding members, many did not necessarily associate themselves or their beliefs with Jewish teachings or ideas, and whether or not Jewish women practiced their religion, rarely did it become a topic brought up in consciousness raising discussions within the Feminist Movement.<sup>11</sup> For many of these Jewish women, their physical characteristics and socioeconomic status made them feel as though they could not speak out about

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<sup>10</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism*, 75-77.

<sup>11</sup> Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 1-2.

discrimination that effected them, in addition to gender, because of their perceived 'whiteness'. Despite the historical discrimination Jewish people faced for millennia in the United States over the course of the twentieth century, the issue of race became much less about ethnic differences and more about skin color. The issue of racism and overt discrimination of African Americans spiked, pushing other xenophobic tendencies against ethnic groups like Italians, Poles, and Jews to the wayside. As the most noticeably different group, African Americans always appeared 'other,' leaving them to be more discriminated against than other groups, even by the ethnic groups who faced xenophobic rhetoric previously.<sup>12</sup>

The 'whiteness' of the Jewish people also meant addressing the issue of having the Jewish historical narrative neglected, with a few notable exceptions. Noted by Jewish feminist and writer Aviva Cantor [1940-], "There is as yet no good text for adults, children, or youth in which Jewish women's history is mainstreamed, just as there is no general history textbook in which *Jewish* history is mainstreamed."<sup>13</sup> In addition to their physical ability to blend in and disappear into the crowd throughout the decades, so too did the history of Jews. In this case, Jewish women's relative invisibility within the Women's Movement led to a lack of discussion until negative rhetoric and antagonism emerged.

Their cultural or ethnic differences, appearance, and general middle-class upbringing and assimilation into many mainstream American norms, caused many Jewish feminists filling that space to not examine the extra layer of prejudice they faced. The

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Looking Jewish, Seeing Jews," in *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Harvard University Press, 1998, 171-201.

<sup>13</sup> Aviva Cantor, *Jewish Women/Jewish Men: The Legacy of Patriarchy in Jewish Life*, Harper San Francisco, 1995, 423.

lack of examining their differences became especially evident when compared with African American women or Chicana women, whose physical characteristics often made them easy targets for discrimination at large, in addition to their gender.<sup>14</sup> However, in part because of their physical characteristics, in some ways it made it easier for them to make clear not only did gender play a role in the discrimination they faced, but their racialized physicality played a role as well.<sup>15</sup> This physical difference made it easier for them to argue the complexities of what it meant to be a women of an ethnic minority. A visible ethnic minority, in theory, held more sway when those differences are much easier for the general public to see and understand.

Feminist women, like Rebecca Alpert, remarked on a rise in anti-Semitism in the late 1970s “triggered for a lot of these secular Jewish feminists... like, ‘wait a minute, I’m a Jew. That matters to me.’”<sup>16</sup> The growth of a religious conservatism within the Republican Party combined with the Zionist movement and Israel’s conflict with Palestine in the West Bank pushed feminists to call attention to the fact that oppression could be carried out by minorities, especially if considered ‘white.’ In this post Holocaust world and through Jewish peoples’ western assimilation for survival, the narrative of Jews solely as victims changed. By the late 1970s, there contained the possibility of Jewish people being the white oppressors rather than the victims.<sup>17</sup>

The *off our backs* 1982 article, “Feminism, Anti-Semitism, and Racism...”, called out the fact that, to some within the Women’s Movement, Jews had become part of the

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<sup>14</sup> Antler, *Radical Jewish Feminism*, 14-16.

<sup>15</sup> Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave*, Cambridge University Press, 2004. Ula Y. Taylor, “Black Feminisms and Human Agency,” and Marisela Chavez, “‘We Have a Long, Beautiful History’: Chicana Feminist Trajectories and Legacies,” in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, Rutgers University, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, interview by Megan Schwab, January 13, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Jacobson, “Looking Jewish, Seeing Jews,” in *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 171-201.

white supremacy problem. As a Westernized and assimilated group, because Jews lost some of their ‘otherness,’ and largely blended in with white society, they became suspect to acts deemed as oppressive. The article notes the “...growing tendency in the women’s movement to say that Jewish women are ‘Third World’ or at least not white. This ignores the fact that Jewish people, in America, despite antisemitism, are part of the white supremacist social order that holds down Black, Chicano-Mexicano, Native American, and Puerto Rican lives.”<sup>18</sup> The article heavily noted the issues between Israel and Palestine as well, believing Israel to be the oppressor because of the ‘whiteness’ of the Jewish population despite the past antisemitic horrors of the Holocaust. Similar in its time chronology, Matthew Frye Jacobson noted the gradual Caucasian status of Jews, thus making them more likely to face the issue of white-supremacy and the role as oppressor rather than that of victim.<sup>19</sup>

Specific instances of anti-Semitism at the United Nations World Conferences on Women between 1975 and 1985 also surfaced, pushing some awareness into their own Jewishness. “Feminism, Anti-Semitism, and Racism...”, addressed the idea of Zionism as an ideology based in racism. The United Nations General Assembly, influenced by the United Nations World Conferences on Women’s decision to pass a plank titled, “Zionism is Racism,” surprised many American Jewish feminists and catapulted them into identifying with and creating a sense of newfound awareness of their ethnic and religious backgrounds as Jews. When developing countries’ delegates also called for the elimination of Israel, further anti-Semitic rhetoric became increasingly blatant and

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<sup>18</sup>Women Against Imperialism, “Feminism, Anti-Semitism, and Racism...,” *Off Our Backs* 12, no 7 (1982):20.

<sup>19</sup> Jacobson, “Looking Jewish, Seeing Jews,” in *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 171-201. Women Against Imperialism, “Feminism, Anti-Semitism, and Racism...,” *Off Our Backs* 12, no 7 (1982):20.

worrisome to Jewish feminists attending these conferences. Some of these women decided to support the ideas and pushed for anti-Zionist and anti-Imperialist agendas. Universalism within the Feminist Movement, the belief that the commonality of a gendered identity mattered above all, would fracture, though not from this alone, but it led Jewish women to realize that their holistic experiences were not just based on their gender and skin tone, but their religion as well.<sup>20</sup> While in some instances of the Women's Movement inclusiveness and particularism emerged and created new bonds between different groups of women, the movement itself did break apart as other women find causes plaguing their specific communities.<sup>21</sup>

The Feminist Movement itself grew, in part, from the realization that many of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s largely centered around male leadership. Often women's voices remained unheard and ignored, and misogyny became a constant presence in a movement pushing for social justice and reform. The Jewish Feminist Movement (JFM) emerged because certain Jewish women, like Judith Plaskow and Rebecca Alpert, desired to address their specific concerns regarding their religious community rather than the secular world. Some also desired to employ feminist ideals to impact their Jewish communities and religion, but within the Feminist Movement that idea remained left out of the agenda, in part because the Movement focused on secular equality, though some groups emerged utilizing their new feminist lens to approach religion. Despite the secular reach that feminism held, religious feminist groups emerged, sometimes creating conflict between fellow feminists due to religious differences.

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<sup>20</sup> Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 9-12.

<sup>21</sup> Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*, Free Press, 2003. Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, Ula Y. Taylor, "Black Feminisms and Human Agency," and Marisela Chavez, "'We Have a Long, Beautiful History': Chicana Feminist Trajectories and Legacies," in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, Rutgers University, 2010

Jewish feminists seeking to reform Judaism to be more egalitarian, also had to contend with the relationship between Jewish patriarchy and Christian patriarchy. Within Christian feminism, myths had been perpetuated in Christianity and then Christian feminism that spread the idea that Jews invented the establishment of patriarchy and that prior to that the matriarchy had been dominate. Plaskow cites Sheila Collins' 1974 work, *A Different Heaven and Earth*, as one of the clearest examples, though not the only one.<sup>22</sup> Supposedly even Jesus himself attempted to spread egalitarianism but was prevented by Jewish traditions and ideals. The fact that Christian ideas and beliefs grew out of Judaism meant that therefore Judaism created patriarchy. This argument led to the idea that Judaism could be blamed entirely for the lack of egalitarianism in Christianity. In this light, Judith Plaskow noted in an interview with *Lilith* magazine, that by creating situations where Jesus confronted situations where women dealt with sexism based off Jewish teaching, it perpetuated the idea that Judaism views women in an entirely negative light. However, rather than entirely envision Judaism negatively, it should be acknowledged that, "...Jesus is evidence for Judaism's positive attitudes towards women!"<sup>23</sup>

According to Plaskow, "The real tragedy is that the feminist revolution has furnished one more occasion for the projection of Christian failure onto Judaism."<sup>24</sup> This attempt at scapegoating the organization of a religion rather than looking within ones' own and pushing for change became a point of discussion by Jewish feminist theologians

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<sup>22</sup> Judith Plaskow, "Christian Feminism and Anti-Judaism," in *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003*, Beacon Press, 2005, 89-93. Originally published in 1978.

<sup>23</sup> Admin. "Feminists and Faith: A Discussion with Judith Plaskow and Annette Daum," *Lilith*, no. 7, June 1980.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Plaskow, "Christian Feminism and Anti-Judaism," in *The Coming of Lilith*, 93. Judith Plaskow, "Feminist Anti-Judaism and the Christian God," in *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003*, Beacon Press, 2005, 100-109. Originally published in 1990.

like Plaskow. These ideas, rather than leading to a discussion on how many religions hold patriarchal foundations, created a rift within the Feminist Movement on religious grounds. Some of these Christian feminists attempted to point fingers at the Talmud (Jewish texts) as proof of their claims that Jewish law judged, governed, and devalued women and that those ideas bled into Christianity, making it patriarchal in nature.<sup>25</sup> However, Judaism existed without a finalized version of the Talmud until the sixth century, well after the death of Christ, and while some of the Talmud originated from documents that were likely utilized during the time of Christ, centuries of alterations question the validity of that critique.<sup>26</sup> Although there are many unsavory characterizations within the Talmud regarding women, the New Testament is similar, yet both also hold many beliefs that cherish women, such as the statement in the Talmud, ““Love your wife as yourself, honor her more than yourself.””<sup>27</sup> Although the Feminist Movement as a whole attempted to welcome all women, like any large group, fractures emerged with the purpose of specific agendas being set by subgroups who held some similarities but who also sought to take those ideals and apply them within their own ethnic or religious groups.

### **The Emergence of the Jewish Feminist Critique of Jewish Religious Practices**

The Jewish Feminist Movement consisted of a wide range of religiously observant women. Although many Reform and Conservative Jews participated within the movement, Orthodox and Reconstructionist Jews, like Blu Greenberg and Rebecca Alpert

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<sup>25</sup> Plaskow, “Christian Feminism and Anti-Judaism,” in *The Coming of Lilith*, referencing Leonard Swidler’s “Jesus was a Feminist,” *Catholic World* 212 (January 1971):177-183. Swidler was the first suggesting the argument, but others followed.

<sup>26</sup> Plaskow, “Christian Feminism and Anti-Judaism,” in *The Coming of Lilith*, 89.

<sup>27</sup> Plaskow, “Christian Feminism and Anti-Judaism,” in *The Coming of Lilith*, 89-93.

respectively, also participated. They felt their Jewishness important enough to address through the lens of gender and to promote *tikkun olam* within the Jewish community itself.

In the early 1970s, some Jewish feminists began to critically assess their own places in Jewish life. For example, Rachel Adler [1943- ], married an Orthodox Rabbi and participated actively as a *Rebbetzin*, an Orthodox Rabbi's wife. She earned a Ph.D. in English in the early 1970s, but by 1984 divorced her husband and eventually became a Reform Rabbi in 2012.<sup>28</sup> While still a practicing Orthodox Jew, Adler wrote her piece, "The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halacha and Jewish Women." Originally published by counterculture magazine, *Davka*, in 1972, the provoking ideas of Adler hit home for many Jewish women. Adler termed women as the "peripheral Jews": Jews relegated as only the house keepers and mothers rather than active participants in Judaism. Keeping a kosher home, observing the holidays, and rearing children, especially sons, to become full members of their community, became central to all women according to *halacha* (Jewish law). Women could not read or touch the Torah, they could not be part of a *minyan*, a group of ten Jews required for a prayer service and for specific prayers.<sup>29</sup> They could not become a rabbi or cantor, both of whom lead the congregation and hold important status in Jewish communities as spiritual leaders. In the judicial system women's testimony remained inadmissible in court. Girls also could not study and prepare for a *bat mitzvah*, because only males could attain religious and legal adult status, therefore women did not participate in this rite of passage. Additionally, as a woman, she

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<sup>28</sup> David Ellenson, "Rachel Adler," *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, 23 June 2021, Jewish Women's Archive.

<sup>29</sup> Rachel Adler, "The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman," *Off Our Backs* 2, no. 6 (1972): 16 – 17.

did not have or take part in the *bris*, the ceremonial circumcision, a central ritual in Judaism.<sup>30</sup> In essence, Adler argued, women were not to take part in anything but the minimal amount of Judaism, and the *mitzvahs* expected of them came from their prescribed role as mother and wife. Adler also said the Talmud only saw women as, “frivolous and the female sexual appetite as insatiable...all women were potential adulteresses.”<sup>31</sup> In order to avoid these sinful attitudes, a woman must focus on keeping the household and rearing children as the only cure. Women did not require a spiritual connection, simply physical labor in the home.

The *Halacha*, according to Adler, compared Jewish women to that of Canaanite slaves and children, yet male slaves and male children had a route out of their status and could one day become full members of the Jewish community; women did not have the same chance of ascending to total legal or religious status. Even though *mitzvah* for women applied to child rearing, the *mitzvah* of procreation only went to man, ignoring the fact that women conceive, carry, birth, and raise that act of procreation. Adler compared Jewish women to golems—created for Jewish society to cook, clean, and raise the children per religious law for the benefit of her master, the husband.<sup>32</sup> In all of this, the physical attributes of women revolved around motherhood and being a wife as their sole contributions to Judaism. Women’s chance to have a relationship with God and all that entails remained absent from religious life. Being denied the option of attending Hebrew school, participating in the daily prayers and the chance to form a religious bond

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<sup>30</sup> Adler, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There,” *Off Our Backs*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Adler, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There,” *Off Our Backs*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

did not exist and for centuries remained denied to women. Adler concluded her analysis by declaring, “It is time for the golem to demand a soul.”<sup>33</sup>

Although still within the Orthodox community when writing this piece, much of what Adler said in the 1972 essay applied to the Conservative community and to an extent even the Reform community. The essay’s content held far-reaching impacts and became an essential piece of literature for Jewish feminists since its publication. In response to the publication of the essay, some male scholars and rabbis claimed Adler to be ignorant because as a woman she would not have been properly taught in the ways of Judaism. Those same scholars and rabbis accused her of promoting feminism, a grave insult to members in the Jewish Orthodox community.<sup>34</sup> However, Adler gave voice to a problem many Jewish women understood and experienced, and in subsequent decades her work, referenced by dozens of Jewish feminists and theologians like Susannah Heschel [1956- ] and Judith Plaskow, became an introductory point into Jewish feminism.<sup>35</sup>

By bringing her scathing criticism to the forefront of Judaism, many Jewish women realized that to obtain equal status, action had to be taken. A small group of primarily Conservative Jewish feminists became the first to publicly challenge women’s place in Judaism. The group of these women, founded a group in 1972 called *Ezrat Nashim*, literally translated as “help for women,”; it also referred to an area reserved specifically for women at the ancient temple in Jerusalem.<sup>36</sup> Because of these two

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Alicia Ostriker, “Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics,” *Lilith Magazine*, Fall, (1998).

<sup>35</sup> Susannah Heschel (Ed.), “Introduction,” in *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, Schocken Books, New York, 1983, 3-12.

<sup>36</sup> Joyce Antler, “We are Well Educated Jewishly... and We are Going to Press You,” in *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women’s Movement*, New York University Press, 2018, 05- 243.

meanings, the group itself took on the name with the idea of promoting women's religious equality within Judaism through equal access to things like Hebrew school, reading from the Torah, and participating in a *minyan* as full-fledged members of the Jewish religious community. With the creation of this group and their activism, the JFM emerged to push for equality within everyday religious life. Members of this group that came from different sects of Judaism eventually included female rabbis from Reform and Reconstructionist communities, like Rabbi Rebecca Alpert from the Reconstructionist, communities in addition to its Conservative members.<sup>37</sup> This group, intended to remain small in number to create an intimate atmosphere for prayer, biblical study, and political action, consisted of highly educated and left-leaning women.<sup>38</sup> Though they did not represent the entire Jewish female population, their variety of higher education and from mostly Conservative Jewish backgrounds, in addition to their involvement in the Feminist Movement and other counterculture movements, meant they had a clear idea of what it meant to push for change and take action. Their devotion to Judaism became reflected in their push for the religious reform rather than pushing entirely for secular change. The original group that made up Ezrat Nashim include women like Martha Ackelsberg, Dina Rosenfeld, Paula Hyman, Arlene Agus, Elizabeth Koltun, and Leora Fishman, Dina Rosenfeld, Maureen McLeod, Deborah Weissman, and Betty Braun, with women such as Judith Plaskow, a Reform Jew, joining later.

Ezrat Nashim, pushing for a way and place to address their grievances, wished to attend the convention of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly at the Catskills in New York in the spring of 1972, the same year the Reform community began allowing women

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<sup>37</sup> Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 206-208.

