

**REINSTATING  
THE DIVINE WOMAN IN  
JUDAISM**

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To Eva Sattler and Starhawk,  
two of my teachers.



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## PREFACE

On winter solstice nights there are fires burning throughout Europe and North America. Sitting in my room in Jerusalem, dreaming into the dark, I have felt my sisters dancing and singing and praising the turning of the year, the Goddess giving birth to the sun-child. In Jerusalem there were no fires. Instead, the week before, we had celebrated *Hanukkah* with candles, singing and partying and saying the blessings. There were no sun-child and no goddess, for the Goddess has disappeared from Judaism. Yet I, a Jewish woman, sat and ached to dance with my sisters celebrating the Goddess. I need a Divine Woman to lead and inspire me, to support me, to refresh and sustain me. I need a female deity to talk women's things to, to be understood as a woman and to be empowered. Yet she is not here, for there is no longer a Divine Woman in Judaism.

We know Judaism as an ancient male monotheistic religion, and you may ask what does a Divine Woman have to do with Judaism at all? Is it even worth wanting a Divine Woman in Judaism or, if we reinstate a goddess in Judaism, would the religion still be Jewish?

In this book, I show that there were goddesses in the old Israelite religion, that this religion was generally polytheistic throughout both Temple Periods, and that it was this polytheistic religion which gave rise to many parts of the Jewish Bible or *Tanach*,<sup>1</sup> which forms the Christian Old Testament. That is, goddesses are buried within Judaism and can still be found hidden in Biblical texts. Revealing them in these texts means finding a goddess in a living religion, in current ritual practice and within our own culture.

Revealing goddesses in the *Tanach* also strengthens the idea of the Divine Woman in Christianity, and is one step in returning the female to the spiritual imagery that has molded Western society. Finding goddesses in the Bible will enable women to reclaim these central texts and to start re-forming their influence on our society. Reclaiming the texts will also counteract the oppression of women that is reinforced with each conventional reading of the Bible the world over.

Because of this, I feel it is necessary to search for Jewish goddesses in the *Tanach* and to reinstate them in the mainstream religions based on this Book, rather than moving with them to the modern feminist spirituality movement and neo-Paganism. It is clear that such goddesses would be much more welcome there but, although neo-Paganism is the most rapidly growing religion in North America, it does not yet reach into the core of mainstream society. And this is where I feel that deep change must be effected for our society truly to transform itself into one that respects women.

But there is another reason for searching for Jewish goddesses, and that is that I am Jewish. This insistent belief that it is possible to be Jewish and to follow the goddess, this wish to have a goddess firmly seated within my own culture, has driven me on a search for goddesses within Judaism, rather than leaving home and settling in the neo-Pagan movement. Even if it appears a dire contradiction, Judaism having defined itself for the last two thousand years through its male monotheism, I follow the goddess yet I class myself as Jewish. This is the only description that does justice to my position, since being Jewish has shaped my life, my character and has flavored my soul. And yet I cannot accept a monotheism which denies the existence of female forms of Deity.

There is much more to being Jewish than accepting the religion. Feminist Reform Jewish theologian, Judith Plaskow,<sup>2</sup> describes Judaism as essentially a community experience, as ritualized experiences in a community which bind the community together. Community creates a way of looking at things and of dealing with problems, it creates an approach to the world. There is community far outside and around the religious experiences that may form the centerpiece and mainstay of the community. That is, Judaism is both a religion and a culture, and many who actively identify as Jews are involved in the culture but not the religion. For example, feminist psychologist Naomi Goldenberg feels that being an atheist is a "reputable Jewish position."<sup>3</sup> Having grown up in a Jewish community, the surround has become a part of me even if I don't accept the centerpieces. As I have no other history, I am adamant in my right to remain Jewish. But I am also adamant in my right to follow the goddess.

This book is an attempt to show that, in spite of the seeming paradox, it is possible to imagine a "goddess Judaism" and to create a practice suitable for women and men seeking inspiration from the Divine Woman, while remaining within a Jewish context.

Jerusalem, 1998.



# INTRODUCTION

## Women, Judaism and the Divine Woman

*On the whole, the neutral or favorable attitude to female sexuality in polytheistic religions came to comprise one of their fundamental differences from monotheism. (J. Ochshorn, 1981, p. 34)*

The question of why we need the Divine Woman, both theologically in her aspect of goddess and socio-politically to empower women, has been raised and discussed beautifully and in depth many times and in many countries since the starting of the modern feminist spirituality movement.<sup>1</sup> Among the more radical writers phrasing their answers most succinctly, Gerda Weiler has delved deeply for goddesses in Biblical texts.<sup>2</sup> Weiler argues that we need the Divine Woman because, firstly, resurrecting ancient goddesses will lead us to discover our past - our history and our religion - and this will influence our current view of ourselves and of the world.

