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THE IMPLICATIONS OF FEMININE IMAGERY IN THE BIBLE

Much has been made of male dominance in Judaism which, it is argued, is rooted in the Biblical and liturgical conceptions of Divinity in masculine images. Though ascribing form to God is strictly and repeatedly forbidden in the Torah, human speech is perforce figurative and consequently *dibra Torah bilshon bene adam*; in so doing it alludes expansively to the world of men, their aspirations, feelings and tangible experiences.

Recognizing that the language employed in speaking of God tells us more about the workings of our minds than of His inconceivable, indescribable Being, the study of that language is important because it tells us how God manifests Himself to human beings, and how they experience the Presence and the aura of *kedusha*. If, indeed, the revelation of God as described in the Tanakh is such that it fosters a closer affinity with the world of men than those of women, then we might understand why some women have felt alienated or at least removed from the source of *kedusha*. This alienation has often manifested itself in a resentment of things traditional, and in some cases, a rejection of the intellectual, religious, and affective structures of classical Judaism because of the perception that these were insensitive to women. While it does not lie within the scope of this paper to deal with these fundamental issues, it is worthwhile to focus on one aspect of feminist complaints: that the Hebraic mind conceived God in exclusively masculine images. This, we submit, is unfounded. This paper will attempt to demonstrate that, in fact, the *Tanakh* is replete with feminine imagery used not only in the depiction of Zion, the Nation, the Land, the Torah, and Wisdom, but also in the depiction of the Creator.

If the Almighty represents indomitable force, that power is imaged in the metaphor of *Gibor* and *Ish Milhama* (a hero and man of war); as the source of righteous judgment. He is depicted as sage *Shofet*, or variously as benign yet stern father, *Avinu Shebashamayim*. It follows, then, that the

This article is based on an address given at the 1988 convention of the Rabbinical Council of America. The author acknowledges the work of Harav Yissachar Jacobson, particularly his chapter "Halshah Be-Melitzat haNeviim," *Hazon Ha-Mikra*, Vol. 2, pp. 110-121 (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1957), for its illumination of the use of feminine imagery in the Bible, and for its inspiration to further explore the territory.

communion between God and Israel be described as betrothal and marriage, wherein the collective of Jews is imaged as the chosen bride, the beloved—courted, sanctified, embraced; and, alternately, abandoned and divorced for adulterous betrayal.

The prevalence of the male conceit in Judaic literary references has apparently largely obscured the fact that the image of God embodied in the creation of the human form was imprinted on both Adam and Eve, that neither one or the other alone can lay full claim to the image of God. Rather Genesis 1:27 relates that God created *ha-adam betzalmo*, male and female. Thus, Malbim in his *Ayelet haShahar* (Chapter 31, Para, 250) cites the rule that the concept of *Adam* denotes both male and female—a rule drawn from the phrase, “in the image of God He created *him*,” which parallels (and thus modifies) “male and female created He *them*.” This notion that the image of God is intrinsic in both man and woman, that, indeed, in the absence of either one—man or woman—there is no complete image, is inherent in the mystical aphorism (*Sota 17*): *Ish ve’ishah, zakhu—Shekhina benehem*. Playing on the spelling of *ish* (man) and *isha* (woman) the sages noted that the name of God is formed by the conjunction of the the letters *yud* in *ish* and the *he* in *ishah*.

It is thus no accident that in warning us against infidelity with other gods, the Torah evokes the image of God as the jealous spouse (Deuteronomy 5:9). But, conversely, when describing the unconditional love that cannot, will not, be extinguished by betrayal or abandonment, Moshe, in the same oration evokes the image of maternal compassion, an *El rahum* who “will not fail thee, neither destroy thee” (Deuteronomy 4:31). Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch has already illuminated the fact that the concept of *rahum* is rooted in the noun *rehem* (womb). The Hebraic conception of compassion and love is grounded in the essentially feminine image of the womb, which holds, nurtures and protects the fetus—be it perfect or malformed, pretty or ugly, worthy or undeserving.