<sup>38</sup> Paula Hyman, "Jewish Feminism," *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, November 1998, 694 -98.

into rabbinical programs.<sup>39</sup> The Conservative Rabbinical Assembly denied them a spot on the program to speak, claiming the program to be full. Ezrat Nashim's ten members chose to attend anyway. Despite initially being told no, the assembly gave them a room and they met with dozens of conservative rabbis and the *rebbetzins*, further pushing their message to Jewish women through the wives of these rabbis. The women held a counter assembly the following day, with about 130 women, and some curious men, attending. These women, the same *rebbetzins*, had the ears of many rabbis from all over the country, and all became acquainted with the proposals put forth by Ezrat Nashim.<sup>40</sup> The most important demands included: full membership in synagogues, being able to fully participate and count as part of a *minyan*, be permitted and even required to complete all *mitzvah* equally as men, being allowed to fully take part in religious observances, be recognized as a witness before the law, have a say and even initiate divorce in the religious setting, and allow and encourage women, if they desired, to attend school to become a rabbi or cantor.<sup>41</sup> The women of Ezrat Nashim pushed for those rights through their determination to be heard by those who traditionally led the congregation and served as leaders in the Jewish community.

### **The Coming of Lilith: The 1973 National Jewish Women's Conference**

After the forced entry and participation at the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly, a National Jewish Women's Conference met in New York in 1973. Although not part of the original Ezrat Nashim membership, Judith Plaskow eventually joined, contributing

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<sup>39</sup> Sylvia Barack Fishman, "The Impact of Feminism on American Jewish Life", *The American Jewish Year Book* 89 (1989): 3-62, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Adler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 214-215.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

her theological knowledge to the group's discussion, and serving as one of the key speakers at the Conference. Plaskow, who grew up in a fairly lax religious family, but one strongly motivated by social justice, and likely the unconscious belief in *tikkun olam*, participated in Civil Rights marches and attended Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous March on Washington. Despite her lack of devout Jewish upbringing, she held the desire to become a rabbi and felt a strong connection to her Jewishness and her ancestors through the stories told on holidays and the Sabbath. Plaskow held the belief that, "the words of the prophets' call[ed] us to justice and social engagement."<sup>42</sup> Her experiences at Yale's Jewish Orthodox services, relegated to the back and unable to fully participate struck a chord with her, resonated with her. Plaskow's realization that as a woman and a Jew, there were considerations on how to be both, not only from a religious standpoint but as a human being.<sup>43</sup>

Plaskow's speech given at the 1973 Conference, "The Jewish Feminist: Conflict in Identities," posed the question of how to reconcile one's Jewishness with one's feminism to become full members of their Jewish communities. She noted that the "secular movement for the liberation of women has made it imperative that we raise certain Jewish issues now, because we will not let ourselves be defined as Jewish women in ways in which we cannot allow ourselves to be defined as women."<sup>44</sup> Plaskow suggested an innate conflict existed between being a feminist and a Jew. She gave voice to the dilemma of following a religion that had been studied, written, rewritten, and practiced by men. While many good qualities exist within Judaism—whether the prayers

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<sup>42</sup> Adler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 221.

<sup>43</sup> Adler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 221-225.

<sup>44</sup> Judith Plaskow, "The Jewish Feminist: Conflict in Identities," in *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2005*, Beacon Press, 2005. Originally delivered as a speech to the National Jewish Women's Conference in New York in February 1973.

or stories told within the Talmud, or laws written and observed through *halacha*—Judaism’s written word originated entirely as being written and run by men. Nowhere did stories written by women about women exist. The stories that existed about women did not come from a woman’s perspective, but that of a man. That reality, Plaskow announced to the audience around her, was the innate problem and key to questioning Judaism while still embracing a centuries-old religion.<sup>45</sup>

An important part of Judaism is to always question. Reflected in the Passover Seder with the questions of the four brothers, to be Jewish means to always ask questions. It is present in the Talmud. To question and to doubt can lead to self-reflection of oneself, and to question an institution when there are concerns or curiosities means more discussions, analysis, debates, and decisions to be made. With the ability to question a flawed system or a system that oppresses, it becomes time to act on those questions and call for change. By allowing members to question the system, it creates the ability for *midrash* to take place. *Midrash* is writing that allows for speculation regarding legends, folklore, and for interpretations of the Talmud to be made.<sup>46</sup> The power of *midrash* is to speculate, question, and elaborate or explain what has yet to be thoroughly examined by religious text or teachings. *Midrash* allows one to speculate and openly discuss what has not been told and speculate on a possible forgotten truth, which leads to analyzing the possibilities of the past.<sup>47</sup> *Tikkun olam* exists in this situation when Jews question ideas or actions that suppress individuals in hopes of fixing the problem and improving the

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<sup>45</sup> Judith Plaskow, “The Jewish Feminist: Conflict in Identities,” in *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972 -2003*, Beacon Press, 2005, 35-39.

<sup>46</sup> Ruttenberg, *Yentl’s Revenge*, 222.

<sup>47</sup> Judith Plaskow, “Setting the Problem, Laying the Ground,” in *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism From a Feminist Perspective*, Harper One, 1990, 16-21.

world.<sup>48</sup> Like all Jews, asking questions is what Plaskow, and others, did when attending the National Jewish Women's Conference. They questioned and uplifted while embracing and attempting to merge their feminist values with their Jewishness.<sup>49</sup>

Plaskow concluded her speech by promoting the idea already emerging in the 1970s—looking beyond the narrative told by the leaders of society and men, and searching for narratives that had been historically neglected. In this case, the need to look for stories told about Jewish women and readdress them differently than the men who created the Talmud. Women always existed in the stories alongside men. Biblical figures, like Miriam, stood by Moses when he parted the Red Sea, and the Jews escaped Egypt. She supplied water for the Jews as they wandered the dessert and she danced with the women and led them. Rediscovering those women within Judaism, Plaskow argued, became a way for Jewish women to reenter the narrative from a biblical standpoint and reintroduce the discussion of women's place within Judaism. "It is not that through them we can say everything we want to say. But without them we might not even be able to begin."<sup>50</sup> By reintroducing old stories of Jewish women and considering their points of view, Plaskow supplied an entry point for how Jewish women could participate in a religion primarily dominated by men.<sup>51</sup>

Plaskow herself would end her speech with such an example of *midrash*, Plaskow herself admitted that "I'm not sure I knew what midrash was at that point."<sup>52</sup> She extended the tale of Lilith, Adam's first wife who had been created by God as an equal to Adam— not subservient and a part of Adam as Eve would be. As the legend of Lilith

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<sup>48</sup> Edgar M. Bronfman, "'To be Jewish is to ask questions,'" *The Washington Post*, March 25, 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Plaskow interview by Megan Schwab.

<sup>50</sup> Plaskow, "The Jewish Feminist," *The Coming of Lilith*, 39.

<sup>51</sup> Plaskow, "The Jewish Feminist," *The Coming of Lilith*, 38-39.

<sup>52</sup> Plaskow interview by Megan Schwab.

unfolded, it said she could not live with Adam, so she grew wings and left the Garden of Eden. This legend in Plaskow's, as well as others' retelling, helped to reapproach and interrogate women's place in Judaism. Lilith became the heroine that could not be what Adam wanted— obedient and subservient to his whims as wife and subject. To cement the bonds of sisterhood, Plaskow hypothesized that Lilith and Eve one day met, unbeknownst to God and Adam. Lilith's desire to rejoin humanity in the Garden led to the meeting between the first and second wife. Eve realized that Lilith's status as a demon, according to Adam, as a falsehood. Rather, Lilith, a normal woman that lived outside the Garden, caused Eve to wonder what life outside of the constricting Garden and Adam could be like. A bond formed between the two as they shared their stories and came together to create the original sisterhood. This bond could not be understood by God or Adam, and the two feared the return of Eve and Lilith to the Garden and the new (lesbian?) possibilities that would emerge. Would these women rebuild the Garden and the construct Adam created as only second to God? What would the role of woman be upon their return and their questioning of Adam and even God?<sup>53</sup> Questions like this provoked discussions of women's place within Judaism through a new lens and through a new interpretation of Lilith's victimization by men (see more in next chapter). Women could sympathize with Lilith, and others who mirrored their own questions, views, and stories on subjugation in a system created to prioritize its men over women.

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<sup>53</sup> Judith Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology", in *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003*, Beacon Press, 2005, 23-34.

## **Jewish Feminist Discussion Groups: The Flowering of Jewish Feminist Publishing**

The celebration of the bonds of sisterhood in Plaskow's "Coming of Lilith" further promoted the ideas of feminism and the bond shared between women. The consciousness-raising experience, the realization of the sisterhood, combined with open discussions and listening, occurred to establish the bond that Lilith and Eve experienced within Plaskow's *midrash*. By sharing their respective stories with one another and learning to laugh, cry and communicate their experiences created a commonality, and they formed the bonds of sisterhood.<sup>54</sup> Plaskow noted that Lilith's story, "so captured that moment. It's very much a reflection of a certain [19]70's feminist moment. It was meant to be. It came out of a group that was talking about consciousness-raising as a spiritual experience."<sup>55</sup> The standing ovation Plaskow received marked a beginning of Jewish feminist writing, with anthologies like *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader* (1983) and *The Jewish Women: New Perspectives* (1976), filled with essays from women like Aviva Cantor, Judith Plaskow, Rachel Adler, and others.<sup>56</sup>

The Conference resulted in the creation of new Jewish feminist organizations, though no single organization emerged as the leading voice for these Jewish women, leading to a much more grass roots approach to change. While only lasting for a short period of time, the publications and presentations offered at the 1973 meeting reached a wide audience. The North American Jewish Students' Network, who created the Conference, joined with *Ezrat Nashim*, to publish their own piece for *Response* magazine, with the subject of the piece revolving entirely around Jewish feminism. *Lilith*

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<sup>54</sup> Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith", 24-27.

<sup>55</sup> Plaskow interview by Megan Schwab

<sup>56</sup> Ed. Susannah Heschel, *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, Schocken Books, 1983; Ed. Elizabeth Koltun, *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, Schocken Books, 1976.

magazine, created in 1976 by a group of women including Susan Weidman Schneider [1944-], Aviva Cantor, believed, like Judith Plaskow, that their voices and thoughts resonated with a large portion of the women, and even men, within American Jewish community. The group believed their magazine could reach an American Jewish audience as well.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to *Ezrat Nashim*, other religious study groups emerged. *B'not Esh* (Daughters of Fire) formed in 1981, with Plaskow and others as founding members. The group began as a spiritual and study group of Jewish feminists from various backgrounds within Judaism. The group consisted of Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform members. Yet despite their different beliefs, they sought to use their differences as a way to empower their group to push for change within Judaism that still managed to hold onto long-standing traditions.<sup>58</sup> Out of this group, some of the most influential Jewish feminist works emerged, like Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (1990), and B'not Esh member Rabbi Rebecca Alpert's *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* (1997). Both of these works address issues in the general society and tried to reconcile those issues with their religious practices. According to Plaskow, since the group's beginning, over the last forty years they still meet every year to discuss, debate, and learn from each other. Although the group's members changed throughout the years, B'not Esh's first purpose, that of a spiritual collective, endures.<sup>59</sup>

Religious study groups helped create a bond between women and helped them look beyond their assumed roles. The groups did what Lilith and Eve, according to

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<sup>57</sup> Hyman, "Jewish Feminism," 695.

<sup>58</sup> Antler, "*Jewish Radical Feminism*," 207, 226-229.

<sup>59</sup> Plaskow interview by Megan Schwab.

Plaskow's *midrash* did—they confronted one another free of male oversight. Creating a sisterhood that withstood the male influence, Jewish women also came to the realization that to change the way they were perceived, it was necessary to join the questioning of the system of Judaism through a female lens.<sup>60</sup>

In spite of their commitment to bringing equity to Jewish religious practice, Jewish feminists continues to question the origins of their submission. Contributing to the discussions advocating for change, Blu Greenberg sparked the question of the validity of creating a separation of the sexes. Regarding *mitzvahs*, it became a question of whether or not women needed to be excused from daily prayer services so she could stay home and raise the children while also keeping a kosher household. Greenberg questioned the system by asking whether God, who created all creatures and loved them, determined these gender roles or if men created it to put one group of people as dominant while the others became forced into submission. Did God proclaim this rule of woman as homebound and absent from temple, or did the ideas simply reflect the socioreligious beliefs of antiquity that no longer held the same line of credibility as they once did? Judaism and its community always felt the external influences from the gentile population. Who was to say that the separation and laxing of duties for women to maintain the household and rear children entirely withstood the test of time without any changes? According to Greenburg, *midrash* allows for the reinterpretation of Jewish law and the Talmud. Rabbis have continued the idea and practice for centuries. So why not reinterpret from the stance of Jewish women? While there are differences between men and women, the sense of superiority of one over the other in Jewish law in a twentieth century world where women strove for equality with their male counterparts no longer

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<sup>60</sup> Hyman, "Jewish Feminism," 695.

held validity. Allowing for the changes of time to create a new framework and argument to allow fluidity of Judaism has helped the survival of the religion as a whole. Why not allow it to continue to evolve and achieve *tikkun olam* for the population of Jews that have been pushed to the side and left behind.<sup>61</sup>

### **The Forgotten History of Jewish Feminism**

Books written by feminist historians like Ruth Rosen [1956-] and Sara Evans [1943-] , gladly note the successes of the Women's Movement, and even some of the difficulties within the Movement. Rosen began her history of the movement with the generation of mothers of the 1950s and the discontent felt by the housewives who identified with Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* in 1963. Through Rosen's book, she analyzes various levels of organizing and in different areas of women's activism, such as healthcare, or addressing organizing efforts within the National Organization for Women (NOW).<sup>62</sup> Evans' book explores more of the subject that Rosen's book mentions briefly but does not commit much time to, and sheds light on the myth that the movement left out minority women in both organizational work and as voices for change.<sup>63</sup> However, both authors, like many other feminist historians, fail to note the disproportionate number of Jewish women involved in the Movement and some of these extremely influential women, such as Heather Booth [1945- ]or Alix Kates Shulman [1932- ], were Jewish, and in the case of Booth, a very much practicing and religiously-minded Jew while being very active within feminist circles.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism*, 39-55.

<sup>62</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, Viking, 2000.

<sup>63</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*, Free Press, 2003, 32-38.

<sup>64</sup> Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 42-47, 105-110.

When asked about the appearance of Jewish women and the memory of their activism within the broader Feminist Movement, Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow, American Jewish historian and author Joyce Antler [1942-], *Lilith* co-founder Susan Weidman Schneider, and Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, summed it up quite easily – Jewish women’s place within the history of feminism is invisible in the history books and the collective memory of the Women’s Movement.

“It’s distorted all the time... It’s completely infuriating.”<sup>65</sup> According to Judith Plaskow, there are multiple issues with the memory of the Women’s Movement, in part because the diversity of the Movement and the mainstream leaders’ desire for universalism and a cohesive voice within the movement rather than particularism, referencing groups focusing not simply on gender, but additional identities surrounding women, such as race or religion. Plaskow found it interesting that, “the women involved in the secular [Women’s] Movement never acknowledged their Jewishness until decades later, and that was part of the broader suspicion of religion.”<sup>66</sup>

Religion itself, to Plaskow, no matter the religion, did not mesh well with the progressive culture of the 1970s. “I think that *religious* feminism has fallen out of the, or was never part of, the discussion of the feminist movement because of the bias against religion on the part of American liberals.”<sup>67</sup> Religion seemed more in correlation with conservative ideology to speak out against the progressive culture, despite the fact that feminist religious groups sparked more discussion and backlash by the growing right-wing conservatism of the 1980s. Plaskow noted that “the [right-wing] were more aware of it than secular progressive folks.” Because reforming religious practices to

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<sup>65</sup> Plaskow interview.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

accommodate social movements did not necessarily sit well with conservative individuals, conservatives pushed more arduously against it because they saw the results of it firsthand.<sup>68</sup> The idea of conservative push back within the religious community coincided with Plaskow's belief that, "the dominant progressive understanding is that if you're interested in religion, you're a reactionary... so that whole history is gone."<sup>69</sup>

Other Jewish feminists echoed this idea that reform of religious life remained outside of, and therefore invisible to, the mainstream Feminism movement. Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, one of the first ordained female congressional rabbis within the Reconstructionist Movement and a Jewish American religion studies professor, reiterated Plaskow's thoughts on the views of religion. According to Alpert, "the secular world doesn't really think religion is liberal. Religion is always equated with conservative tendencies, and so there's no assumption that there could be a connection."<sup>70</sup> Because the association with religion skews towards conservative ideology, to cultural historians and even those who participated within the Feminist Movement, religion existed and ruled based off patriarchal ideals and therefore could not coincide with ideas of feminism.<sup>71</sup>

"It's assumed that they're just like everybody else," noted Rabbi Alpert.<sup>72</sup> In part because of the assimilation that occurred in the post Holocaust era and the idea that Jews in the United States lost their foreignness to become another group of white Americans, people did not believe a Jewish account of feminism existed or was needed.<sup>73</sup> This response, also reiterated by Susan Weidman Schneider, reaffirms the idea that many

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom, January 13, 2022.

<sup>71</sup> Plaskow interview. Plaskow, "The Jewish Feminist: Conflict in Identities," in *The Coming of Lilith*, 35-39.

<sup>72</sup> Alpert interview.

<sup>73</sup> Jacobson, "Looking Jewish, Seeing Jews," in *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 171-200.

Americans see Jews as another category of whiteness, especially in the post Holocaust world. Weidman Schneider remarked that within the scope of feminist history, Jewish feminism or active feminists that identified as Jewish, “[is] not really present. I think there is a sense that Jewish history happened before and up to the Holocaust... There’s not a lot that is specifically taught about Jewish history in post-war years.”<sup>74</sup> Other than the founding of Israel in 1948, in some ways Jewish history within fields of historical study lack real historical analysis other than by Jewish feminist historians like Antler.