Secondly, Weiler sees the Divine Woman as symbolizing absolute recognition that women have control over their bodies, celebrating their sexuality, protecting themselves and their daughters against the attacks of men, shaping their surroundings and creating culture. That is, a strong Divine Woman implies a world in which women test their own boundaries and creatively transcend their physical existence in any field of human endeavor. Resurrecting the Divine Woman means placing these images of female strength and creativity at the center of our world view. According to Weiler,<sup>3</sup> it is only by doing this that we can

"move the world," and transform these images into a social reality.

The first and most apparent effect of reinstating a Divine Woman at the center of our society would be that women are honored in all their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects. The Divine Woman serves to remind women and men alike that women share in divinity, and that not only are women's souls and aspirations, thoughts and feelings to be honored, but women's bodies are also holy. The lack of a divine female figure in the monotheistic religions has persuaded men and women, worshipping a male and sexless God, to regard women as a "negative other," and their bodies and sexuality as "unclean" or "impure." As long as Divinity is only male, women's sexuality will remain a dark and frightening domain that needs to be bound and limited or harnessed to men's convenience. Western women are beginning the attempt to counteract what is basically a lack of humanity by campaigning for more equality within their religions. Yet these religions will never be able to give true equality to women nor allow them full sexual expression until they incorporate a Divine Woman.

Women's bodies need to be respected and honored very differently from the way we honor men's bodies. Because of the load of their reproductive functions, and because they face many potential risks not faced by men, women's bodies have a great deal of extra work to do. Women's bodies are also particularly vulnerable to abuse. Women both need, and have the right, that their bodies be respected and cherished. The Divine Woman reminds us of this and empowers women to celebrate their bodies. This, alone, is justification enough for seeking to restore the Divine Woman to our society. If reinstating her provides a framework for teaching men to respect women's bodies again, and makes clear the enormity of the desecration

when a woman and her body are abused, we would be approaching joy.

Men's oppression of women is frequently justified, in the Western world, by the canons of the monotheistic religions, the Jewish *Tanach*,<sup>4</sup> (which forms the Christian Old Testament) and the Christian Bible, which contain the patriarchal imagery and ideas that have helped mold Western culture over the last two millennia. However, I shall show that the *Tanach* was written and compiled over centuries when religion in the ancient kingdoms of Judah and Israel was anything but monotheistic and when clearly female goddesses stood as consorts beside the male God. Laying bare the goddess underpinnings releases these goddesses from hiding and disguise, and frees them from misuse in texts that have been formative for all aspects of Western culture.

Reclaiming Biblical texts by cleansing them of misogyny frees Jewish and Christian women all over the world of the shackles put on them with each conventional reading of the Bible. By finding and, more importantly, by reinstating goddesses in the canons of Western culture, we go directly to the source to remold its spiritual imagery of our world.

What does this mean for Judaism? Judaism is currently essentially a men's religion, developed by men for men. In Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Judaism, women do not have the right to full religious expression, nor any rights in shaping the religion they practice. They do not have equal rights to, nor support for, religious education and consequent participation in the intellectual and mystical traditions of Judaism. They do not have equal divorce rights, equal rights in Jewish religious courts, and certainly not equal sexual rights. We need to remold Jewish spiritual imagery into one so deeply empowering for women that it becomes obvious and natural to both men and women that

women be equal partners in all aspects of religion and society. Reintroducing the Divine Woman in Judaism may help move us towards this state.

### **1. The Divine Woman in a Modern Context**

Before attempting to restore the Divine Woman to Judaism, we need to know what goddesses could mean to today and what we expect them to do for us. That is, we need to establish a modern concept of the Divine Woman. Only then will we be able to direct our attempts in a way that will be both relevant and useful.

My concept of both the goddess and the Divine Woman is purely modern and is not a re-interpretation of the concepts behind the old goddesses of previous cultures. I do not use the term "Divine Woman" interchangeably with goddess as others have done,<sup>5</sup> for the idea of goddess is only one part of my concept of the Divine Woman. For me, the Divine Woman comprises femaleness in Divinity (the goddess) and holiness in women, as well as the interaction between them. That is, the Divine Woman encompasses those aspects of the world emphasized by the femaleness of a woman-like goddess and the effects on society of calling Deity female.

