

". . . But Words Can Never Harm Me: The Feminist Challenge to Liturgy"  
(Genesis 1: 26-31; Genesis 2:25-3:12)

An anthropologist studied a remote tribe who had been given a television set, a satellite dish and electricity so they could receive every possible signal. Everything stopped. The entire traditional life of the village ground to a halt. They turned on the television set and did nothing but watch. But at the end of two weeks, they turned off the television set, disconnected it, and never looked at it again. Now the anthropologist was very curious about this. He went to one of the elders and asked, "Why have you stopped watching the television?" The elder said, "Well, we've seen it." And the anthropologist said, "Yes, but there's so much more to it, you know it changes all the time." And the elder said, "No we've seen it...and besides, we have our storyteller." And the anthropologist said, "Yes, but the television knows so many more stories than your storyteller does." The elder thought about that for a long time. Then he looked up with a big smile and said, "Yes, it's true. The television knows many, many stories. But the storyteller knows us."

The storyteller knows us. How much we want to be known, to be seen, to be included in and connected by our stories. If stories are to be more than entertainment, there must be reciprocity, in which the listener understands more about who she is and the storyteller is attentive to who is listening.

Religious feminists are telling new stories from old texts. We are listening to the storyteller while asking a new set of questions about the relationship between ourselves and the story. Listen, I am going to tell you some stories.

Laura Geller is the second woman to be ordained as a rabbi. When she was a guest on a radio talk show shortly after her ordination in 1976, the host earnestly asked her, "But really, Rabbi Geller, Judaism and feminism are incompatible. Which is more important to you, your Judaism or your feminism? After a moment's pause, she responded, "And which is more important to you, your heart or your liver? She was never invited back on his show.

Meinrad Craighead is an artist who was nurtured in the Roman Catholic tradition including spending fourteen years in an English monastery. But her paintings look nothing like the windows and mosaics in Memorial Church. She paints from tactile memories of her connections with her grandmother and her mother. She paints the liturgies of Catholicism. She does not see herself as a part of the Catholic institution; nor has she left the church. "The structure is inside of me. I haven't left the church; it would be like leaving my family. You

might have all sorts of arguments. You might not fit in, you might outgrow them, but your family's still your family. My original soil, going back countless generations, is the Catholic Church, and I honor it." (quoted in Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions, p. 218ff)

In her work, *The Litany of the Great River*, Craighead recalls the mesmerizing power of the processions and litanies of her childhood. "The very monotony shifted us into a different mood. The rhythmical flow and the precise syllables of the sacred language got inside our bodies; the step-pause-recite-pause response movements were as regular and drum-like as our heartbeats. All the spirits and holy ancestors we were invoking seemed to walk along with us, our remembering made them present." The titles of Craighead's paintings are intercessions from traditional litanies. But the images are not traditionally Catholic. They emerge from her dreams, her past, the New Mexico landscape, her connection to animals. In "O Rosa Mystica, enclose us, we beseech Thee." the mountains of New Mexico at sunset are the backdrop for a cave with an arched stone entrance. A figure with a four-winged bird at its throat sits at the entrance. The bird holds a vessel in its talons and pours milk into the mouth of a baby's head centered in a many petalled rose. Craighead describes her painting, "God says, Come into my lap and sit in the center of your soul. Drink the living waters of memory and give birth to yourself. What you will unearth will stun you. You will paint the walls of this cave in thanksgiving."

Meinrad Craighead offers an imaginative view of the sacred, one that was previously unimagined, previously unseen. Rabbi Liza Weiss, describes the opposite: how limited vision can prevent what is plainly visible from being seen. Rabbi Weiss' husband is also a rabbi. He had invited an important religious scholar to speak at the largest congregation in town. The rabbinic couple had dinner with the guest-- and he barely glanced in her direction. Even when she asked a question, he directed the answer to her husband. At the end of the dinner, Rabbi Weiss apologized that she would not be able to attend the lecture, but she had a class to teach. "Oh, are you a teacher?" For a split second, she was embarrassed for them both. "I'm also a rabbi." she said, and she couldn't resist adding, "In fact, you'll probably see my picture on the wall of the congregation where you are giving your talk." Rabbi Weiss watched his face as he did a mental rerun of the evening's conversation. "Here I was a rabbi, and he had treated me like a...a...rebetzen--a rabbi's wife. "Oh I'm so sorry! I didn't know." What she wanted to say to the famous scholar was, "Me, the rabbi, you didn't offend. Go apologize to the woman with no title who was just some rabbi's wife."

The failure of imagination (not to mention courtesy) of this scholar reminds us how much imagination is needed to right the wrongs that have been done in the name of those defining and speaking for God.

Adrienne Rich has written, "When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul--not just individual strength, but collective understanding--to resist this void, this non being, into which you are thrust and to stand up demanding to be seen and heard...to make yourself visible, to claim that your experience is just as real and normative as any other." (Adler, 63, "Invisibility in Academe" in Blood, Bread and Poetry, p. 99)

When girls see women in positions of authority in their religious communities, their images of God expand to include the feminine. A friend overheard a woman in conversation with a two year old. "Mommy, is God married? The mother was briefly stymied--was this the moment to try to discuss theology with a two year old? She answered, "No, dear, I don't think so,: The child thoughtfully replied, "Of course, now why would God need a husband?"