Despite the disproportionate number of Jews, Antler claims that, “I don’t think you could write the Feminist Movement without writing the role of Jewish women.”<sup>75</sup> Even throughout the twentieth century and the social movements occurring, Antler and other historians remarked on the activism of Jewish women in social movements – spanning as far back as labor organizing in the early twentieth century, to the Freedom Riders of the 1960s, and of course the Feminist Movement.<sup>76</sup> Yet within the history of social movements, and in this case the Feminist Movement and despite Antler’s book on the topic, the presence within the field of Feminist Studies and the teaching of feminism, a Jewish perspective largely remained absent. Within the field of Feminist Studies, “The Jewish heroine is not what they’re looking to,” declared Antler.<sup>77</sup>

As for being remembered and discussed within the Jewish community, the answers varied. Plaskow’s approach on the idea of remembrance within the Jewish community points towards a forgotten history. Compared with previous generations,

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<sup>74</sup> Susan Weidman Schneider, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom, December 17, 2022.

<sup>75</sup> Joyce Antler, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom. February 8, 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Antler interview. Rabbi Jill Jacobs, “Bread, Roses, and Chutzpah: Jewish Women in American Social Movements, in *New Jewish Feminism: Probing the Past, Forging the Future*, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009, 356-369.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

“people growing up today completely take for granted women’s access, and they are no longer aware of it as something that was fought for and the notion that it was a product of a social movement, and it could be taken away. There isn’t really awareness.”<sup>78</sup> Despite that within the history of Judaism and its longevity, the most recent history of the Jewish women’s push to increase their participation in their community seemed to blend so much with the mainstream social movements in the United States, that the Jewish feminism and remembering that activism fell to the wayside.

Weidman Schneider approached the idea from a generational point of view, particularly when it comes to approaching levels of activism. “I think every new generation needs to find its own path to activism. I think there are lessons to be learned and a certain homage to be paid to those of us who came before.”<sup>79</sup> As an individual heavily involved in the publishing world and the current editor in chief of *Lilith* magazine, Weidman Schneider has seen plenty of writings on Jewish feminism occur yearly, and for the past 45 years since the first quarterly publication of *Lilith* began, that number continues. However, she believes that “everything needs to be retaught to each generation.”<sup>80</sup> Like with the yearly retelling of the story of Passover, so too does the reminder of all the accomplishments of Jewish feminists achieved over the last half a century. Whether from a political perspective or a religious one, Schneider commented that for many, “memory, certainly, is useful... memory is useful as an opportunity to teach us about the perils of our current situation, and the potential perils.”<sup>81</sup> Whether addressing the reemergence of anti-Semitism or the political realm of Jewish thoughts on

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<sup>78</sup> Plaskow interview.

<sup>79</sup> Weidman Schneider interview.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

issues like abortion, remembering those who played a role in those issues, remains an important aspect of Jewish feminist history.

Part of that Jewish history, noted Antler, now accessible online, could contribute more to the study of Jewish feminism for both historians and the Jewish community. Citing the Jewish Women's Archive and their database, the encyclopedia, timeline, photos, articles, and hundreds of book recommendations receive millions of hits. That, according to Antler, remains promising for both the Feminist Studies, Religious Studies, and every day individual interested in Jewish women and their activism.<sup>82</sup>

The activism of the mid-twentieth century in the United States in the secular world, with many activists of the Jewish faith taking part, pushed for social reform with movements meant to acknowledge and positively influence groups historically oppressed. The Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement, to name a few, sparked conversations amongst activists about the conversation of on race, gender, and eventually intersectionality. What remained largely outside the scope of the secular movements was religion, and in this case Judaism. While the intersectionality of feminism and Judaism needed to be discussed and analyzed to become inclusive, Jewish women like Plaskow pushed to incorporate the idea that one can be a feminist and also a Jewish woman. Judaism's survival, based in change when confronting the secular world, endured for centuries in this way. Feminism simply further morphed the thinking and traditions further.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

### III. THE MAIDELS OF JEWISH FEMINISM

“It felt like we were changing the world,” said Dr. Judith Plaskow [1947-], a conference speaker at the 1973 Jewish Women’s Conference in New York City, describing the energy of the room after presenting her essay, “The Coming of Lilith.” Even today, Plaskow, who received her doctorate in theology from Yale University in 1975, remains unsure just how much her essay influenced Jewish women. Plaskow’s essay perfectly captured the 1973 Feminist Movement’s ideology surrounding consciousness-raising and its importance to all groups of women, and in this case, Jewish women.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, the Jewish Women’s Conference and the feeling of feminist hope has been forgotten despite, according to Plaskow, how many feminists held Jewish roots and how many later used the ideology of feminism to enact change within their religious communities. The discussion of Jewishness and Jewish influence within feminism’s history remains fairly subdued.<sup>2</sup> For example, historians Ruth Rosen and Sara Evans wrote of the Feminist Movement in their works, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* and *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End*. Both historians attempted to document the achievements of the Women’s Movement while also dissecting the movement, including analyzing the different groups of women involved. However, seldom did Rosen or Evans acknowledge the role of Jewish women and Jewish values in the Feminist Movement.<sup>3</sup> Even when Jewish figures from Biblical times made appearances in feminist scenes and feminist spaces, these

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Plaskow, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom, November 7, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Plaskow, interview by Megan Schwab, November 7, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Rosen, Ruth. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America*. Viking, 2000. Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End*, Free Press, 2003.

symbols' Jewish origins did not always enter the conversation.<sup>4</sup> Not until 2018, when Joyce Antler published her book, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*, did a serious examination and acknowledgement of Jewish voices within the Women's Liberation Movement emerge.<sup>5</sup> Despite the disproportionate number of women involved in the Feminist Movement that identified as, or came from, Jewish families, that history largely remains invisible in the teaching of women's history.

In the wake of reexamining Judaism from a feminist perspective, several female figures became acknowledged as symbols for Jewish feminists. Plaskow introduced women like Lilith, Adam's first wife. Others, like Rabbi Susan Schnur [1951-] and co-author of *The Dancing with Miriam Haggadah: A Jewish Women's Celebration of Passover*, Rebecca Schwartz, analyzed and reinterpreted Miriam the Prophet from the story of Exodus. Both women resonate with Jewish feminists of the 1970s and 1980s, albeit for different reasons. Lilith and Miriam both remained hidden or obscured from Jewish teaching, however, within the Jewish Feminist Movement, they became symbols for Jewish women.

Lilith and Miriam are women history forgot and rediscovered because of their connection to Judaism and one of its most important ideals – *tikkun olam*. *Tikkun olam* translates from Hebrew to “repair or healing of the world.” For example, in Jewish households, families have the *tzedakah* box, a box money goes in until ready for donation. The word *tzedakah*, meaning “righteousness,” often means helping those less fortunate, similar to the *mitzvah*, or “good deed.” These Jewish concepts of charity and

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<sup>4</sup>Louise Crowley, Dotty DeCoster, Madelyn Scott, et al. “Lilith.” *Lilith*, September 1, 1968, 1–30.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*, New York University Press, 2018.

good will fit within the idea of *tikkun olam*, to help when able and to assist in fixing the wrongs of the world, whether that means through charity or acts of kindness. In the case of Jewish feminists and political activists, *tikkun olam* references actions that lead to positive change within society, whether that be in the secular or religious spheres.<sup>6</sup>

Men wrote the Talmud. Whether laws regarded men's or women's roles within the community and their *mitzvahs*, the rules created originated with men. With only male scholars, the interpretations of biblical heroines, biblical antagonists, and Jewish women, have been colored and understood through men's perspective with texts dominated by male thought, male expectations of women, and especially their concerns about them.<sup>7</sup>

Judaism always held women in the historical narrative, though not necessarily thoroughly examined through a feminist perspective or acknowledged for their contributions to Judaism or the endurance of its people. This research shows how Lilith and Miriam came to represent and give power to the Jewish female narrative. Jewish female scholars like Plaskow, Schwartz, and others reclaimed Lilith and Miriam to help reflect the changing Jewish ideology via feminism. Their stories have impacted and emboldened Jewish feminists to push for a religious history that acknowledges the women who helped shape both Jewish religion and culture.

*Midrash*, the practice of interpretation of legends or folklore of the Torah, voices the opinions and discussions of rabbis throughout the centuries. The first and largest collection of *midrash* emerged between 400 and 1200 CE. Filling in the blanks and answering questions, *midrash* endured over the centuries, as it does today. To be Jewish means to ask questions, and the rabbinical form of asking questions lies in *midrash*.

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<sup>6</sup> Dany Rutenberg, et. al, *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*, Seal Press, 2001, 229, 223.

<sup>7</sup> Vanessa Ochs, "On the Path to Power: Women Decode the Talmud in Their Own Style," *Lilith: Independent, Jewish & Frankly Feminist*, Summer, 1990.

Feminist theologians seeking to reexamine Judaism through the practice of *midrash* continued in part because of the tradition of questioning and answering questions with interpretation.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the story of Lilith has been reimagined to analyze what it historically meant for a Jewish woman to attempt equal status as her partner in Judaism. The lesson of Lilith expanded to encapsulate the sentiments of the Jewish Feminist Movement, and the knowledge that Jewish women have sought to attain equal stature.<sup>9</sup> Her story will be analyzed further and the history of the interpretation over time will be examined to understand how Jewish women embrace her and came to associate themselves, in part, with Lilith.

Another Jewish figure that inspired *midrashic* interpretation among Jewish feminists was Miriam, the sister of Moses. Many know the story of Exodus, where Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt to wander the desert for forty years until finding their promised land. However, Moses did not accomplish the feat alone. His older sister, Miriam, a constant figure throughout Exodus as a leader and protector of her people, stood by her brother's side. She became a matriarch of the fledgling nation of the Jewish people, yet she appears only eight times in Exodus. Today, she and all Jewish women are honored on many Passover seder plates with an orange in acknowledgement of the rumored phrase spoken by a rabbi that, "women belong on the bimah as much as an orange belongs on the seder plate."<sup>10</sup> Although this phrase and the tale of the orange originally represented the gay/lesbian community and women, it morphed itself into a

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<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Tirzah Firestone, "Transforming Our Stories through Midrash," in *New Jewish Feminism: Probing the Past, Forging the Future*, ed. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009, 113-119.

<sup>9</sup> Aviva Cantor, "The Lilith Question," in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, Schocken Books Inc., New York, 1983, 40-50. Originally published in *Lilith Magazine: Independent, Jewish & Frankly Feminist*, Fall 1976.

<sup>10</sup> Anita Silvert, "The real story behind the orange on the seder plate: I present here with the real story of why people put an orange on the Seder plate," *Jewish United Fund*, March 22, 2012.

legend that defied a metaphorical rabbi representing the conservative ideology of women's place. This famous tall tale, told at many Passover Seders, symbolized the refusal of being ignored in history, and Miriam's importance in the Passover story became a time to acknowledge those forgotten by Judaism.<sup>11</sup>

Lilith and Miriam reflect the belief that within Judaism there have always been important women whose tales have not been told in their entirety. Their stories reflected the idea that Judaism continuously asserted its patriarchal dominance over those who defied or refused to fit into the mold of what a woman should be. Jewish men turned Lilith into a cautionary tale for a religion that historically relegated its tales of women as sexualized beings who became heroines or victims through their sexuality.<sup>12</sup> Although some, like Miriam, did not necessarily go against the system, she helped contribute to the notion that women are worth talking about.

### **Lilith: Demoness or Demonized**

Lilith did not originate in the first versions of the Torah, or the first five chapters of the Old Testament—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. From as far back as the Dead Sea Scrolls (200 BCE - 200CE) and the tale of Gilgamesh (2000 BCE), Lilith existed as a demoness that stole children in the night and seduced men.<sup>13</sup> Several centuries later, between 700 and 1000 CE, Lilith's story evolved further. The *Alphabet of Ben Sira* claimed that Lilith and Adam, upon Lilith's creation said to Adam that, "I will not lie below," to which Adam responded with, "I will not lie below, but

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<sup>11</sup> Anita Silvert, "The real story behind the orange on the seder plate," *Jewish United Fund*, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Karen (Chai) Levy, "Sexy Rabbi," in *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*, Seal Press, 2001, 112-118.

<sup>13</sup> *Lilith*, Jewish Virtual Library, 2005.

above, since you are fit for being below and I for above.” Lilith’s responded in kind with, “The two of us are equal, since we are both from the earth.”<sup>14</sup> This interaction, resulting in Lilith leaving the Garden of Eden and refusing to be submissive to Adam, later influenced Jewish feminists like Judith Plaskow to reassess the legend of Lilith. However, to scholars from the medieval period, the idea of Lilith’s demonic presence of stealing children and requiring precautions for infants and children, endured for hundreds of years. Lilith’s established existence as Adam’s first wife who fled the Garden rather than be subservient originated to explain the contrast between the two wives of Adam. Lilith’s ultimate sin, stemming from the desire to be equal to Adam, as her creation suggested, meant casting herself out of the Garden and becoming a demoness rather than Adam’s partner and mother of mankind.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the lengths the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* goes into explaining the Creation story and Lilith, her name appears only once in the *Tanakh*, or the Hebrew Bible, widely referred to as the Old Testament. Lilith resided in the place where, “No kingdom is there,” referencing Edom, outside the Garden of Eden. The exile from Eden became part of the origin story of Lilith’s role as a demon; in Edom she colluded with those outside of Eden with the jackals, hyenas, and goat demons. The association with creatures like that enhanced the mysterious nature of Lilith, and her location in Edon further pushed her with into the antithesis of the Garden of Eden and God.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Lilith*, Jewish Virtual Library.

<sup>15</sup> Jewish Women’s Archive, “Alphabet of Ben Sira 78: Lilith.” Kosior Wojciech, “A Tale of Two Sisters: The Image of Eve in Early Rabbinic Literature and Its Influence on the Portrayal of Lilith in the Alphabet of Ben Sira,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 32 (April 1, 2018): 112-30.

<sup>16</sup> *Tanakh*, Isaiah 34.5-35.

Originally the association of Lilith with Adam did not exist. The name itself, 'Lilith,' generally associated with the word "night", from the Hebrew word *Laila*. Additionally, the word *Lilit*, Hebrew that likely came from the Akkadian root, meaning "breath" or "wind" could also tie to "God" or "Demon." The earliest uses of the word in the 6<sup>th</sup> century made ancient scholars wonder about the nocturnal creature, and where it came from.<sup>17</sup> The origins of Lilith as Adam's first wife came about to explain two chapters of Genesis. The creation of man and woman on the sixth day of Creation in chapter one, versus the second chapter, where Adam's loneliness caused God to put Adam to sleep so as to take one of his ribs to create Eve, conflicted with one another.

Yiddish literature and Jewish historian Solomon Liptzin [1901- 1995] noted that the unknown Talmudic scholars between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries assumed these chapters to mean that two different women emerged as the partner of Adam. These two different wives, and what they stood for, became part of Jewish legend. The second wife, Eve, who would bite the apple of knowledge and cast herself and Adam from the Garden of Eden is well known. However, Adam's first wife, the one made to be Adam's equal in every way and created on the sixth day in God's image, according to Liptzin and other scholars, was Lilith.<sup>18</sup>

Talmudists, scholars of Jewish civil and religious law, from the late centuries before common era to the 5<sup>th</sup> century, claimed Lilith then joined Lucifer, and as such she became a mother of evil and a demon to Adam and Eve's offspring and subsequently all of mankind.<sup>19</sup> In part from her name, she became a demon that roamed at night and stole

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<sup>17</sup> Kosior Wojciech, "A Tale of Two Sisters," *Nashim*, 2018, 113-115.

<sup>18</sup> Solomon Liptzin, "Rehabilitation of Lilith," *Dor le dor* 5, no. 2 (1976): 67.

<sup>19</sup> Liptzin, "Rehabilitation of Lilith," 69-70. As referenced by Liptzin, these scholars of antiquity are unnamed. Prior to the Talmud being written, the oral traditions of Judaism were passed down over

infants away before their *bris*, or circumcision ceremony, if a male infant, or before their twentieth day of life if female. Although not part of the original scripture, Lilith's identity as a night demon became popularized in the ninth or tenth century by Talmudists, and so for a millennium Lilith became the night demon who stole new-born babies, killed women in labor, and aroused sleeping men to steal their semen to create her own demon children. Consequently, women protected their children by having them wear amulets and protecting themselves and their babies by placing tablets inscribed with prayers and what they believed to be magic in the walls of the rooms in which women gave birth. Stealing children from their mothers originated from Lilith's refusal to accompany the three angels that God sent after her to return to the Garden. Lilith's decision to stay away from Adam also meant one hundred of her 'demon children' would die every day, making her vengeful towards Adam and Eve's progeny, hence stealing them.<sup>20</sup> However, over the centuries Lilith's story remerged differently in literature than how previously described.

Lilith, created at the same moment as Adam, rather than being made from a part of him, knew herself to be his equal partner and not meant to be submissive to him. Rather than being forced to become secondary to Adam, according to twentieth century German poet and writer Isolde Kurz [1853-1944], wrote in 1908 that Lilith spread her wings and flew away out of the Garden of Eden. Though God attempted to bring Lilith back, the three angels sent to return her were unsuccessful.<sup>21</sup>

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generations, with the names of the scholars largely forgotten, though their study and interpretations helped create new Jewish beliefs.

<sup>20</sup> Raphael Patai, "Lilith," *The Journal of American Folklore* 77, no. 306 (1964): 295–314.

<sup>21</sup> Liptzin, "Rehabilitation of Lilith," 72-73.