At the most abstract level, I imagine the goddess as the creative force of the universe, the force that makes the atoms dance and split, their particles moving between energy and matter, the force that makes the stars need to grow and create solar systems and the force that makes galaxies spread. She is the Life Force that makes species grow, evolve and differentiate, that makes organisms grow and cells divide, the Life Force that makes us grow and will to live. She is Life or Being itself, the principle of life, of movement, of development and change. She is immanent or all-present. As the Being in the Universe, she is everything there is, in the cosmos and on Earth.

Why do I call this surely ungendered force "she"? I think we would find it unsatisfactory to use only the pronoun "it," and no such pronoun exists in some languages, like Hebrew. We can name only in the words that exist in our languages, and these words describe the everyday world we perceive with our senses. In this everyday world, the force for renewal is most dramatic at the birth of new life, and we therefore use the female to describe it.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the immensity of the physical world, because of the incredible complexity of the interconnectedness of which we can experience but little, and because these connections and forces seem to weave and flow and make patterns beyond our comprehension, we cannot grasp the immanent nature of the goddess. Yet, feeling her presence, the sense of connectedness and holiness in the world, and needing to invoke it into our lives, we long to approach, to communicate and to name our feeling of fitting or not fitting into her patterns. We focus her into an image, larger than us and awe-inspiring and, at the same time, in our own image. Just as God is depicted in male language and as King, the goddess becomes a woman, a transcendent Queen or Great Mother.

Describing the goddess as a woman sets up new associations, for the goddess incorporates women's attributes into her character and reflects them back to us. Including femaleness in Deity is to declare femaleness holy, which means that there is a divine aspect to woman. The female aspect of the Divine and the divine aspect of women interact with and reinforce each other, setting up a positive chain reaction. Women are empowered by finding their own qualities in their divine figures, and honor these qualities more in themselves. The more a quality is honored, the more likely it is to be emphasized in the

character of the Divinity, where it will again empower women.

The goddess may also develop a particular character according to our needs and perceptions, or she may split into several aspects or goddesses, each of which similarly develops a character or specialization. Following such goddesses is essentially a working-through of these aspects in oneself.

My definition of the Divine Woman encompasses all of these aspects. She is the immanent, abstract and ungendered Life Force in the universe. In addition, attempting to make this abstract force approachable and to simplify the complexity of immanence, we also see her as the transcendent woman, whose femaleness our imagery emphasizes. At the same time, she may turn into individual goddesses representing specific aspects of the world we wish to emphasize or need to deal with. Finally, she incorporates the social consequences of calling Deity female, such as honoring and empowering women. That is, my concept of Divine Woman includes all the levels from the universal Life Force to the social interaction between the female in the Divine and the divine in women.

## **2. Strategies for Reinstating the Divine Woman - Taking a New Look at History and Resurrecting Old Goddesses**

How can we reinstate the Divine Woman? Ideally, we should work at all her levels, reinstating the concept of the goddess as Life in the universe, reinstating the anthropomorphic Great Goddess, or her versions as goddesses, and reinstating customs of honoring ourselves as women. All these changes would radically affect our societies and our religions, but our societies and religions would probably have to be radically different to enable us to introduce such changes. Obviously, the Divine Woman is

a concept foreign to the current monotheistic religions, and one to which there is great resistance. This requires introducing change slowly and in small steps.

One approach is that taken by the modern feminist spirituality movement, which is reviving the lost goddesses of Europe and the Ancient Near East, as well as incorporating existing goddesses from the religions of Africa, Asia, the Americas and Polynesia. Knowing that we will never be able to recreate the ancient goddesses as they were, knowing that we are transplanting them not only from their original cultures but also from their original places, countries, landscape and languages of worship, always raises the skeptical question "Why bother? Why not create our own, new goddesses, goddesses more in keeping with modern women and our own culture?"

One reason for resurrecting old goddesses is that it spurs us on to finding new views of our cultural history and to establishing our own Utopian visions of the sort of society we would find ideal today. Consider, for example, attitudes to war. A widely accepted view is that men are fundamentally warlike and that war is simply and inevitably a feature of human culture. This is a self-defeating view for, if being human means having wars, then no peace movement can be successful, as war and destruction are inevitable. The modern feminist spirituality movement, which sanctifies life, refuses to take this position, refuses to honor war and destruction, refuses to accept the willful desecration of life and love and refuses to take rape and sexual abuse as things women just have to accept. This forces modern followers of the goddess into taking a new look at history and asking why we have wars if they are not inevitable. Where did war come from? Did we ever have another form of society without wars? Could we have one again?