We learn who we are from stories. And the stories of our inception can either make us visible or create psychic disequilibrium. Sacred texts influence and ground our understanding and provide divine justification for social relations. Feminist Biblical scholars such as Phyllis Trible and Ilana Pardes have challenged the traditional readings of Biblical texts and used historical biblical criticism and literary attentiveness to arrive at new interpretations of old texts. Because it has been used to justify patriarchy in all three Western religious tradition, the biblical story of the creation of woman has been a frequent text for multiple feminist interpretations. When read with curiosity and openness, when read without the force of proscription, the creation of Eve yields a picture of a woman who is adventuresome, curious, protesting, pioneering, suffering. But the normative reading yields two problematic interpretations y--one that Eve was created from Adam; the other, that she was responsible for the first sin. Both can be disputed by a close reading of the text, a reading by feminists who are not committed to seeing women as subordinate or sinful.

When the second creation story is read in relation to the first, Eve is seen not as created from Adam's rib, but rather from his side--an interpretation supported by the Hebrew word for side, *tzela*. By this reading, the second creation story alters the first androgynous human being, to become two discreet human beings, one male, and one female. And regarding the eating of the fruit, a close reading reveals that the serpent consistently uses the plural when he speaks, suggesting that his words were directed to both Adam and Eve. Commentator Nachum Sarna points, "She also gave it [the fruit] to her husband, "*imma*, with her", suggesting that he was a full participant in their action. When

women re-examine sacred texts without expecting them to defeat us or to define us, we can often wrest new meaning and complex possibilities from those words.

Not only human creation, but the Creator him/herself calls for careful reading. When God is imaged as male and God language is exclusively male, the question arises: "Are women made in God's image?" While this question creates different problems for Christians than for Jews and Muslims, for all Western traditions, imaging and speaking of God as male limits God and limits women's visibility. There are several liturgical responses to this dilemma. Some feminists have chosen to use exclusively female imagery for God. For some, this evokes fears of idolatry--how can God be envisioned as a Queen or a Goddess? Others have appropriated language devoid of gender entirely, as a response to the limiting boxes of male or female. They pray to the Fountain of Life, Teacher, Friend. This creates the difficulty that boys or girls, men or women may not find themselves in God's image, because we, the pray-ers are not gender neutral. Yet another response is to seek richer metaphors for God, metaphors that are honest enough to reflect the whole of the sacred--death as well as life, destruction as well as creation, the terrifying along with the serene, a multiplicity of images alluding to the limitlessness of the divine.

For those who write and pray liturgy, this is not just a literary or a political issue. Our understanding of the very nature of God is at stake. There are women who experience a conflict between a commanding God and the egalitarianism of feminism, and consequently will reject any notion of God as Other, with a capital "O". They assert that identifying God as Other describes a hierarchy which is not consonant with a spirituality of inclusion. Poets like Marcia Falk have created liturgy with sacredness residing in the community. Falk, one of the few feminists who creates liturgy in Hebrew as well as English, describes her work as evoking "my relationship to the divine, a loss of otherness, a merging a breaking down of boundaries and a momentary release into Wholeness" "I create and use new images--images such as "wellspring or source of life, " "breath of all living things" and "sparks of the inner unseen self" to serve as fresh metaphors for Divinity. With these images and still others, composed of all the basic elements of creation--earth, water, wind and fire--I hope to help construct a theology of immanence that will both affirm the sanctity of the world and shatter the idolatrous reign of the lord/God/king." ("Toward A Feminist Jewish Reconstruction of Monotheism" Tikkun 4 (July August, 1989) p.56-57)

Theologian Rachel Adler, author of a challenging book, Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics, argues with the premise that eradicating Otherness is desirable. Adler understands that breaking down all boundaries between self and other, self and God, God and world simultaneously eradicates relatedness. Furthermore, she notes, feminists have fought long and hard for independence, fought hard not to have their selfhood be subsumed into

another's. Why, she asks, embrace the experience of fusion in our spirituality? Adler tells us, "A story is a body for God." Through liturgy, we and God together will shape stories, and will write words filled with religious power. She is insistent about two starting points. There are two starting points, which are non-negotiable in Rachel Adler's understanding. 1) Prayer is not for lying to God and 2) prayer is not for hurting or excluding members of the community. The task, as she sees it, is to create prayer whose words reflect experience and include all who comprise the story.

I want my stories and my prayers to speak truthfully to God. I want my stories and my prayers to include all of us. I, and many women like me, am not willing to choose either my heart or my liver. We are the proud heirs to religious traditions, to sacred words, to images of ourselves and of the Divine that have challenged us as well as ennobled us. It is time to use our God-given minds, hearts and even livers to enrich our traditions, to find ourselves in the sacred words of our prayers and in the sacred words of our stories and to rekindle the light of equality in all of our religions. Now that would be a story worth telling!