Some writers sought to challenge Lilith's identity as a demon and turned her into an empowering woman who men sought to minimize, thus turned into a victim. In 1908, Isolde Kurz, in her work, *Die Kinder Der Lilith*, The Children of Lilith, questioned why Lilith had wings if not to be similar to the angels and help create perfection amongst mankind. If she had wings, then how could Lilith be truly evil? What other plans did God have for Lilith that differed from Adam? Ultimately, wrote Kurz, the plans of God became disrupted by the denigration of Lilith's character by men who sought to lessen her influence by claiming Lilith's fall was due to her unwillingness to serve her husband. Kurz suggested that Lilith's creation originated from the light and spirit. This light and spirit countered Adam's earthly nature, and as Adam's partner their disagreements and reconciliations spread harmony and developing art into the world, which God desired for his creations. Kurz also speculated that rather than fleeing, Lucifer created Eve from Adam's rib to seduce Adam into forgetting about his perfect mate. Lilith fled and as a result of Adam's infidelity, his future offspring with Eve would be full of guilt and suffering.<sup>22</sup>

Furthering her metamorphosis in the late nineteenth century, the legend of Lilith changed from her status as a demon and child-killer. Her tale, softened by nineteenth century writers and poets like Dante Gabriel Rossetti [1828-1882] and Remy de Gourmont [1858-1915], in 1864 and 1892, respectively, turned her into a woman scorned who held potential to help create the human race, yet became unsuccessful due to outside forces. Similar to Helen of Troy, victimization became her story. In an era still influenced by the Romanticism of the nineteenth century, Lilith signified a change from demonizing to recognizing that Lilith herself became a victim of male domination.

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<sup>22</sup>Liptzin, "Rehabilitation of Lilith," 71-73.

However, Jewish feminists like theologian Judith Plaskow, founding member of the Jewish Feminist Organization Aviva Cantor [1940-], and poet Yiskah Rosenfeld took Lilith's victimization and revitalized it in the 1970s. Rather than being replaced by Eve and tricked by Lucifer, Lilith's title of demon originated because Jewish men claimed this is what happens when one dares to leave her husband. The argument of 1970s feminists like Aviva Cantor that Lilith, mostly excluded from *midrash*, was made to be the villain to serve as a warning to women of what happened when they spoke out and questioned their rights. Desiring to be equal and given power led to the demonization and exile. Aviva Cantor, a Jewish feminist, and historian argued that because Lilith, as Adam's equal, held too much power and became a threatening female figure to men's power in society and within their religious circle. Cantor argued that Lilith emerged out of the 6<sup>th</sup> century Jewish exile from Babylonia to represent societal change and threats to Jewish survival. Lilith became a demonic entity in Jewish literature and amongst Jewish male scholars. In this context, the story of Lilith expressed anxieties about the ability of Jewish communities to propagate. Her villainy of stealing or killing babies, pregnant women, and arousing men in the night and stealing their semen to create demonic children, all hindered the continuation of the Jewish people and challenged men's roles in ensuring the next generation through procreation.<sup>23</sup> Cantor also made the point that Lilith became the first woman to recognize tyranny and break free of it. "We must consider the possibility that the story of Lilith's revolt may be one of women's creations which was told by mother to daughter over many generations before surfacing in the *Alphabet [of Ben Sira]*, and then being contaminated with male bias."<sup>24</sup> In reality, Cantor argued Lilith

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<sup>23</sup> Cantor, "The Lilith Question," in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Cantor, "The Lilith Question," in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, 43.

became corrupted by men and the myth of the demoness emerged during the Exile.

Despite the negative associations made of Lilith during the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Cantor proposed Jews should treat her as they did King David, “accept the essence, glorify the essence, and reject the later additions as contradictory, contaminated by fear and distrust, and not central to the intrinsic nature of the character of Lilith.”<sup>25</sup> Rather than utilize the corrupt version of Lilith created by men, Cantor suggested going back to the original meaning of Lilith – a woman who refused to submit to tyranny and men.

Cantor also called into question women during Exile and whether they coped better with Exile than their male counterparts. If women’s attitudes, while still stressed, maintained their composure, and persevered, what would be the chances that women felt they could be independent or even equals when traditionally they provided the support system and shoulder to lean on for their men? Lilith, according to Cantor, may have reflected the generations of women who showed their strength and challenged their patriarchal system through their perseverance, thereby threatening Jewish men’s place both within their religious community in addition to the insecurity they felt as Jews in the world at large. Cantor argued, rather than acknowledging the strength of the Jewish women, men expressed the insecurity they felt by using the female figure of Lilith to push their insecurities off as a woman, and “It had to be made forcefully clear to the women that their strength was tolerable – even desirable- as *long as it did not connect with power*.”<sup>26</sup> Lilith became the tale told to Jewish women what happened if they attempted to threaten the dynamics between men and women.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cantor, “The Lilith Question,” in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, 50.

<sup>26</sup> Cantor, “The Lilith Question,” in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, 47.

<sup>27</sup> Cantor, “The Lilith Question,” in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, 45-49.

Rosenfeld claimed erasure as the main problem rather than rewriting and corrupting Lilith's image. Rosenfeld proposed that Lilith's story became intentionally left out of religious texts and speculations altogether rather than confronting a woman who held a semblance of equal power to her husband. By leaving Lilith out of the narrative, Rosenfeld speculated that Jewish men sought to put her into the shadows and push the male approved stories and lessons to the forefront of Jewish teachings. By removing Lilith as an equal figure, the patriarchal nature of Judaism could endure unchallenged.<sup>28</sup>

Jewish feminists of the 1970s celebrated the symbol of Lilith, embracing both her victimization by Adam as a symbol of the dangers of patriarchal power, and her insistence on her equality in the eyes of God and independence as a symbol of feminist defiance and strength. The punishment Lilith experienced—exile—and her subsequent demonization and association with the monstrous served as a potent symbol to Jewish feminists of the risks and dangers women faced when speaking up as equals. Lilith emerged as a source for women, like Judith Plaskow and Aviva Cantor, to argue their place within Judaism as equals and to fight patriarchy cloaked in religious tradition. Although traditional and Orthodox Jewish male scholars used Adam as a way to articulate Lilith and Eve as dichotomies of one another, in some ways their commonalities could lay the foundation of sisterhood. Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow proposed such a bond between Lilith and Eve in her work.

Through *midrashic* retelling, Plaskow forged a new path for the wives of Adam in 1973. Rather than remaining enemies, a bond formed between the two. Eve, known for being too curious, leading her to bite the apple of knowledge, also remained curious

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<sup>28</sup> Yiskah (Jessica) Rosenfeld, "You Take Lilith, I'll Take Eve: A Closer Look at the World's Second Feminist," in *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminists*, Seal Press, 2001, 131- 136.

about the mysterious Lilith. Plaskow reimagined a meeting between the two women and subsequently titled her *midrashic* tale as, 'The Coming of Lilith.' Both wives of Adam struggled in their respective roles, one as a vilified demon and the other blamed for downfall of humans from eternal grace. In Plaskow's rendering, despite Adam's tales of the demoness that Lilith became after leaving the garden voluntarily, the two women meet and share their stories with one another. In a consciousness raising group of two, the two women found more commonalities between them than with Adam or God. By sharing their stories and learning from one another, the earliest form of sisterhood emerged. This friendship worried Adam and God, who feared what changes would be wrought about the world when two women joined together to question, in essence, the patriarchy in which women remained secondary to men.<sup>29</sup>

Plaskow's reimagining, addressed to the National Jewish Women's Conference in 1973, not only argued that the bonds of sisterhood lay at the foundation of the Jewish Feminist Movement but also suggested that both Lilith and Eve became victims and subject to the will of man. Creating a bond between the two women, the metaphor reflected the time in which Plaskow wrote her *midrash* tale and it spoke to Jewish women within the movement.<sup>30</sup> When interviewing Plaskow and asking her on the response received after reading her piece, she stated simply but with a smile, "I got a standing ovation."<sup>31</sup> Women in the audience at the time such as Rabbi Rebecca Alpert [1950-] and

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<sup>29</sup> Judith Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith," in *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003*, Beacon Press, 2005, 31-32. Originally part of a speech titled, "The Jewish Feminist: Conflict in Identities, in 1973 at the first National Jewish Women's Conference in New York, 1973.

<sup>30</sup> Judith Plaskow, "Lilith Revisited," in *The Coming of Lilith, Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2005, 81-86. First written in 1995.

<sup>31</sup> Judith Plaskow, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom November 7, 2021.

Susan Weidman Schneider [1944-], both recall the importance of the essay and its role on Jewish feminism.

By standing together, women had a better chance of making change in the world and achieving their ideas of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world through alliances and sisterhood rather than standing alone and being pitted against one another by assumptions made by men. Plaskow also noted that her essay, “sparked the imaginations of a lot of people to create new *midrash* about the female figures in our canonical text.”<sup>32</sup> Lilith and Eve’s story reflected the experience of consciousness raising, and in part largely embraced the idea held by these Jewish feminists that consciousness raising held a fundamental spirituality that connected these women to their religious values as well as each other.

Rather than being the demon that should be avoided at all costs for the safety of Jewish survival, Lilith became reclaimed by the very Jewish women meant to fear her journey into demon hood. The knowledge of Lilith and the tales woven to create her character built a sense of permanence about her—including her constant present in Judaism, meant Jewish women faced the same dilemma and victimization as Lilith, likely for centuries. Rather than being frightened of what became of her, Jewish feminists embraced Lilith. As such, Lilith became remade as a symbol for Jewish women and what they desired—being treated equal to men in both the secular and religious worlds.

Jewish women, in particular, took Lilith and made her part of their vernacular, even launching a magazine titled *Lilith: Independent, Jewish & Frankly Feminist*. Created in 1976 by Susan Weidman Schneider with Aviva Cantor and others, the feminist magazine offered a way to bring the long-lost Lilith back into the light and to use her as a

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<sup>32</sup> Plaskow, interview by Megan Schwab.

way of forging a bond between the past and present and among women.<sup>33</sup> The Feminist Movement as a whole produced many publications beginning in the 1970s, however, *Lilith* celebrated its 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the fall of 2021. The first issue of *Lilith* contained the feature written by Aviva Cantor (then Zuckoff), titled, “The Lilith Question,” reintroducing the figure of Lilith to the readership and explaining the title for the magazine by paying homage to Lilith herself.<sup>34</sup> Susan Weidman Schneider, a co-founder, and current Editor in Chief of *Lilith* Magazine, noted the importance of Lilith in Jewish feminism because of her paradoxical nature. As sexless but a seductress, a demoness that somehow manages to produce offspring yet described as being infertile—the stereotypes of Lilith herself, contrast significantly with one another, yet the possible power of Lilith lies within her contradictory associations.<sup>35</sup> Weidman Schneider noted that Lilith, “was kind of a paradoxical figure... Lilith was a demon, she was at the same time infertile and has 100 demon children every day... She is sexless and yet she is a person who seduces men. The complexities of Lilith represented, “...current stereotypes of women, Jewish women in particular... a woman who is either too ambitious for herself, or too passive. She wants somebody to support her or she’s far too outspoken.”<sup>36</sup> To Weidman Schneider, Lilith’s contradictory attributes also points out, “how limiting it is to have these fixed stereotypes... in which you [women] can operate.”<sup>37</sup> Like the first cover of *Lilith* magazine from 1976, with a flowing ‘hippie’ skirt, while holding chicken noodle soup in one hand and the flag of Israel in another yet carrying a purse with the female sign while also having a *tallit*, or prayer shawl, around her shoulders, this Lilith

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<sup>33</sup> *Lilith: Independent, Jewish & Frankly Feminist*, 1976- present.

<sup>34</sup> Cantor, “The Lilith Question.”

<sup>35</sup> Susan Weidman Schneider, interview by Megan Schwab, December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Weidman Schneider interview.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

showcased the struggles of juggling multiple views of women and the contradictions portrayed by a singular woman. That image represents Lilith and all women, who wore too many hats and remained unsure of how to manage all of them. The power and strength of *Lilith* magazine started as, and continues to be, the diversity of opinions shared within its publication.<sup>38</sup> For Jewish feminists, one voice does not exist, nor does one face, just like Lilith herself.

Jewish feminists approached the subject of equality within Judaism because there was precedence for it. Jewish men's fear about Jewish women's desire to be included within Judaism stemmed from men's alarm of seeing their system uprooted. Lilith's forced demonization within that system gave proof that other women in the past sought such things within Judaism. Lilith's origin, from winged equal of Adam to demonic killer and seductress, to a victim of slander in a male-dominated society, persevered, and importantly, not of her own doing. Being championed by other women who saw her plight and understood the longevity of the fight holds equal importance in the retelling of Lilith and the struggles that all women, not just Jewish women, face in a world where equality must seemingly be fought for rather than given.

Lilith's creation, explanation, and endurance over the centuries through *midrash* by rabbinical scholars and then feminist theologians, like Plaskow, showed how much of an important figure Lilith became. Though not originally mentioned in the story of Genesis, her lasting legacy stemmed from it, as the woman who emerged as Adam's equal, but whom Adam desired to have remain his submissive wife, thus leading her to flee her home rather than to be made subservient when she knew her creation put her and Adam on equal terms. Part of her lasting legacy to feminism remained her innate

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<sup>38</sup>Susan Weidman Schneider, *Lilith: Independent, Jewish & Frankly Feminist*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1976).

knowledge that being created by God made her equal to her male counterpart, despite what Adam desired, and that she refused to remain in a place where she could not act as her Creator designed her to be—man’s equal.

### **Miriam: The Forgotten Prophetess**

Another figure that Jewish feminists sought to reclaim was Miriam. Exodus describes the story of Moses freeing the Hebrews from Pharoah’s tyrannical rule and cruelty. When Pharoah refuses to let the Hebrews go, God brings ten plagues to Egypt, leading to destruction and the death of the Egyptian first-born. With this, Pharoah lets the Hebrews go, and when Moses parts the Red Sea with God’s staff held by Moses guiding to ultimate freedom, The Hebrews make it out of Egypt at last. While in the desert, Moses brings the Ten Commandments to the Hebrews but witnesses them praying to a false idol, the Golden Calf. In anger, Moses destroys the Ten Commandments and he and his people are forced to wander the desert for forty years until finding the promised land of milk and honey. Moses never gets to enter that promised land. This is the story of Passover, which millions of Jews celebrate every spring in honor of our ancestors who were once slaves and who became free. Moses is known throughout the three major monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, as a prophet. As a Jew he is honored every year through the retelling of Exodus, including film adaptations retelling this biblical story. However, what is not always stressed through the story of Passover is that Moses did not accomplish this alone or without others helping to lead and care for Hebrews. His older siblings, Aaron and Miriam, maintained a constant presence by his side. Miriam always held an important place amongst her people as well as the first

female prophet of the Torah.<sup>39</sup> Her story, however, generally gets skimmed over, never thoroughly discussed or dissected for anything other than face value acknowledgement.<sup>40</sup>

According to Rabbi Susan Schnur biblical scholarship suggested that Miriam's story once held much more prominence in the story of Exodus than what the Torah now shows. The Bible told the story of crossing the Red Sea in two slightly different versions, one of which originates from the Miriamic passage—far older and more original to the text than the story focusing primarily on Moses, also included the crossing of the Red Sea. Biblical scholars believed that Miriam became held in high regard amongst Jews, and many followed her teachings and remembered her with steadfast devotion. Schnur notes in her work that Jewish men who later edited the story of Exodus did not entirely remove Miriam due to the tradition of honoring her, so they retained small pieces of the older text. Rather than including the entire Miriamic passage, she became relegated to being mentioned a total of eight times in Exodus, and her words recited only twice.<sup>41</sup>

After the parting of the Red Sea and safe crossing, Miriam led the women in dance. The bond created through dancing with her fellow women, gave rise to the idea that Miriam's image could be utilized within Jewish Feminism to use Miriam as a model of how to create sisterhood for Jewish women to the modern era. The women in Exodus not only danced together because they had escaped bondage, but because they could live freely and embrace their spirituality without oppression. Much like Jewish Feminists who

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<sup>39</sup> Rebecca Schwartz, "Prophecy & Leadership," in *All the Women Followed Her: A Collection of Writings on Miriam the Prophet & the Women of Exodus*, Rikudei Miriam Press, Mountain View, CA, 2001, 11-12.

<sup>40</sup> Alice Bach, "De-Doxifying Miriam," In *A Wise and Discerning Mind: Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long*, edited by Olyan Saul M. and Culley Robert C., 1-10, Providence, Rhode Island: Brown Judaic Studies, 2020. doi:10.2307/j.ctvzgb93t.8, Alicia Ostriker, "Whither exodus? Movies as midrash," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 42, no. 1 (2003).

<sup>41</sup> Susan Schnur, "The Cult of Miriam: Gaiac Healer, Goddess, Ecstatic Rock N' Roll Mama?" *Lilith Magazine*, Spring 1992. Scholars, as referenced by Schnur, wrote of these things after generations of passing these stories down through oral tradition

sought to freely practice their spirituality without being oppressed by those within the community, Jewish women held a tangible connection of sisterhood through Miriam and her own bond with her fellow woman.<sup>42</sup> Some scholars, such as dance anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku (1930 – 2015), suggested that the imagery of Miriam dancing with her fellow woman indicated the symbolic importance of dance as a ritual.<sup>43</sup> Weidman Schneider also noted Miriam’s status as associated with ritual, and as, “a rich source of imagery, and certainly of song.”<sup>44</sup> Although somewhat ignored in Exodus, the story of Miriam leading the women in dance acknowledges the possibility that women took part in rituals and held importance in ancient Jewish practices. Although diminished over the centuries, the parting of the Red Sea and subsequent visual of the celebration found in a fourteenth century Spanish Haggadah signifies the prominence of not only Miriam, but the understanding that women contributed more than just caring for the home.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout the story of Miriam, Miriam never weds, and her unmarried status differentiated her from many women of the Torah. Noted by Jewish feminist historian Aviva Cantor (1940 – ), Miriam, as a female protagonist, used successful strategies, such as her role as caregiver to her people, to circumvent her perceived role as submissive to male authority.<sup>46</sup> While her independence challenged the belief that women remain submissive to their fathers and spouses, she remained accepted in part because of her dedication to her family, even as she spoke out of turn as a woman by questioning God

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<sup>42</sup> Rebecca Schwartz, “Introduction,” 4-6.

<sup>43</sup> Cia Sautter, “Miriam’s Dance.” In *The Miriam Tradition: Teaching Embodied Torah*, University of Illinois Press, 2010, 51-52.