One aspect of goddess religions is, therefore, a feminist examination of prehistoric cultures and the development of religion, or "matriarchy research." By examining other cultural forms, matriarchy research helps us combat the idea of our present patriarchal culture as "natural" or inevitable. It reveals different social models which we can use to inspire and empower ourselves in our search for new forms. Above all, matriarchy research is a women's history - a herstory - which uncovers women's roots and their past. Only when we have recovered our past can we move on to a new future.

I shall spell out my basic approach to matriarchy research here, rather than leaving it as an unformulated thread. I also feel the need to emphasize that there are positions within this research, and in research about ancient goddesses, that can be well argued and that are not only a matter of belief.

On the one hand, there has never been a "matriarchal" society that was the mirror-image of present patriarchy. Yet rejection of matriarchy in this sense must not lead to an unfounded and unargued rejection of any form of cultural domination by women. On the other hand, some writers use "matriarchy" to denote their own Utopian ideals and then project this view backward in time,<sup>7</sup> loading the word emotionally and ideologically, and rendering it impossible to use historically. For both these reasons, many academic researchers use "egalitarian," but this neutral word effectively buries any suggestion that social, political and religious life could ever have been centered on women.<sup>8</sup> I shall therefore use Erich Fromm's word, "matricentric,"<sup>9</sup> to describe a society in which the magic-motherly powers of women lie at the center of both community and cultic life.

Presuming a gradual development from the social groups of our primate ancestors through to the earliest

human societies,<sup>10</sup> I posit that human culture was originally matricentric. Typically, the oldest known piece of representational art - approximately 300,000 years old - is a small female statuette found in Berekhat Ram, Israel.<sup>11</sup> The next representational art we know dates from over a quarter of million years later, during the late Paleolithic period or Old Stone Age, 30,000 to 20,000 years ago. During these 10,000 years, only female, and no male, figures are found from Siberia to Spain.<sup>12</sup> The emphasis on female figures cannot prove matricentricity throughout the whole culture but certainly suggests that women were at the center of spiritual life during this period.<sup>13</sup>

Further archeological evidence for the existence of matricentric societies and religions has been obtained from cultures in Anatolia and the Balkans, dating from 10,000 to as late as 3,500 BCE,<sup>14</sup> and traces of matricentric culture can be found in the older strata of every "more advanced" culture<sup>15</sup> and most non-industrial cultures documented by Bachofen<sup>16</sup> and Briffault<sup>17</sup> in sweeping works written in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Their reports from Africa, Asia, the Americas, Australia and the Pacific region suggest that matricentric cultures are old and were widespread. Indeed, the simplest way of refuting the patriarchy-forever faction is to press all three volumes of Briffault into their hands. Yet the general acceptance of these ideas and their propagation is grudging, to say the least.

Once we accept the idea of matricentricity as the original form of culture, we must discover why most cultures changed from matricentric to patriarchal, if we wish to restore women to a central role in religion and society. Psychologist Carola Meier-Seethaler has suggested that nomadic or semi-nomadic cultures, changing to a sessile lifestyle with high intensity agriculture, never satisfactorily solved the problems of roles for men married into the clan of their wives. This inherent cultural weakness

drove a long, slow and sometimes violent change to patriarchy. For Meier-Seethaler, men's intense rage at women and their subjugation of them is an unconscious revenge for their own experienced loss of identity in late matricentric societies.<sup>18</sup>

Elise Boulding, in contrast, proposes that, for some unknown reason, women failed to specialize when a basically agricultural society advanced technologically, adding the new crafts of mining and metallurgy and trade in metal and metal products. These new roles for men, and their trade in captives taken in war, allowed men to develop administrative roles and centralized control, thus changing their position in society.<sup>19</sup> Finally, violent overthrow of apparently successful matricentric cultures by a stronger or warlike patriarchal culture caused many matricentric cultures to disappear, e.g. in the Balkans in about 3500 BCE.<sup>20</sup> We are still left with the questions of why these patriarchal cultures developed and why no matricentric cultures were able to withstand them.