The manifestation of God as the eternal and ever-present is apparent in the Psalmist’s cry (27:10): “For though my father and my mother have forsaken me, Hashem will take me up.” That God functions as the ultimate mother and midwife is even more explicit in Psalm 22, in which the poetry transposes the babe’s reliance on the mother’s breast with its reliance on God:

For You are the one that drew me out of the belly,
The One that secured me on my mother’s breasts;
Upon You I have been cast from the womb,
From my mother’s belly You have been my God. (verses 10-11)

Is it then accidental that the Tetragrammaton, which as a rule connotes the quality of *rahamim*, is structured as a noun of the feminine gender? This may have been the rationale that guided Rashi to select the *Mekhilta’s*

interpretation of (Exodus 19:4) “I bore you on wings of eagles” not as an image suggesting soaring heights or dominant force, but rather loving, self-sacrificing concern expressed as “I would have the arrow pierce me, and not my children.”

This image of God’s relation to Israel as that of the non-judgmental, unconditionally loving mother, which is admittedly but an elusive chimera in the tight prose of the Torah which avoids all description of God, flowers in the poetic renditions of the latter Prophets. In his description of the exodus from Egypt and the birth of Israel as a nation, Ezekiel also employs the concept of a high-soaring eagle who takes note of Israel, depicted as an unwanted, abandoned newborn female wallowing in blood (16:6). The hovering Presence, resolute that the infant will indeed live, is contrasted to the parents and midwives that rejected her. While they did not cut the umbilical cord and did not wash or swaddle the baby, God cuddles and nurtures her.

Ezekiel’s eagle emerges as an image of the masculine lover, tenderly spreading its wing over the foundling (16:8): “I spread my wing over you, and I covered your nakedness; I made a vow to you, and came into a covenant with you.” That image of tenderness assumes a maternal hue, as the description of the nurturing and rearing of the new nation described as a baby girl.

The deliciousness with which Ezekiel describes the dressing and adorning of the growing lass sheds a new and warm light on the rituals by which mothers bestow gentle affection on their children. There is no more intimate and tender act of giving than that of a woman when she cleanses her baby and dresses it in pretty clothes. To be able to adore a baby despite its filth, to coo and sweet-talk a child while wiping its bottom, to wash and anoint its skin, and then cover it with embroidered swaddling probably does more for building a child’s self-esteem than we can ever know. That God deigns, through the prophecy of Ezekiel, to ascribe to Himself such loving, albeit mundane acts, speaks more to the value of “women’s work” than all the exhortations of feminist literature.

What sanctity is attributed to mothering by the metaphors that describe the gifts of Torah and mitzvot as the rich, ornate garments sewn for and bestowed upon an adored child!

I clothed you in embroidery,
and shod you in doeskin;
and wrapped you in fine linen,
and covered you with silk. (Ezekiel 16: 10)

It is no accident that the materials for the wardrobe allude to the fabrics employed in the building of the *Mishkan* and the priestly garments. By implication, so much meaning and holiness is invested in the “things” which women do and make.

Ezekiel's imagery speaks directly to the hearts of women, whose forte it has always been to attach sentiment and memory to objects. The Hebraic word for ornament, *adi*, is reminiscent of the word *ed*, a witness, a testimonial. It alludes to the feminine proclivity to create and invest meaning and spirit in the material and mundane stuff of everyday life. Isn't that a manifestation of the imperative to "bring out the sparks" of *kedusha* from the profane, the dull soil of our daily routines"? Don't we—men and women alike—in this manner draw the *adam* out of the *adama*, the Divine out of the mortal flesh that we are?

The awareness of the woman's milieu, so apparent in the words of Ezekiel, is equally obvious in the imagery employed by Jeremiah when he ponders with disbelief how readily *Bat Zion* forgets and abandons God and his gifts—the Mitzvot (2:32): "Can a maiden forget her ornaments, a bride her ribbons?" What is astounding here is that these words are uttered by Jeremiah, who never married and never had children, and who, as a lone male, would have had but the remotest experience with the bride's ribbons, sashes and adornments. These words come from a source as empathetic to the experience and feelings of women as to those of men. The desire to foster as intense an empathy between the genders is implicit in the custom of men as the donning of *tallit* and *tefillin* each morning. Acting in what is an ostensibly feminine role, the male allows himself to be wrapped—as it were—in the wing and embrace of God. In a mystical psychodrama in which the male assumes the place of the Beloved—the Bride—he winds the *tefillin* down the arm, and as he binds the straps around his fingers—allowing the wedding ring to be placed thereon—he utters the words that emanate from God—the Groom:

And I will betroth you to me forever,
And I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice,
And in lovingkindness and in compassion;
And I will betroth you to me in faithfulness,
And you will know Hashem. (Hosea 2:21-22)

The liturgy apparently is educating men to sublimate ego and willfulness to the Higher Will, and to assume this subjugative attitude not out of servitude or compulsion, but out of love. It would seem that aside from the purely halakhic reasons that exclude women from this ritual, there is another, more subtle reason. It would appear to be redundant to have a woman play-acting a woman to instill self-abnegation and effacement, when her natural life has already done a more than adequate job of it!

Lest it seem that the use of the feminine metaphor is limited to the depiction of nurturance and self-denial, Isaiah in bold strokes confounds our prejudices. Not only does the woman personify the collective of Israel in its relation to God, but in a radical departure from common usage, the prophet "dares" to directly (rather than allusively) envision God as a woman.

In describing, in the third person, the vengeance of God against His (and Israel's) enemies, Isaiah foretells (42:13): “. . . As a mighty man (*kegibor*) he will go out, like a man of war he will stir up jealousy, he will blare, even scream, as he overcomes his enemies.” However, in the continuation of that self-same vision, the voice moves to first person, as God bespeaks His pent fury:

I have forever held my peace,
I have hushed and refrained Myself;
Now like a birthing woman, I will cry out,
Panting and gasping at once. (42:14)

The *Ish Milhama*, the Man of War, renders Himself in the strength and cries of a birthing woman in the throes of labor. Malbim, in his commentary *Hazon Yeshayahu*, differentiates between $\sigma\psi\alpha$, which refers to rapid, panting exhalations, and $\gamma\lambda\psi\alpha$, which refers to inhalation. In what might be the first description of the Lamaze method, the prophet transforms the allegorical meaning inherent in the image of the birthing woman. She is no longer a symbol of the victim, but rather the image of strength, of creative force.

Reminiscent of the words of both Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Isaiah renders God as the loving mother of Israel who can never forget the child she bore and suckled. God asks incredulously:

Can a woman forget her babe,
Cease loving the son of her belly?
Indeed, these may forget,
But I will never forget you. (49:15)

Unlike mortal mothers, for the Creator there is no forgetting, and in a bold metaphor God declares that He could never forget, having—as it were—engraved Zion on the palms of His hands (49:16).

In his prophecies of comfort, Isaiah presents God in a woman-to-woman dialogue with Zion. Explaining that the long years of suffering are but the travails that precede birth, God soothes the despairing Zion like a sympathetic midwife (66:9), asking rhetorically: “Will I bring you to the breaking point, and not bring forth? If I am the deliverer (midwife), will I stop [the birth] . . . ?!” And like the proud midwife who has successfully delivered the newborn babe, God continues (66:10): “Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all that love her.”

In a similar vein, Isaiah presents the source of life and peace in a graphic personification of God as nursing mother:

I stretch out to her like a river of peace,
Like a stream flowing with the honor of the nations,

And you may suckle.
You will be carried on the side,
And played with on the knees. (66:12-13)

The accurate depiction of the woman carrying her child on her broad hip adds a depth to the verbal sketch unfound in any other Prophet. Isaiah proceeds by explicitly deciphering the maternal metaphor:

As one whose mother comforts him
So will I comfort you;
And you will be comforted in Jerusalem.

The overwhelming power of this image of Divine love seals the Book of Isaiah, and continues to resonate in the language of the Midrash and Kabbala.

In light of the majestic beauty and profound emotion which the Prophets conjure through the use of feminine imagery, it is puzzling that some Jewish women have advocated the use of gender-neutral language in our liturgy. The correlate to removing references to *Avinu* is to remove references to *Ha-Rahaman*. To those for whom Hebrew is not a foreign tongue, the numerous feminine images more than balance the masculine ones. It would be a tragedy—and a travesty—to “castrate” the language, for it would then remove God from the experiential milieus of both men and women, rendering us mortals mute, unable to commune with or communicate about our Creator.