<sup>44</sup> Weidman Schneider, interview by Megan Schwab.

<sup>45</sup> Cia Sautter, “Miriam’s Dance.” In *The Miriam Tradition*, 46-76.

<sup>46</sup> Aviva Cantor, *Jewish Women, Jewish Men*, 1995, 115- 116.

and Moses. Miriam, according to Jewish studies expert Rebecca Schwartz, was celebrated, in part, because she supported her people as a fictive mother. Although she maintained her independence by never marrying, in the Torah she cared and nurtured others.<sup>47</sup> Through her securing Moses' safety as a baby and ensuring his survival from the Egyptian edict of killing Hebrew male babies, she established herself initially as the protector of her brother.

Miriam's connection to water also had a lasting impact on her symbolism as a caretaker, according to Rabbi Schnur. Her name, *mar yum*, translates to "bitter sea," tied her to any body of water. Her name often became synonymous with a body of water being nearby. When she died, it said the water disappeared with her as well. Known as Miriam's Well, it became significant to the journey through the desert, as Miriam discovered the well created on the sixth day of creation, and through her, rivers flowed and the Hebrews in the desert survived because of the water she provided.<sup>48</sup> Her association with water, though not intrinsically maternal, coincides with the ability to care for others by ensuring they stay hydrated rather than wasting away in the desert. The water also contained healing properties, and those with disease could bathe in the water to be purified. Tending to the sick, often associated with maternal caretaking, combined with the water's connection, further tied Miriam's status as a motherly figure for the Hebrew people.<sup>49</sup> For Jewish Orthodox feminists like Blu Greenberg [1936 –], who sought to keep her role as a maternal figure while also pushing for religious equality, Miriam symbolized the ability to be both maternal and on equal standing as a leader.

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<sup>47</sup> Rebecca Schwartz, "Introduction," in *All the Women Followed Her: A Collection of Writings on Miriam the Prophet & the Women of Exodus*, Rikudei Miriam Press, Mountain Drive, CA, 2001, 1-10.

<sup>48</sup> Schnur, "The Cult of Miriam.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

While men's and women's roles may differ, Greenberg would argue that those different abilities complement one another and aid in helping their community. This belief in gender role complementarianism further strengthened the argument that despite gender, biblical accounts already created the precedence for men and women to stand as equals despite the different tasks performed by the respective genders. If precedence already exists, then who can deny the equality between men and women?<sup>50</sup>

Miriam emerged as a symbol for Jewish feminists because they argued that she broke the boundaries of what the male prescribed conventional Jewish woman 'should be.' Independent, unmarried, and an equal to her brothers, Aaron and Moses, Miriam set herself apart. She served as a mother to her people with becoming a mother herself. Despite her bout with leprosy, the people trusted her and saw her as a leader. Contrary to other strong women from the Bible, Miriam did not become demonized or rely on her sexual nature, nor did temptation lead her to triumph or downfall like so many others.<sup>51</sup> Listed as a matrilineal ancestor of King David, something ancient rabbis considered extremely important, Miriam was celebrated for her faithfulness and devotion to protecting Moses as an infant. Her success in guaranteeing Moses' survival from birth to adulthood, in addition to ensuring Moses had the chance to free and lead their people out of Egypt, justified the creation of a connection between the previously unmarried Miriam to King David. The connection between a great leader like David and the woman who ensured the survival of another leader meant to acknowledge Miriam's dedication to her peoples' overall survival.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, out of only six individuals who, "die[d] by the

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<sup>50</sup> Blu Greenberg, "Feminism: Is it Good for the Jews?", in *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, PA, 1981, 11- 16.

<sup>51</sup> Levy, "Sexy Rabbi," in *Yentl's Revenge*

<sup>52</sup> Devora Steinmetz, "A Portrait of Miriam in Rabbinic Midrash," *Prooftexts* 8, no. 1 (1988): 35-65, 10-13.

kiss of God, without being taken by the Angel of Death,” Miriam is the only woman granted that honor.<sup>53</sup>

The alterations to her story took place primarily through *midrash* that occurred throughout the centuries to fill in the details of the Torah and *halacha*, or Jewish law. Attempts occurred to return Miriam to the status of just a woman connected to powerful men and the matrilineal ancestor of more powerful men rather than the woman the Torah and Miriamic passage described her to be. Her title in the Torah became *Miriam Ha-Neviah*, Miriam the Prophetess.<sup>54</sup> In remaking her, some Jewish scholars and rabbis attempted to put the entirety of Jewish women into a place that made their accomplishments less than. Miriam received a husband, but not in a traditional sense. *Midrash* claimed Miriam married Caleb and had children, and through her union came the famous architect, Bezalel. By giving Miriam a husband and turning her into a wife and mother, her brazen independence and demand for equality became diminished. Though she still held status, she could be less threatening to men by fitting into a more conventional role than if she had remained a single woman.<sup>55</sup>

However, despite the attempts to demean her status as a leader and speaker for the women of Israel and of God as a prophet, her story persisted through *midrash*. Alicia Ostriker [1937 –], a poet and creator of *midrash*, used Miriam’s deeds from Exodus, to emphasize all that Miriam accomplished while realizing she would end up largely forgotten. The poem, originally published in 1994 and written in Miriam’s point of view,

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<sup>53</sup> Schnur, “The Cult of Miriam”, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Schwartz, “Prophecy and Leadership,” 11.

<sup>55</sup> Schwartz, “Introduction,” in *All the Women Followed Her*, 4-5. As referenced by Schnur, these scholars of antiquity are unnamed. Prior to the Talmud being written, the oral traditions of Judaism were passed down over generations, with the names of the scholars largely forgotten, though their study and interpretations helped create new Jewish beliefs.

calls herself rebellious for what did she have other than a voice to announce her liberty when there were no tricks or stones of law, referring to the commandments. Nobody believed her to be a spokesperson for God, only Moses. While she would be buried in the desert and forgotten, those who remembered her music would not forget, and their feet felt the cool water beneath the stone, and she would be remembered for what she did for her people.<sup>56</sup> From a young girl ensuring Moses' safety, to leading and dancing with the women of Israel and eventually buried in the desert, Miriam's perspective in this poem sheds light on the realities of what women dealt with, in addressing the limited spaces women could inhabit. "Call me rebelliousness...What did I have but a voice, to announce liberty...I who am maiden/woman and crone..."<sup>57</sup> From a maiden to an outspoken woman and crone, Miriam's multifaceted character endured over the centuries while also being marginalized, judged and left behind. Despite her being silenced by men who would deny her leadership and equality, "But you who remember my music/ You will feel me under your foot soles/ Follow me, follow my drum..." she persisted through time and remained symbolic Jewish women.<sup>58</sup>

Miriam's connection to dance, and how she and the Hebrew women danced after the parting of the Red Sea influenced some Jewish feminists through literal dance. In places like Australia, Jerusalem, and Brooklyn in the 1990s, tambourines hung in living rooms symbolized a connection with Miriam. It could be argued that through dance, Miriam and the women connected one another through a level of consciousness that allowed presence of the divine, and with the God that freed them from Egypt. What's

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<sup>56</sup> Alicia Ostriker, "The Songs of Miriam," in *All the Women Followed Her: A Collection of Writings on Miriam the Prophet & the Women of Exodus*, Rikudei Miriam Press, 2001, 13-14.

<sup>57</sup> Ostriker, "The Songs of Miriam," in *All the Women Followed Her*, 13-14.

<sup>58</sup> Ostriker, "The Songs of Miriam," in *All the Women Followed Her*, 13.

more, dancing in a circle, an often-feminine symbol associated with rebirth, the moon, and the Rosh Hodesh celebration of women, Miriam danced in the shape to further the connection with her fellow Jewish women. A sense of liberation, felt when dancing, increased when doing it within the bonds of sisterhood, as Miriam and many Jewish women participated in.<sup>59</sup> Fitting with some Jewish feminists' ideas of shifting from patriarchal in practice to egalitarian, some *midrashim* poems suggested that men and women danced together, with men joining in to clap and dance. Although this belief departed from traditional *midrash* ideas of Miriam and the women dancing together, it fit better with the belief that men and women cooperated and had equal standing by allowing both groups to participate fully in the dancing ritual.<sup>60</sup>

Beyond her dancing, Miriam's link with water connected her not only with the Jewish people in Exodus but with Jewish feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in connection with Rosh Hodesh and Passover with Miriam's appearance on and next to the seder plate. Rabbi Geelza Rayzel Raphael, in her dissection of Rosh Hodesh, connects multiple symbols between the holiday and Miriam herself. The associated with the holiday connect to femininity itself -water, the circle, and significance of rebirth. Those symbols also connected with Miriam. Through her, the Israelites had water through the desert until her death. Her literal presence made the water available, and with her gone, through *midrash*, Moses' sadness upon her death and the inability to find water reflected her importance and necessity to her people. Miriam's tie to the water also tied into the idea of redemption. Shortly after her death came redemption for her people, who would

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<sup>59</sup> Rishe Groner, "Why the Miriam Story Stops," *Lilith Magazine*, April 7, 2017.

<sup>60</sup> Simcha Paull Raphael, "'Miriam Took her Timbrel out and all the Women Danced:' A Midrashic Motif of Contemporary Jewish Feminism," *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary E-Journal* 7 (2), 2010, 10.

no longer be slaves but truly free in the land of milk and honey.<sup>61</sup> After crossing the Red Sea, Miriam and other women joined together and danced in celebration in the form of a circle. The circle symbolized rebirth and the cycle of life. Rosh Hodesh consisted of dancing together in a circle to music. Miriam did the same with Jewish women, and maybe men, after their successful escape from Pharaoh and bondage.<sup>62</sup> In reconnecting Rosh Hodesh with women's participation and uniqueness within Judaism, a spiritual link between God formed, and a new spiritual consciousness was created.<sup>63</sup> By using Rosh Hodesh to remember Miriam, a Boston Rosh Hodesh group continued utilizing Miriam's Well and drank water to remember the maternal ancestors, beginning a tradition of expanding Miriam's presence, and female presence, into Jewish rituals.<sup>64</sup>

The influence of Miriam within Jewish Feminism also lies in the retelling of her story. Every year, the story of Exodus was retold, with the knowledge that Jews endured and managed to survive countless struggles to persevere as a people and learn from it. Families came together to reflect on what it meant to address the changing world and the state Jews lived in, with the belief that next year they would be together in the promised land of Israel. The *Haggadah* is the book that tells the story of Passover, with its prayers, songs and questions, and is used every year by families and friends. Throughout the seder, a symbolic orange is placed on the seder plate, women began to be acknowledged in the retelling of Passover. Although the originator of the orange on the seder plate, Jewish Studies professor Susannah Heschel [1956-], revealed the actual story of the

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<sup>61</sup> Norman J Cohen. "Miriam's Song: A Modern Midrashic Reading." *Judaism* 33(2): 187-189.

<sup>62</sup> Geela Rayzel Raphael, "Still Dancing with Miriam," in *All the Women Follower Her: A Collection of Writings on Miriam the Prophet & the Women of Exodus*, Rikudei Miriam Press, Mountain View, CA, 2001, 83-87.

<sup>63</sup> Arlene Agus, "This Month is for You: Observing Rosh Hodesh as a Woman's Holiday," in *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, Schocken Books, New York, 1976, 83-84.

<sup>64</sup> Annette Bockler and Annette Boeckler, 2012, Miriam's Cup: The Story of a New Ritual," *European Judaism* 45 (2): 147 – 63.

orange, families continued to put the orange on the seder plate to recognize the women of Judaism whose stories were forgotten in time and never deemed important enough to be told. Miriam, one of the exceptions to the rule, proved through her story that women realized they had not always been invisible in Judaism. The example of Miriam proved useful and inspiring to Jewish women such as Rabbi Schnur and Ostriker. Miriam the prophet, considered an equal to her brothers, one of whom she helped survive into adulthood to help lead the people out of Egypt, became a woman whose opinion and story mattered, and an inspiration to Jewish women. In honor of her, many began putting a cup on the seder plate filled with water.

Female representation in celebration traditionally remained excluded from the narrative. For Passover, the spirit of Elijah had a glass of wine poured for him on the seder plate, and generally his symbolic presence stood alone. However, Miriam's Cup became a ritual and gendered opposite to Elijah, within the Passover story and seder plate, beginning in 1978 at a Passover seder in Philadelphia. Elijah, the messenger who would one day bring word of the future messiah, had a cup of wine left on the table. The door or window remained open for his spirit to enter and pass over in spirit and drink from the cup. While it reminded Jews of their bondage and freedom through Moses, it was meant to be a reminder to think of the future and to remember that the messiah would one day come, and Jews would be liberated once more. Miriam's cup, filled with water as a symbol of her role as caretaker, and that as a "Tireless tribal parent, she offered hope and renewal at any stage of the journey".<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Bockler & Boeckler, "Miriam's Cup," 157-158. Susan Schnur, "The Cup of Miriam," in *All the Women Followed Her: A Collection of Writings on Miriam the Prophet & the Women of Exodus*, Rikudei Miriam Press, Mountain Drive, CA, 2001, 303. Originally first published in *The New Schocken Haggadah*.

Dr. Rebecca Alpert [1950 –], one of the first female Reconstructionist rabbis to be ordained, notes that the Passover seder traditionally exuded masculinity, but with the inclusion of Miriam’s Cup on the seder plate enforced the idea that the story of Passover did not solely belong to Moses. Miriam’s presence in the Passover seder acknowledged not just herself but became a gateway to reexamine other women in the Bible, according to Rabbi Alpert.<sup>66</sup> Miriam’s place at the seder table, Rabbi Schnur noted, “remind[ed] us of Jewish women, whose stories have been too sparingly told.”<sup>67</sup> Additionally, Miriam’s Cup remained an ultimate reminder that Jewish women long stood beside men as equals and as important figures in leading their people through trials and tribulations. Women’s stories, largely neglected, became symbolized by Miriam’s cup to recognize the importance of women as leaders, caretakers, and as independent. The retelling of Passover, a tale of the birth of a nation not fully formed, holds significance and hope within Judaism. By placing Miriam’s Cup on the table during Passover Sedar and remembering her on Rosh Hodesh, her image of resilience and strength reminded Jewish women, not just the Jewish feminists, that a long history of strong women exists, despite centuries of being told their role meant being submissive. Miriam became a reminder that one did not have to be submissive but could speak out.<sup>68</sup> Through religious ritual, Jewish feminists in the late 1970s found a way to push their voices into the traditionally male-dominated narrative by reminding all Jews that women’s presence, like Miriam’s presence, meant that Jewish women had the right to be involved and included in Jewish practices, and not simply as the subservient housewife.

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<sup>66</sup> Rebecca Alpert, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom, January 13, 2022.

<sup>67</sup> Schnur, “The Cup of Miriam,” in *All the Women Followed Her*, 303.

<sup>68</sup> Susan Schnur, “The Cup of Miriam,” in *All the Women Followed Her*, 303-304.

## Conclusion

Lilith emerged as a figure to explain the story of Genesis and as a figure demonized by the rabbinical scholars seeking to explain the struggles of survival, while stressing that Lilith's desire for independence resulted in her self-imposed exile from the Garden of Eden. Her subsequent demonization and role as seductress and abductor further emphasized, according to rabbinical scholars, that Lilith created dangers to the Jewish population during a time of great upheaval for the Jewish people. However, over the centuries her story came under speculation, reanalyzed by poets, writers, and artists of the Romantic Era, which revitalized her as a victim, softening her initial role as demoness. Even feminists used her name when discussing the original independent woman. Jewish feminists, especially, felt a strong tie to this woman who fled the Garden of Eden rather endure a life as Adam's submissive wife. The role she continued to play, particularly after Judith Plaskow's "Coming of Lilith," as an independent woman and half of the first sisterhood with Eve, elevated her to a woman who would rather leave a paradise than to be treated as anything less than equal to man. The imagery of Lilith lives on, especially through *Lilith* magazine, as source for different women to share their multitude of ideas but with a cohesive understanding that Jewishness plays a role in their beliefs in activism towards independence—like Lilith aimed to achieve.

Miriam, contrasting with Lilith, acknowledges that women always existed in the bible, and that despite the patriarchal writings that emphasize on male achievements, women also contributed to Judaism and its survival. Miriam's presence grew within the realm of ritual and ceremony for Jewish women despite her story being diminished by rabbinical scholars over the centuries in the telling of Exodus and of the first Passover.

Her importance as a female figure in Judaism endured despite the attempt to reign in her appearance as a leader and an unmarried woman. The symbolic associations tied to Miriam, such as water, underlines her importance, not only to the history of Jewish persistence in a time of great opposition, but as a figure to Jewish women as a symbol and figure to commiserate with in rediscovered ceremonies such as Rosh Chodesh. Her importance as the first female prophetess of the bible also underscores her importance to a people seeking freedom from tyranny.

Both Lilith and Miram became the faces of liberation through the personal connection and understanding felt by Jewish women. Whether their stories originated by male authors or exacerbated by them, or understood from a Jewish activist lens, these women had an influence on what Jewish feminists considered a long-standing tradition of Jewish women standing up for themselves, their independence, and for the desire to change their circumstances within a Jewish framework. The complexity of all of these characters only made them more relatable to the Jewish feminists who decided how they wanted to be perceived by the world at large. Though some meant to upend the entire system and others sought to gain inclusion in a world they were born into but had been relegated to the sides of, they meant to use Jewish women of the past to give a precedence to their voice and push for change.