I suspect that there were also other reasons. Perhaps, unknowingly, women themselves started the trend that led to their downfall. By centering a religion on women's magic-motherly powers, by equating the womb with the cycles of all life and by symbolizing incarnation with the vulva, as many of the Stone Age figures and paintings indicate,<sup>21</sup> women may have implied that the only way men could reach the Otherworld is through intercourse or death. In the long run, this could have equated sex with advantage for men, leading to men functionalizing intercourse. For example, in cultures where inheritance passes from mother to daughter, some of the privileges accrued by a woman can be shared by her mate, possibly equating sex with wealth or privilege for men. Similarly, the king gained power through intercourse with the queen/ priestess, thereby associating sex with power for men. Even a slight shift away from a

firm matricentric context allows this relationship between sex and advantage or power for men to become extremely dangerous. It is only a small step from reverence for women's bodies to using them. In addition, it is possible that, after hundreds of thousands of years of matricentric culture, culture became old and decadent, and it was time for change.

Even if the older matricentric cultures and religions contained many flaws and faults, they could only have been better for women than the present patriarchy. This is reason enough for wanting to return to some form of matricentricity and to restore the female to the spiritual imagery that we use to create our world. But to do this, we need to know our herstory in order to learn from past mistakes rather than repeating them. We must discover what was so good that a matricentric cultural and religious form was maintained for many, many thousands of years, and what was so wrong that such cultures could not survive? Any attempt to reinstate the Divine Woman in present religions must not only incorporate a search for her traces but also an analysis of her disappearance.

Searching for traces of the Divine Woman brings us into contact with old traditions where we meet old goddesses. These goddesses provide well established anthropomorphic metaphors whose freshness has not diminished with age. The goddesses emphasize those aspects of the world honored in the modern feminist spirituality movement: creativity, interconnectedness, caring, strength for good, rage for justice and the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Through their personification of these values, these old goddesses are still valid role models to strengthen us in becoming like them, thus fulfilling the functions of the Divine Woman. We do not need to create something new, without roots and tradition, in order to reinstate the Divine Woman.

Not only does resurrecting the old goddesses connect us with deep roots and old traditions, which we have not quite forgotten, but we do not have the time to start inventing new goddesses. The old goddesses developed organically from traditions many tens of thousand of years old, with much time for experimenting, testing, and refining. We don't have time today for this slow gathering of experience. The increasing violence in the media and on the streets, the increasing sexual violence both in pornography and in the aberrations it induces,<sup>22</sup> and the trade in women and children from the Third World, all force us to take action as quickly as possible. Therefore, resurrecting old goddesses, or incorporating currently existing goddesses from Africa and Asia, with their developed and complex symbolism, may be the best way to begin reinstating the Divine Woman.

Returning to Judaism, this means that a first approach to reinstating the Divine Woman in Judaism may be through reviving the old goddesses of Judah and Israel - the Jewish goddesses.

### **3. Uncovering the Goddess in Judaism**

Who were the Jewish goddesses? Why do we know nothing about them? The answers to these questions comprise both a history and herstory. History, for I try to reconstruct historically who the Jewish goddess was and how she disappeared so thoroughly. Herstory, for the story of her disappearance is also the story of the disappearance of women from the cult.

But more than a her/history, this is also a story of reconstruction. Tracing how the goddess and how women disappeared from Judaism can lead us to form some ideas of what was in the cult before their disappearance or, failing this, to become sensitive to the leftover traces of the goddess and of women's religion in the *Tanach*.

Uncovering these traces is a first step towards revitalizing a women's religion.

Israeli feminist activist, Prof. Alice Shalvi, referring to the integration of Judaism and feminism, has written:

In Israel we have a law which says that before any building can be erected, archeologists have to be called in to inspect the foundations as to whether anything of our past history, or other people's past history, can be found. I think the metaphor of delving down before one can erect something new is very appropriate for Judaism ... Unless we find what lies behind us in our past, in our tradition, we can never truly create a strong and steady future.<sup>23</sup>

Surely this applies to our herstory of women's past participation in Judaism, just as much as it does to normative Judaism. Uncovering the stories and traditions of the Jewish goddess is an attempt to remember more than a thousand years of Jewish religion and culture, the place of our starting, our roots and origins. It is an attempt to uncover a strand still hidden within Judaism.

#### **4. Is Judaism with a Goddess Still Judaism?**

To answer this question we need to grapple with the real essence of Judaism, a problem that has sustained discussion throughout the thousands of years of Jewish history. As I cannot possibly do justice to the complexity and depth of this discussion, I shall pick out some of what I feel to be the main points in the feminist discussion.

The simple answer to the question 'What is Judaism?' is that it is an exclusively monotheistic religion whose God is the unnamable but male JHWH, who made Israel into a nation at Sinai and gave the Torah to the new Jewish nation. This clearly excludes the Divine Woman and