## IV. THOUGHTS AND OUTCOMES

### Background

When asked how much things have changed since the activism of Jewish feminists began in the 1970s, Dr. Judith Plaskow [1947- ], one of the first Jewish feminist theologians, responded that things changed, “so profoundly that it’s hard to even remember.”<sup>1</sup> Jewish feminism emerged during the peak of the Women’s Movement of the 1970s. It embraced the Women’s Movement’s ideas of equality and inclusivity, taking it from a secular ideology to a religious ideology, and applied these ideas to Judaism. For Jewish feminism meant serving not only as an activist for women’s rights, but also being a good Jew, in whatever practicing form these women decided for themselves. *Tikkun olam*, or as it translates from Hebrew ‘repair of the world,’ means that if an injustice occurs, it becomes part of the obligation for Jews to right the injustice.<sup>2</sup> Although the possibility of entirely fixing the problem may not be possible, Jewish faith asserts that Jews have a duty to acknowledge the injustice and play our part in attempting to right the wrong, no matter where it occurs. In the case of Jewish feminists, they felt obligated to push the ideas of equality, social justice, and *tikkun olam* into their own religious communities. While the fight for Jewish women’s equality and inclusion began in the 1970s, many of the outcomes did not emerge within religious communities until the 1980s. With some of these accomplishments emerged a new generation of Jewish feminists, rituals, traditions, and possibilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Plaskow, interview by Megan Schwab, November 7, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Danya Ruttenberg, et. al, *Yentl’s Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*, Seal Press, 2001, 229.

The Jewish Women's Movement, according to Jewish historian Joyce Antler [1942-], consisted of the universalism concept – the idea that strove to build a coalition of women from all walks of life and backgrounds, but did not always mean inclusivity because of those distinct differences.<sup>3</sup> The Jewish universalist perspective celebrated the coming together as a group of women and acknowledging the shared experience of gender (but rarely other social identities), and mimicked the universalism of the broader feminist movement. Because of the desire to push a universalist concept, all other identities remained excluded from the agenda for so called 'mainstream' feminist agenda, among them being the topics and struggles experienced based off of race, ethnicity, socioeconomics, and religion.<sup>4</sup> While the concept of universalism carried over with some successes, some groups noted the tendency for universalism to shut out any discussion or analysis of different experiences. Although the term would not be coined until the 1990s by Kimberlee Crenshaw, intersectionality, the idea of understanding the multitude of identities held by a single individual, plays into every aspect of one's life, not just gender.<sup>5</sup> Though not yet vocalized with the exact terminology, Antler uses the word 'particularism' instead, referencing groups focusing not simply on gender, but additional identities surrounding women, such as race or religion. Although the larger organizations within the Feminist Movement desired a universalist approach, many historians, like Ruth Rosen, Sara Evans, and Benita Roth, argued that an insistence on universalism, or

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<sup>3</sup> Joyce Antler, *Joyce Antler, Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*, New York University Press, 2018, 2-20.

<sup>4</sup> Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 11-21.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 19-23.

rather a failure to recognize women's differences, assisted in ending the vitality and successes of the Women's Movement.<sup>6</sup>

Jewish feminists discovered that difference not only mattered in their lives, but it shaped their emerging identities. The response to the idea of Jewish particularism, meaning that although they strongly identified themselves with issues based on their gender, their Jewish identity also played a large role in their lives and experiences. However, within the Women's Movement and Jewish meant addressing negative sentiments towards Judaism, especially in dealing with Zionism and Israel. Zionism, the belief that Israel should exist and does so as the promised land for the Jewish people, became even more heavily scrutinized after the Six Day War in 1967. In 1967, Israel's forces launched a preemptive aerial attack and ground war to show their military strength of its nation, especially towards some of their Arab neighbors, including Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. However, this strike garnered international attention, with many claiming that with the expansion of Israel (Israel gained the Golan Heights from Syria, the West Bank from Jordan, and the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt) meant Israel was taking on the role of oppressor in relation to their Arab neighbors. Although created in 1948 after the realization of the severity of the Holocaust and displacement and attempted annihilation of European Jews, negative sentiments in the West did not begin until a few decades later. The idea that Israel's establishment displaced previously settled groups and that by pushing their military to enforce their country's security and dealing with

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<sup>6</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, Viking, 2000. Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*, Free Press, 2003. Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

perceived threats through arms rather than diplomatic talks, cemented for some the idea that Israel became an imperialist nation, colonizing land away from other ethnic groups.<sup>7</sup>

Many within the New Left and the Women's Movement, even some Jews, particularly after the Six Day War, held the belief that Israel became the oppressor, and the anti-Zionist sentiments reflected anti-Semitic prejudices simmering beneath the surface.<sup>8</sup> While many of the ideals of feminism remained a positive, some Jewish women within the movement felt ill at ease when these sentiments revealed themselves. The UN General Assembly meeting in Mexico City in 1975 included and shock to some American Jewish women when the last panel's declaration stated: ' "Women and men together should eliminate colonialism, neo-colonialism... foreign domination and occupation, Zionism... the acquisition of land by force..."<sup>9</sup> Women like Bella Abzug and Betty Friedan objected to the notion as 'Zionism as Racism,' and both, especially Betty Friedan, received backlash in the form of anti-Semitic remarks such as name calling by the press and organized disruption by those in attendance.<sup>10</sup> Many Jewish women embraced feminist ideologies despite these anti-Zionist and subtle anti-Semitic beliefs within the Women's Movement, and rather than stay entirely connected to it, they desired to spread the feminist ideology to their own religious communities. Even today, Jewish women still address the issues of their feminist identity, their Jewishness, and their mixed feelings when dealing with anti-Zionist rhetoric.<sup>11</sup> By doing this, they strove to change

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<sup>7</sup> Women Against Imperialism. "Feminism, Anti-semitism, and Racism..." *Off Our Backs* 12, no. 7 (1982): Pp 20. Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Looking Jewish, Seeing Jews," in *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Harvard University Press, 1998, 188. Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*, New York University Press, 2018, 25-28, 315-342.

<sup>8</sup> Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 11-21.

<sup>9</sup> Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 320.

<sup>10</sup> Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 319-322.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Weidman Schneider, "Intersections and Intersectionality," *Lilith*, Spring, 2017, 3.

centuries of religious practices within synagogues. These Jewish women sought to prove that *within* Judaism, women should not be denied equal access in religious rituals and traditions.<sup>12</sup>

### **Thoughts on Jewish Feminism & Religious Change**

Aviva Cantor, journalist, and author of *Jewish Women/Jewish Men: The Legacy of Patriarchy in Jewish Life* (1995), describes the hurdles that Jewish women faced when the fight for female rabbinical ordination occurred in the 1970s within the Jewish Conservative community. According to Cantor, the biggest difference between the debates on the ordination of women did not have theological arguments like in Catholicism or Protestantism. One of the particular issues occurred around the argument that synagogues exist so Jewish men have their space away from the outside world. To be a Jewish man in temple meant having power and control. With the rest of the world dominated by those not of the Jewish faith just outside temple doors, the created identity and self-worth within temple contains special value for Jewish men. According to Cantor, by desiring to be included in religious leadership in synagogue, women in turn challenged the self-worth of Jewish men in synagogue, and therefore Jewish women threatened Judaism itself.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the argument against female ordination made also revolved around the destruction of the Jewish family. If women entered synagogue as equal or as leaders, the woman's role in the house—to keep a kosher home and raise Jewish children—would be threatened. Some went so far as to argue that the duty of Jewish women needed to revolve around producing children and raising them in a

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<sup>12</sup> Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*, 7-11, 318-327.

<sup>13</sup> Aviva Cantor, *Jewish Women/Jewish Men: The Legacy of Patriarchy in Jewish Life*, HarperCollins, 1995, 417 - 421.

traditional Jewish setting to counter the destruction of the Jewish population from the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup>

Religious study groups helped create a bond between women to look beyond what was thought of them. The groups did what Lilith and Eve did, according to *midrash* created by Plaskow, they comforted one another despite what Adam claimed about Lilith. Creating a sisterhood that withstood male influence, Jewish women also came to the realization that to change their image, like Jews through the centuries, they would have to question Judaism, however, this time they would question it through a feminist lens.<sup>15</sup>

Contributing to the discussions advocating for change, Blu Greenberg [1936- ] questioned of the validity of creating a separation of the sexes. Regarding *mitzvahs*, how necessary would it be for women to be excused from daily prayer services so she could stay home and raise the children while also maintaining a kosher household? Greenburg questioned the system by asking whether God, who created all creatures and loved them, ordained this and truly desired to have one group of people as dominant while the others forced into submission, or not. Did God's words ordain this, or were those ideas simply reflected in the socio-religious beliefs of antiquity that no longer held the same line of credibility as they once did? Judaism and its community always felt the external influences from the gentile population. Who was to say that the separation and relaxing of duties for women to maintain the household and rear children entirely withstood the test of time without any changes? According to Greenburg, *midrash* allows for the reinterpretation of Jewish law and the Talmud. Rabbis have continued the idea and practice for centuries. So why not reinterpret from the stance of Jewish women? While

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<sup>14</sup> Aviva Cantor, *Jewish Women/Jewish Men*, 421.

<sup>15</sup> Paula Hyman, "Jewish Feminism," *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, Routledge, 1998, 694 -698.

there are some differences between men and women, the sense of superiority of one over the other in Jewish law in a twentieth century world where women strove for equality with their male counterparts no longer held validity. Allowing for the changes of time to create a new framework and argument to allow fluidity of Judaism has helped the survival of the religion as a whole. Why not allow it to continue to evolve and achieve *tikkun olam* for the population of Jews that have been pushed to the side and left behind.<sup>16</sup>

Connecting the ideas of equality with feminism and applying it to Judaism could be difficult when the institution held a patriarchal slant. Questioning, something expected in Judaism, did not always supply Jewish women with the answers they desired or helped them remain within the fold of both Judaism and feminism. While special ceremonies for women have always been present, and new ones slowly developed, it remained important to reexamine the imagery within Judaism and its symbols that resonated with women but have been diminished by the desire to keep women in their proclaimed roles as wives and mothers. The pressure for women to maintain these roles to continue the Jewish population denied women the ability to care for herself and her family financially, but also spiritually and emotionally. By attempting to guilt Jewish women to retain their historic roles, it became difficult for some to claim Judaism as a part of themselves. Though feminism stems from the desire to bring justice for oppressed women and to be compassionate, Judaism holds these values as well.

Many Jewish feminists struggled with the patriarchal nature of Judaism and the fine line created for some Jewish women to accept both titles as Jew and feminist.

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<sup>16</sup> Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981, 39-55.

Feminism supposedly threatened Judaism with change by recognizing women as full Jews rather than the peripheral Jew that Adler claimed them to be. Some religious leaders even feared by allowing this equality, the Jewish population would suffer, tying in the idea that if women left the home, the Jewish family would collapse and disappear. Gail Shulman saw a path for Jewish women to embrace both their religion and their feminism in 1983, but acknowledged the obstacles of, 'separate but equal' within Judaism, and the struggles to address and change it while remaining faithful to Jewish tradition and feminism. Within Shulman's Conservative congregation, men and women remained separated with the notion, "We *watched* while they *did*."<sup>17</sup> Despite the changes that occurred by 1983, Shulman reflected on the belief that, "Without...fundamental changes in the patriarchal structure, many feminists who do not fit into the traditional roles will continue to feel estranged from Judaism."<sup>18</sup> She ends her essay with the unfortunate self-discovery that, "one source of my feminism is my identity as a Jew... the irony here is that I affirm my Jewishness in a way Judaism seems unable and unwilling to accept or return."<sup>19</sup> With society's growth, Shulman pleads that Judaism keep up or else risk alienating more of its members.

However, other Jewish feminists took comfort in the rituals that separate men from women because they believed each group had a unique role to play. Just like the general Feminist Movement in the United States, not all women embraced the idea of full inclusion in what used to be a male dominated sphere. For example, in 1982 Vivian Mayer, an Orthodox Jew, believed by studying the symbols within Judaism and their

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<sup>17</sup> Gail Shulman, "A Feminist Path to Judaism," In *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, Schocken Books Inc., New York, 1983, 105-109.

<sup>18</sup> Shulman, "A Feminist Path to Judaism," In *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, 109.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

significance, women could further appreciate their roles, even if not entirely the same as men. Mayer believed in the assigned duties for each gender, and rather than changing the roles, she thought steps could be taken for women to understand and appreciate their place within the Jewish community more fully. She claimed, “Christian capitalist culture... reduced women to an ‘ornament on a man’s arm.’ Unfortunately, Jews, especially after the holocaust, are often desperately assimilationist, and Jewish women have paid for it the most.”<sup>20</sup> She also worried because the attempt of wiping out Jewish people through defining what it meant to be a Jew appeared to be oversimplified and not fully encapsulating the real nature of what it meant to be Jewish. Parts of Judaism that should be embraced, according to Mayer, dealt with the belief of taking care of one another, respecting foreigners, and affording dignity to all living creatures, were excluded from the basic definition of Judaism. She acknowledged the rituals of *mikveh* (ritual purification) for women and the power women held over creating the next generation. Mayer claimed that men and women have different needs and therefore different parts to play in Judaism. Mayer’s argued that men, “... need their minyans and their tallisim, but our [women’s] needs are different... lighting candles for the Sabbath and celebrating the New Moon with other Jewish women unite our women’s spirituality harmoniously with our Jewish tradition.”<sup>21</sup> Other Orthodox Jewish women supported the ideals of basic feminism in the realm of work, but ultimately believed within religion, leaders should primarily remain male, and men and women should retain their separate roles..<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Vivian Mayer, “A Once Closed Door, Re-Opened Again:,” *Big Mama Rag* 10, issue 7, 12, July 1982.

<sup>21</sup> Mayer, “A Once Closed Door, Re-Opened Again:,” *Big Mama Rag*, 11, 17..

<sup>22</sup> Lisa D. Pearce, “God Gave Us the Right: Conservative Catholic Evangelical Protestant, and Orthodox Jewish Women Grapple with Feminism Christel Manning,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 38, no. 4 (December 1, 1999): 564-565.

This argument made sense for some, especially within the Jewish Orthodoxy, but not all Jewish feminists agreed. Fellow Orthodox Jew, Blu Greenberg, questioned the original differences between men and women. Observing men fulfilling their prayer obligations and watching sons and husbands at service gave a sense of satisfaction and pleasure. Greenberg asked how much of that had been ingrained into women, to not have them question their exclusion. The rituals and obligations for men always existed, and so there has always been a belief that women simply sit back and watch. While tradition held validity and having men only in rituals at synagogue kept them from less desirable areas of male bonding, like bars, Greenberg wondered whether that was enough reason to continue male only rituals and push for only men to attend synagogue. “Do I really believe that women’s communion is different in God’s eyes and that He wants it any less? Are men truly more suited to a rigorous discipline of prayer, or is it simply that women have been given or have taken the easy way out?”<sup>23</sup>

Created complacency became another issue Greenberg noted. She argued that prayer by proxy was no longer sufficient for some women to feel like equal participants, if they ever felt that to begin with. Complacency became the custom, but Greenberg stressed the idea that questions needed to be asked. *Tikkun olam*, repairing and accepting beneficial change in the world seemed to be the better option rather than simply repeating the patterns of past generations with less options available to them. Through educating Jewish women about their religious obligations, and through feminist ideology, Greenberg noted that, “If we have learned anything at all from feminism, is it not that rights and responsibilities must come together?”<sup>24</sup> Rather than remaining complacent,

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<sup>23</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism*, 88-89.

<sup>24</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism*, 89.

Jewish women must, “retrieve obligation from its limbo state, to restore women to the sound habits of liturgy, and to give equal status and equal access that comes with obligation.”<sup>25</sup> While men and women may be different, equality within a religious setting could be possible if both groups had the same requirements.

### **Female Cantors and Rabbis**

Arguments over ordination of female rabbis and cantors stemmed from arguments that pervaded Jewish scholars’ thoughts for centuries. The Talmud notes that a woman’s singing voice, considered *ervah*, translating to mean “erotic” or “licentious,” should be left out of religious songs. The belief of women’s voices as inappropriate for religious songs led rabbis and scholars to assume that Jewish women should not sing, yet the history of female voices in Judaism stretches as far back as Exodus and remained present through Jewish history. According to the Jewish faith, Miriam the Prophetess led the Jews in song and dance after crossing the Red Sea and escaping slavery in Egypt, therefore signifying that Jewish women’s voices of the past did contribute to song. Similarly, the Song of Songs, written sometime between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE as part of the Tanakh, require women to join in the songs. Cantor Barbara Ostfeld [1952- ], the first ordained female Cantor, liturgical singer who leads prayers during temple service, notes that despite this history, the idea of a female Cantor remained a topic of little serious discussion until the 1970s. With the spread of feminist influence into Jewish

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

practice, the idea of a female Cantor finally emerged and became generally accepted within Reform Judaism.<sup>26</sup>

The difference in vocal range and sound also played into the role of cantors. Ostfeld admitted that while male voices traditionally dominated the cantorial position, the association between male and female voices differ enough to warrant discussion. Ostfeld argued, “People often feel that the female voice humanizes, softens, enhances prayer... Men’s voices are seldom described as ‘pure,’ but ‘purity,’ and ‘clarity,’ are words frequently used in admiring descriptions of women cantor’s voices...”<sup>27</sup> Although unsure of the shift in preference, Ostfeld made the point that congregation members appreciate a woman’s voice and its feeling over that of the traditional ‘earthiness’ of male cantor’s voices.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the differences in opinions and ideas of how to promote change or simply create something new, women slowly became included in synagogue beyond attending to observe male family members. In the wake of the push from *Ezrat Nashim*, and in general a push from progressives within religious groups and the growing popularity of feminism, changes within the religious community blossomed. The first female Reform Rabbi became ordained in 1972, and the first female cantor, an individual who sings or chants prayer service, became ordained shortly after in 1975. In quick succession, the Reconstructionist community ordained its first female rabbi in 1974.<sup>29</sup> Rabbi Rebecca Alpert [1950- ], ordained at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1975 and part of

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<sup>26</sup> Cantor Barbara Ostfeld, “The Ascent of the Woman Cantor: Shira Hamaalot.” in *New Jewish Feminism: Probing the Past, Forging the Future*, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009, 138..

<sup>27</sup> Cantor Ostfeld, “The Ascent of the Woman Cantor,” in *New Jewish Feminism*, 138.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Paula Hyman, “Jewish Feminism,” 695. Pamela S. Nadell, “Paving the Road to Women Rabbis, 1889-2015,” in *Gender and Religious Leadership: Women Rabbis: Pastors, and Ministers*, Lexington Books, 2019, 89- 112.

the first generation of female rabbis, noted that in some ways, “Women have done what some of the early thinkers feared, which was to feminize Judaism.”<sup>30</sup> As one of the first female rabbis in the Reconstructionist community, she faced instances of criticisms, noting that some in the congregations said female rabbis were not real rabbis, and some refused to have a female rabbi oversee a funeral for a loved one. However, within the Reconstructionist community, female rabbis gained wider acceptance relatively quickly. Today, Rabbi Alpert says it would be a tragedy if women never entered rabbinical school and became rabbis, and that it would be a disservice to Judaism if new female leaders never entered rabbinical positions to positively change Judaism and create a more welcoming environment for Jews with disabilities or diverse sexual identities.<sup>31</sup>

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly also gathered to address some of the issues laid at their feet by *Ezrat Nashim*. In 1973, they allowed women to count in a *minyan*, which effectively allowed them to participate in most religious services. Rabbi Phillip Sigal, who supported women’s participation, stated that *halacha* (Jewish law) does not explicitly exclude women from participating, and that public prayer was mandatory, regardless of gender. The original version of *halacha*, Rabbi Sigal argued, merely said ten adult members must be present to form a *minyan*, and that specifying gender came later. In utilizing *midrash*, Rabbi Sigal studied interpretations of *halacha* and argued in favor of women’s participation in Conservative congregations. Though the motion passed and women could now participate in the *minyan*, different opinions still appeared and became discussed. Some questioned its decision, in fear of jeopardizing ‘traditional’ family life and women’s place

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<sup>30</sup> Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom, January 13, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Rabbi Alpert, interview, 2022.

at home. Others supported it because of their belief in embracing equality of men and women in the congregation, or like Sigal's wish to retain congregation numbers, differing beliefs for women to be allowed in a *minyan*, or not, existed.<sup>32</sup>

Following this decision, women in Conservative congregations were increasingly welcomed to read from the Torah. Conservative Judaism in the 1970s had the largest number of congregants in the United States. Acceptance of women into Conservative congregations and eventually accepting female rabbis and cantors was seen as a large accomplishment because of Conservative Judaism's prominence and due initial reluctance of some of its leaders. After reviewing the issue for several years by faculty members of seminary schools and the Rabbinical Assembly, the first female Conservative Rabbi, ordained in 1985, signaled more women joining the ranks of Conservative cantors in 1987.<sup>33</sup>

The ordination of religious figures in Jewish religious life proved a great accomplishment for the Jewish Feminist Movement. Rabbis and Cantors maintained important relationships with their congregations and often helped individual members through very emotional, both joyous and heart wrenching, situations. However, as rabbinical student, Rabbi Karen 'Chai' Levy [1972- ] noted, sometimes a difficulty resulted if congregation members did not quite know how to address a female rabbi. In part, becoming a religious figure meant one's personal life became open to scrutiny. "The boundary between a rabbi's private and professional life is already near nonexistent, and when wooers use Judaism as a dating maneuver, the rabbi can get trapped by a smitten

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<sup>32</sup> Rabbi David J. Fine, "Women and the Minyan." *Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of Rabbinical Assembly*, 2002, 2-10.

<sup>33</sup> Paula Hyman, "Jewish Feminism," 696.

congregant who won't go away."<sup>34</sup> While not necessarily an issue only female rabbis dealt with, a young female rabbi, like any young female, must know how to play the game when dealing with men in both professional and personal settings.

The Talmud depicted sexuality in both positive and negative ways, and it often tied into a woman's story. This issue carried on over the centuries into the modern era. Like the depictions of hypersexualized Halloween costumes of nuns or catholic schoolgirls, female rabbis contend with the opposite sex in a way that many male rabbis did not, in part because of mainstream media and biblical teachings. "... Women serving as religious leaders are up against a tradition and society that has sexualized and objectified them for generations; we still live in a world in which men are respected and women are harassed."<sup>35</sup> The importance of addressing the fact that female rabbis did not subscribe to the assumed visual of a rabbi – that being male, still had to be addressed. *Hesed* refers to the loving kindness, while *gevurah* means strength, often associated with the restraint that disciplines an individual. Both ideas, according to Rabbi Levy, are key to leading a congregation, and there must be a fine line, especially in a world where women were often viewed as one or the other but not always both. As an important figure in a Jewish community, rabbis must accomplish this duality to maintain their congregation. Female rabbis must maintain this duality even more firmly because of how they have historically and biblically been perceived.<sup>36</sup> Rabbi Levy, twenty years later recalled the struggle of, "How do I be warm and loving, open, and embracing of people

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<sup>34</sup> Rabbi Karen (Chai) Levy, "Sexy Rabbi," in *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*, Seal Press, 2001, 114.

<sup>35</sup> Levy, "Sexy Rabbi," in *Yentl's Revenge*, 115.

<sup>36</sup> Levy, "Sexy Rabbi," in *Yentl's Revenge*, 112-118.

and not have them get the wrong idea?”<sup>37</sup> Although finding her way after a few years as a rabbi, the duality of being a woman and a rabbi meant struggling with different dynamics than a male rabbi.

With the ordination of more female rabbis, some looked beyond the pulpit as a way to use their ordination to benefit their community. While some desired to belong to a single community and synagogue, others sought to take their knowledge elsewhere. Hoping to inspire the incoming generation of rabbis, female rabbis sought out universities and seminaries to provide students with new ways of approaching the rabbinate, not only as women but to show possibilities for rabbis beyond the traditional synagogue atmosphere. Some sought to take their services to universities as Hillel rabbis and even chaplains at hospitals or senior facilities. Whereas these roles outside of the congregation held the stigma of being less than, these roles became embraced by this new generation of female rabbis since female ordination in the 1970s and 1980s, and eventually the Jewish communities. This phase of Jewish feminism also helped introduce new writings in the field of Jewish feminism. New midrashic tales, poetry, prayers, ceremonies, and religious studies and literature emerged during this time when female rabbis entered Jewish academia in the 1970s and 1980s as more female rabbis became ordained. In this way, according to Rabbi Jaqueline Koch Ellenson [1995(?)-], the rabbinate remained influential for Jewish leaders and their communities but spread the role further than prior generations thought of as appropriate, yet by becoming more localized in the community

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<sup>37</sup> Rabbi Chai Levy, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom, March 3, 2022.

in places other than synagogue, these female rabbis seemed to grow the rabbinate and draw old and new members into Jewish practice, helping rather than hindering.<sup>38</sup>

With women entering the rabbinate and taking on responsibilities previously only held by men, the model of the rabbi also began to change. Whereas previous generations of male only rabbis often fused their professional and personal lives into one, the new generation containing women sought to do this in a way that the personal lives surrounding child rearing and dealing with home life also entered the discussion in the profession. Male rabbis' absence from the home life meant that domestic issues tended to be absent in temple. With women rabbis, issues such as pregnancy and child rearing entered the communal discussion. The idea of parenting could enter public discussion because this new generation of rabbis, according to Rabbi Ellenson, played an instrumental role as mothers raising their children.<sup>39</sup> Rabbi Levy noted that bringing her personal issues into congregation discussions, particularly about fertility struggles, "...helps people feel seen, and that the rabbi understands the pain that they're going through. I think that's a great example of the kind of things women bring to the rabbinate... making it more of a topic."<sup>40</sup>

### **Ceremonies for Girls**

Another growing trend throughout the movement, in addition to more women becoming rabbis and cantors, was the expansion of *bat mitzvah*, the ritual where a twelve- or thirteen-year-old girl attained religious and legal adult status, in more and more

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<sup>38</sup> Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson, "From the Personal to the Communal: How Women Have Changed the Rabbinate" in *New Jewish Feminism: Probing the Past, Forging the Future*, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009, 125-132.

<sup>39</sup> Rabbi Koch Ellenson, "From the Personal to the Communal," in *New Jewish Feminism*, 128.

<sup>40</sup> Levy interview.

congregations. By the 1980s, many young girls were taking part in this ritual within Reconstructionist and Reform Synagogues. Unsurprisingly, Conservative and Orthodox Congregations initially both struggled with the idea of a female on the bimah and reading directly from the Torah to recite the blessings. Although in many cases *bat mitzvahs* occurred, restrictions existed to prevent girls reading from the Torah, performing certain blessings, or even which day to have the *bat mitzvah* itself. One mother of a daughter who had to deal with the constrictions of her synagogue acknowledged that Judaism moves slowly, and that in the past the *bat mitzvah* occurred less often. Despite the slow pace of change, there is still progress being made. Dr. Paula Hyman [1946-2011], a past dean of the Conservative Seminary College of Jewish Studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, also noted that the *bat mitzvah*, while still limited, was an important step in becoming an equal, despite the lack of expectations that came from a *bat mitzvah* versus the *bar mitzvah* for boys.<sup>41</sup> Rabbi Cherie Koller-Fox noted in 1976, that in many cases, the culmination of a girl's study to celebrate her *bat mitzvah*, "...is often the last time that girls are allowed to participate in the synagogue service. They are taught all the skills necessary for the occasion and then are never called up to use them."<sup>42</sup> Once elevated to adulthood, girls joined their mothers in temple as observers rather than fully participating as a boy would do after his *bar mitzvah*. Instead, Koller-Fox suggested the inclusivity of allowing girls to fully participate in service after a *bat mitzvah* could help Jewish girls, "feel more connected to Jewishness at this critical time in the formation of their identity."<sup>43</sup> Koller-Fox's argument directly contradicts the

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<sup>41</sup> Nadine Brozzan, "Jewish Controversy Over Rite for Girls," *New York Times*, Mar 24, 1982.

<sup>42</sup> Rabbi Cherie Koller-Fox, "Women and Jewish Education: A New Look at Bat Mitzvah," in *The New Jewish Perspectives*, Ed. By Elizabeth Koltun, Schocken Books, 1976, 36.

<sup>43</sup> Koller-Fox, "Women and Jewish Education," in *The New Jewish Perspectives*, 41.

paranoia that feminism would lead to the downfall of Judaism. With more girls in the congregation as active participants, they would embrace their religion rather than abandon it.

The idea of having good role models also existed in Rabbi Koller-Fox's mindset of properly acknowledging girls' place in their Jewish communities after a respective *bat mitzvah*. Rather than only having mother figures as the key example or role model to these young girls, another type of role model became necessary. Although the traditional role of the woman meant staying home to raise the children and ensure a kosher home, there needed to be an emphasis on important female figures who pushed the idea that girls can aspire to more than that in their religious community. Both Rabbi Koller-Fox and Rabbi Levy understood the importance of girls needing another female role model. For Rabbi Levy that meant having a rabbi or cantor that understood the traditional barriers keeping young girls out of the rabbinate or cantorial professions. Prior to female ordination, she felt girls wondered, "How do I see myself reflected in this tradition? Am I supposed to just be the one in the kitchen?"<sup>44</sup> Rabbi Koller-Fox emphasized having a female role model for young girls outside of the home – teachers, tutors, and other active participants. By showing girls that women actively took part in temple meant that they too could participate more fully than their mothers and grandmothers.<sup>45</sup>

The traditional beginnings of being welcomed into the Jewish community begins at birth. With baby boys, the ritualistic circumcision known as the *bris*, starts the initiation into the religious community. The circumcision, which occurs eight days after

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<sup>44</sup> Levy interview.

<sup>45</sup> Rabbi Koller-Fox, "Women and Jewish Education," in *The New Jewish Perspectives*, 37- 39. Rabbi Levy, "Sexy Rabbi," in *Yentl's Revenge*, 112-118. Rabbi Laura Geller, "Reactions to a Woman Rabbi," in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, Ed. Susannah Heschel, Schocken Books, 1983, 210-213.

birth, signifies two things, according to authors Ilana Trachtman and Sarah Blustain of their 1999 article - that it must occur for Jewish boys if they want to be part of the Covenant, and “Tough luck... this is a boys’ club; God didn’t give you what it takes to join.”, for both mothers and baby girls.<sup>46</sup> In an attempt to participate in a ritual that historically excluded women, even the mothers, women elected to become *mohels*, those who actually performed the ceremony. The Brit Milah Board, established in 1984 through the Reform movement, allowed both men and women training to perform the ritual circumcision. Because the Reform Rabbinical College already ordained female rabbis at this point, it became easier for women to become involved in the process of the *bris*. Blu Greenberg, though an Orthodox Jew, supported the decision, noting the importance of women being able to participate in this *mitzvah*, as it benefits the community as a whole when children enter into the Covenant. Giving women the ability to participate in the *bris* mattered since females themselves do not have the ritual performed on them as babies, so this decision gave women a way to participate when otherwise unable.<sup>47</sup>

Other than participating in a *bris*, women wanted a way to acknowledge their Jewish daughters. To welcome daughters into the Covenant, the *Simchat Bat*, known as the Celebration of the Daughter, and the *Brit Bat*, the Covenant of the Daughter, emerged as early as 1970 as a practice as part of the idea that daughters should have a formal way of being welcomed into the Jewish nation. Commonly just enveloped under the umbrella term *Simchat Bat*, these ceremonies expressed and affirmed the humanity

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<sup>46</sup> Ilana Trachtman and Sarah Blustain, “When the Mohel is a Woman: Moving an Ancient Ritual into a New Era,” *Lilith: The Independent Jewish Women’s Magazine*, 24 (1) 1999: 10-14.

<sup>47</sup> Trachtman and Blustain, “When the Mohel is a Woman,” *Lilith*, 12-14.

and value of Jewish girls while utilizing Jewish values and themes to create the ceremony.<sup>48</sup>

Plaskow made the analogy that the use of interpretation when creating a ritual differs between boys and girls. Citing a study, Plaskow noted that compared to boys who are intent on studying the rules and creating more to resolve problems, girls find rules to be pragmatic and once they lose that pragmatism, they are replaced or discarded as the situation unfolds. Like the girls from the study, by using some of the rules to maintain the ritualistic and religious function, the structure of new rituals such as the *Simchat Bat*, stem from this same ideology largely adopted by Jewish feminists.<sup>49</sup> Feminist ritual promotes fluidity, and while Jewish rituals have existed for centuries, the religion itself exists and maintains itself by adapting to its changing environment. In that regard, the compatibility between feminist ritual and Jewish ritual speaks a similar language and can coexist with one another.

Some of the earliest naming ceremonies occurred in 1973, some occurring on the Sabbath, and others utilized sacred objects such as the *tallit* (prayer shawl) or the *mezuzah* (doorpost marking). Using these objects in the naming ceremonies meant the home and Torah would be represented, adding another layer of significance to the ceremony. These earliest ceremonies occurred within the Reform and Reconstructionist congregations, but the Conservative congregations also adopted these measures to include more of their Jewish daughters into the fold. Guides, published to assist parents in planning their daughter's *simchat bat*, assisted parents and encouraged them to allow for

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<sup>48</sup> Sharon R. Siegel, "Jewish Welcoming Ceremonies for Newborn Girls: The Modern Development of a Feminist Ritual," *Modern Judaism* 32, no. 3 (2012): 335–58.

<sup>49</sup> Judith Plaskow, "Torah: Reshaping Jewish Memory," in *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism From a Feminist Perspective*, HarperOne Publishers, 1990, 25-74.

these celebrations as fluid and complex as a representation of what other rituals could be. The Reform Movement included a naming ceremony for girls in their 1994 book, *On the Doorposts of Your House: Prayers and Ceremonies for the Jewish Home*, with the text noting that the ceremony occurred within the home or the synagogue, depending on the family preference. To an extent the Orthodox rabbis acknowledge the *simchat bat*, though a standard practice for it did not exist.<sup>50</sup> The ceremony, based in Jewish traditions, entered the Jewish community largely without much protest, and since the first naming ceremony in the 1970s, thousands take place every year to welcome the Jewish daughter into the Covenant.

### **Rediscovering Rosh Chodesh**

With the emergence of feminist literature and female leaders entering Judaism, new or long forgotten holidays reemerged into the mainstream Jewish consciousness. Rosh Chodesh, Festival of the New Moon, historically held great significance for women, but over the centuries lost prominence and became forgotten by the general Jewish population. However, with the rise of Jewish feminism and female leaders, Rosh Chodesh became reinvigorated and encased in feminist ideology. Rosh Chodesh, as the translation suggests, celebrates the beginning of a new lunar cycle. The lunar cycle dictates the Jewish calendar and therefore observing of the new moon cycle holds importance. It is a time to celebrate not only the new cycle, but also women and their relationship to God and mother earth. The moon, long believed to be a symbol of woman, all Jews, and Shekinah, the feminine part of God, was emphasized through this monthly

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<sup>50</sup> Siegel, "Jewish Welcoming Ceremonies for Newborn Girls," *Modern Judaism*, 242–58.

celebration. The Talmud explained that the sun and moon originally equaled each other in size until the moon asked if there could be two rulers that shared a single crown, referencing the skies where the moon and sun reigned. In response to this, God altered the size of the moon to become smaller, sparking a critical response from the moon. The moon questioned why God made her smaller for asking an important question. In Judaism, when asking questions remains pivotal to practicing and learning, the moon asking a question held significance for Jewish scholars. God pondered the question and responded that she, the moon, would rule by night and the days and years would be marked by her, and worthy people would be named after her. To atone for the hasty decision, God gave this to her and promised she would shine as brightly as the sun.<sup>51</sup>

A *midrash* explanation for Rosh Chodesh and its thorough involvement of women also draws its history from the story of Exodus. When the male Israelites built the Golden Calf in the desert after believing Moses died attempting to receive the ten commandments from the top of Mount Sinai, the women refused to give their gold and jewelry to construct it. Rather than donating their gold and praying to a false idol, or any idol, they refused to participate. Some *midrashic* stories suggest that Miriam, Moses' sister, led this resistance in rejecting the construction of the false idol. Judaism rejects idolatry as a whole, and because the women chose not to take part in building and praying to a false god, the Hebrew God honored Jewish women with Rosh Chodesh.<sup>52</sup> By remaining true to their faith, Rosh Chodesh honored women for maintaining their covenant with God.

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<sup>51</sup> Arlene Agus, "This Month is for You: Observing Rosh Hodesh as a Woman's Holiday," in *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, Schocken Books Inc., New York, 1976, 84-94, 85. Arthur I. Waskow, "Feminist Judaism: Restoration of the Moon," in *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, Ed. Susannah Heschel Schocken Books, 1983, 261-272.

<sup>52</sup> Ryiah Lilith, "Challah for the Queen of Heaven," in *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*, Seal Press, 2001, 102- 112.

Rosh Chodesh has been primarily for women, even to the extent that they avoid work on the first day of the month in honor of the moon's new cycle. The one month it is not observed is the month when Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is observed. As a symbol of a new cycle, women have strong ties to the observance because women's connection to the concept of new life and rebirth. Even the idea of menstruation and the cycle of the female form revolve around the idea that in part because women carry and bring new life into the world, the association between women and the moon have a connection with one another. Symbols used for the ceremony include water and spheres. In connection to Miriam the Prophetess, as a mother to her people while helping to lead them through the desert for forty years, this adds remembrance to a strong female leader. The association with water also reflects the pull the moon has on the tide, as well as the purification process tied in with the *mikveh*.<sup>53</sup> The *mikveh*, a ritual traditionally participated in once a woman's menstrual cycle finished or after childbirth, involves women entering blessed and purified water to receive new life and resume marital relations with their respective spouses.

Rosh Chodesh and its practice goes back centuries. Part of what Jewish feminists sought to do in reframing their Jewish history meant examining the past and seeking out the holes that could contain women's importance. Because Rosh Chodesh existed practically through to the biblical era and is even mentioned in Exodus 12:2 in the verse, "This month is for you the first of months."<sup>54</sup> Celebrations consisted of consuming festive foods with singing and dancing and even sacrifices made to God, with documentation

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<sup>53</sup> Agus, "This Month is for You," 85-89.

<sup>54</sup> Arlene Agus, "Examining Rosh Chodesh: An Analysis of the Holiday and Its Textual Sources," in *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology*, Ed. Susan Berrin, Jason Aronson Inc., 1996, 8.

dating as far back as the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.<sup>55</sup> Jewish feminists in the 1970s took up this holiday easily and embraced it and idea that Jewish women always practiced and celebrated womanhood in their own way. Whether or not it existed outside of temple, this holiday fomented the idea of women practicing their Judaism in a way honoring all women, and in doing so validated women's place in Judaism rather than being seen as 'other' within it.<sup>56</sup> Even Orthodox Jewish feminists like Greenberg, who said that while the holiday celebrates all Jews, Rosh Chodesh's historical emphasis on acknowledging women meant that the holiday gives a special overlap that enriches the whole community in its celebration. The overall lesson to be taken from this holiday, according to Greenberg, is that of renewal, that light follows dark, and that hope returns. This universal message and the timing of Rosh Chodesh's reclamation led by the Jewish women whose parents and grandparents experienced or mourned because of the Holocaust, contributes another layer of complexity and Jewish values to the holiday.<sup>57</sup>

### **Addressing Remaining Issues Through a Feminist Lens**

One of the limitations that persist today within Judaism revolves around the issue of divorce. Although generally considered a civil matter today, even if married in a place of worship, divorce could be dealt with outside of religion, but traditionally Judaism deals with both the civil and religious aspects of divorce. While Christianity and Catholicism attempted to prevent divorce, Judaism historically never prevented or spoke against the ideas of married couples divorcing. In *halacha*, Jewish law stated that a

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<sup>55</sup> Leah Novick, "The History of Rosh Chodesh and Its Evolution as a Woman's History," in *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology*, Ed. Susan Berrin, Jason Aronson Inc., 1996, 13- 22.

<sup>56</sup> Arlene Agus, "Examining Rosh Chodesh," in *Celebrating the New Moon*, 3-12.

<sup>57</sup> Blu Greenberg, "Foreword," in *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology*, Ed. Susan Berrin, Jason Aronson Inc., 1996, xiii-xviii.

divorce could be granted, though it was the man who must initiate it and agree to it. A civil divorce can be conducted and completed by a woman, but if a husband did not provide the divorce document, known as the *get*, then in Judaism the woman is known as an *agunah*, or chained wife, who could not remarry under Jewish law and any children produced in a separate relationship were considered illegitimate. Though ways of petitioning and receiving a divorce within Conservative Judaism existed for women, the court traditionally could not grant the divorce or force the husband to sign off. A husband could withhold a divorce, for whatever reasons.

The issue, assessed multiple times over the centuries, had its greatest changes occur in the twentieth century. The feminist group containing mostly Conservative Jewish women, *Ezrat Nashim*, attended the convention of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly in 1972 to propose changes that would fully include women in Jewish practices, rituals, and the law. From these proposed changes, three basic ideas emerged to help women receive a divorce if the husband remained uncooperative and refused to sign the *get*. To avoid this, one of the proposals eventually offered was that of a conditional marriage, wherein if a *get* does not occur after a certain period after the civil divorce, then the marriage became null and void in Judaism. The “Lieberman clause,” dictated that through a marriage contract known as the *ketubah*, a pact forms that if one spouse files for divorce, the other would abide by it. The last allows for the Jewish court to annul the marriage if all other options failed. While all these options made it easier for a woman, she still could not grant a divorce to her husband, only he could. Because of the fluidity and ability to interpret *halacha*, room existed to include women in rituals and practices,

but there were also ways to interpret it to still exclude women from being on equal footing with men.<sup>58</sup>

Some of the new female Jewish leaders also sought to address this issue through additional rituals. Cantor Susan Caro created a new ritual focusing on marital separation. The ritual acknowledges the wife leaving her marriage while still remaining a part of the Jewish community. While some rituals recite Psalms, others contain the idea that the wife leaves the ritual having restored her status as an independent person, and that the wife, despite ending her marriage, "...[stands] as a Jewish woman with dignity and with strength."<sup>59</sup> With the rise of women in leadership positions within Judaism, more options became available to women, even in difficult positions, because their voices could be heard through fellow Jewish women.

By the early 1990s and with the ordination of female rabbis and cantors, it became increasingly possible for young Jewish girls to have mentors that understood the struggles of what it meant to be female in a community that was only beginning to accommodate and acknowledge that women could have a real place other than inside the home rearing children. More female leaders in congregations meant real discussions could occur regarding gender issues, including discussing the changes taking place during preteen and teenage years.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Rabbi Gail Labovitz, "Feminism and Jewish Law in Conservative Judaism," in *New Jewish Feminism: Probing the Past, Forging the Future*, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2009, 323-333.

<sup>59</sup> Rabbi Ostfeld, "Women and the Synagogue," *New Jewish Feminism*, 139-140.

<sup>60</sup> Vivienne Kramer, "Bat Mitzvah in the 90's," *Lilith Magazine*, Fall issue, 1994.

## Conclusion

According to Greenberg, *midrash* allowed for the reinterpretation of Jewish law, Talmud, ritual, and everyday life. Rabbis continued the idea and practice of *midrash* for centuries. So why not reinterpret from the stance of Jewish women? Greenberg argued that *halakhah* needed to be preserved, but that, “‘Preserving’ does not preclude bringing to the system human responses that will enhance and expand Torah values.”<sup>61</sup> Stagnation of Judaism did not benefit nor fit the historical nature of *halakhah*. While there are some differences between men and women, the sense of superiority of one over the other in Jewish law in a twentieth century world where women strove for equality with their male counterparts no longer held validity. Allowing for the changes of time to create a new framework and argument to allow fluidity of Judaism helped the survival of the religion as a whole. With the ordination of leading female figures, the creation or rediscover of celebrations for women, and the inclusion of female discussion and opinion, Jewish scholars like Plaskow and Greenberg, among others, helped defend the decisions that led to the changes occurring in the 1970s and 1980s. Though there are still challenges not yet addressed or resolved, why not allow Judaism to continue to evolve and achieve *tikkun olam* for the population of Jews originally relegated to the side and left behind.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism*, 49-50.

<sup>62</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism*, 39-55.

## V. CONCLUSION

Both the mainstream and Jewish community have forgotten the struggle of Jewish women's fight for religious equality and accountability. The suspicion of religion within a progressive society has dimmed or restricted the discussion of religious influence and change, especially within Judaism. Additionally, progressive social movements, influenced by Jewish values led to a theological discussion about *halachic* studies and the utilization of *midrash* in Judaism. This also brought into question rituals using a feminist lens while also studying and using a Jewish female precedence through Jewish female figures to establish the place of Jewish women in the religious setting. This work contributes to the scholarship of feminist studies within a religious context, and how Judaism benefitted from feminist ideology to reapproach a religion thousands of years old to accommodate and welcome the Jewish female population.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning with chapter one and the history of Jewish 'whiteness,' the invisibility of a historically small population, yet its disproportionately high number of participation within social movements leads one to wonder why this happened. With the history of Jewish activism comes the concept of *tikkun olam*, or repair of the world. The Jewish obligation to not give up on trying to address and fix the problems and oppression in society remains a focal point of Jewish life and values. Chapter one addresses some of this while leading into the genesis of Jewish feminism ideology and organization, with women like Judith Plaskow [1947-], Blu Greenberg [1936-], Rachel Adler [1943-], and others who took lessons from the Women's Movement of the 1970s and sought to apply it to their religious communities. With the first Jewish Women's Conference in 1973 and

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*, New York University Press, 2018. Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Looking Jewish, Seeing Jews," in *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Harvard University Press, 1998, 171-201.

Judith Plaskow's essay "The Coming of Lilith," the usage of consciousness raising and sisterhood from feminism emerges as part of the new feminist approach to Judaism's attempt to become more inclusive. Jewish women also came together to address the issues within the religious community – areas of women's historical lack of participation in religious practice and ritual, including a lack of female leaders in the rabbinical or cantorial positions.

The remembrance of Jewish women and their activism within the Jewish community also gets discussed by interviewees Judith Plaskow, Susan Weidman Schneider [1944-], and Rabbi Rebecca Alpert [1950-]. Their take on the importance of remembering Jewish feminist activists helped reveal that Jewish feminism was, and to some extent still remains, absent within both the history of the Women's Movement and feminism, but also the Jewish community seems to have forgotten that the appearance of female rabbis and female inclusivity only occurred within the last half a century and should be recognized as new and be properly discussed and acknowledged as a new development within Judaism.

The second chapter, delving into the Jewish figures of Lilith and Miriam (of Exodus), discussed the rediscovery and reclamation of both women by Jewish feminist scholars, though Miriam's presence always existed in the narrative of the Passover story, but became reapproached through a feminist lens. Women like Judith Plaskow, who's influential "Coming of Lilith," helped to establish Lilith, not as the demoness of centuries past rabbinical scholarship, but rather the first wife of Adam who refused to be anything but his equal and who fled in protest rather than be submissive. Plaskow's 1973 essay helped fellow Jewish women reevaluate Lilith, and even Eve, to push the sisterhood

narrative, in part to reflect the feminist practices of consciousness raising and sisterhood, but to show the value of Jewish women coming together to push their agendas into the religious narrative. Lilith also becomes the name of the Jewish independent and feminist magazine founded in 1976, to honor the first woman who dared to push for her independence and equality amongst man.

Miram, according to scholars like Rabbi Susan Schnur [1951-], Rebecca Schwartz, and Alicia Ostriker [1937-], as a female prophet alongside her brother Moses, sets precedence for female leadership within Judaism. As both a leader and a caregiver for her people simultaneously, the argument emerged that women could be more than just in the background, and that women historically held precedence of holding leadership roles within Judaism.

Her symbolic importance also endures through religious holidays and celebrations. Through the story of Passover, as the sister that protects Moses and watches over him to ensure his safety on the Nile, her symbolic importance as a nurturer ensures another quality that is compatible with her as a leader. Through the creation of the feminist Haggadah, the written story of Passover, Miriam's story, and place on the seder plate reminds women of their permanent presence within Judaism.

The last chapter, addressing the accomplishments and the continuous discussions within the Jewish religious community, shows the culmination of the work achieved by Jewish women. *Ezrat Nashim*, the women's religious study group, and their demands, broached in 1972, culminates with the ordination of female rabbis and cantors as well as the wider acceptance of *bat mitzvahs* and allowing young girls to have a full celebration rather than the minor one compared with the *bar mitzvah*. Additionally, the emergence of

rediscovered women's holidays, such as Rosh Chodesh, reveals the knowledge that women's rituals and women's presence always existed but needed a rebirth.

Female rabbis offer their perspectives on the changes within the rabbinical circle. Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, one of the first Reconstructionist rabbis, as well as Rabbi Chai Levy, who became ordained more than twenty years after the first generation, like Alpert, offer their perspectives on how the roles of women changed since the first female rabbi ordination in 1972. Both women give their opinions, noting that while much has changed, issues like religious divorce, and some of the gendered issues, like how to dress for service, still exist in a field previously dominated by men less than fifty years ago.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the female leadership roles, new ceremonies reminding Jewish communities of a female presence gets discussed. Naming ceremonies to counter the ritual *bris* ceremonies for boys emerged to ensure girls have a proper induction into the religious community. The *bat mitzvah*, as already mentioned, now seen as entirely equal to the *bar mitzvah*, since the 1970s, do not face the limitations girls dealt with, or the sense of inferiority for having a minimized version compared to the *bat mitzvah*. The changes and push to include more women in both leadership roles and in ritual and holiday recognition, pushed by Jewish feminists like Dr. Judith Plaskow and Rabbi Alpert, among others, signify positive changes within the religious community, spurred on by feminist ideology. Rather than the feminization and destruction of Judaism that some male scholars feared, a more inclusive religion emerged to compliment the religious ideology that is *tikkun olam*.

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom, January 13, 2022. Rabbi Chai Levy, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom, March 2, 2022.

Since the first ordination of a female rabbi in 1972, new conversations and new issues have entered the forefront of Jewish debate. Questions of how environmental awareness and responsibility can be tied to Jewish spirituality, and the discussion of welcoming members of the LGBTQ+ community, or how best to be inclusive with Jewish individuals who are within an additional minority other than being Jewish.<sup>3</sup> With the symbolic importance of Miriam's Cup on the Passover seder plate to represent the Jewish female leaders, we must also not forget that those Jewish families who place the orange on the Seder plate must recognize the oppressed groups in the LGBTQ+ community. One of the issues mentioned by Plaskow, remains the lack of remembrance within the Jewish community. Although the legend of, '...the rabbi said a woman belongs on the bimah like an orange belongs on the seder plate,' conveys a sense of defiance and willingness to cross the gendered boundaries, it also must remain important that the Jewish community does not forget its recent past.<sup>4</sup> While the orange is symbolic of minorities, many forget that these legends come from centuries of tradition that historically excluded women and other minorities from becoming full members of the religious community. Despite the changes over the last half century, both Plaskow and Weidman Schneder worry that the history of the women who made those changes lack remembrance within the community.<sup>5</sup>

With a rise in anti-Semitism over the last decade, it remains important that the Jewish community remembers its past. Feminism rocked the United States in the 1970s,

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<sup>3</sup> Sharon Wachsler, "Composting Judaism: On Ecology, Illness and Spirituality Re-Planted," in *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*, Seal Press, 2001, 52-66. Danya Ruttenberg, "Blood Simple: Transgender Theory Hits the Mikveh," in *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*, Seal Press, 2001, 77- 87.

<sup>4</sup> Anita Silvert, "The real story behind the orange on the seder plate: I present here with the real story of why people put an orange on the Seder plate," *Jewish United Fund*, March 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Plaskow, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom, November 7, 2021. Susan Weidman Schnieder, interview by Megan Schwab, via Zoom, December 17, 2021.

but the Jewish history of endurance goes back centuries. Passover, the retelling of Moses and the exodus from Egypt always includes the idea that, “This year we are here; next year may we be in the Land of Israel. This year we are slaves; next year may we be free.”<sup>6</sup> Similar to the idea that Weidman Schneider pondered, is that the history of Jews, even to Jews, halts after the Holocaust, despite the more than eighty years since it began. It remains important that the recent past be remembered and acknowledged as well.<sup>7</sup> Although the bonds of slavery were not a physical thing for women in the 1970s, the metaphorical shackles existed within the realms of the religious community, so it should not remain an undiscussed topic when teaching the next generation of Jewish children, the entire history of the Jewish people.

Additionally, as this work pertains to the study of religious feminism, the hope for the future remains that the conversation between Jewish studies and feminism find a way to meet somewhere more than just at the outskirts. Although research exists within feminist studies about Jewish feminism and theology, according to academics and Jewish historians like Joyce Antler [1942- ] and Rebecca Alpert, their firsthand experience within Feminist Studies speaks of the lack of interest in Jewish intersections with feminism outside of the mainstream activism. According to both women, it remains largely left out of teachings and research. Alpert noted that, “The Jewish heroine is not what they’re looking to... this is not what people are interested in.”<sup>8</sup> Despite this current belief, in the future as further examinations and research unfolds, there is hope that eventually the gaps between the respective studies merge and become more acquainted with one another rather than acquaintances.

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<sup>6</sup> Waranch family, *Haggadah*, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Weidman Schneider interview.

<sup>8</sup> Alpert Interview.

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