

*Let us bless the flow of life
That revives us, sustains us,
And brings us to this time*
- Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings*¹

Connecting With Deity Through a Feminist Metaformic Theology

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The Theological Roots of the Tree

I developed metaformic theology as an extension of metaformic theory, developed over a thirty-year period by cultural theorist and poet Judy Grahn. The theory, detailed in her *Blood, Bread, and Roses* (1993) and her more recent work, "Are Goddesses Metaformic Constructs?"² is complex; I will focus on only one key aspect here.

Metaformic theory posits that women's menstrual rituals created much of what we know as culture. Grahn identifies metaforms as acts, objects or ideas that make a connection between menstruation and a mental or spiritual principle.³ This paper examines the possibilities open to us if we accept this as a basic premise.

I first learned about the theory while pursuing my MA degree in Women's Spirituality. After several years of immersion in the theory, by which time I was in the midst of my doctoral studies,⁴ a metaformic theology began to form itself as I searched for a theology that would deepen my faith, not alienate me from it. During my research, I explored the tenets of the theory and wrestled with my own beliefs. Along the way I also sought a methodology that would acknowledge the importance of embodiment without sacrificing intellectual analysis.⁵ The text-based approach was the one I had trusted above all others, the one I had been taught as the preferred method of study.

As I looked for a way to merge mind and body that would provide the synergy the inquiry—and my own spiritual questions—demanded, I found answers both by expanding and deepening my own spiritual practice, and by examining and re-examining metaformic theory. As I moved through my research, it turned out the theory had theological applications in my life. It inspired much language for new conversations with deity, satisfying many of my evolving theological questions as I was redefining terms, God, and my place in the universe. The theology, in turn, gave me a way to understand metaformic theory as both relevant and necessary in the context of my own relationship with Goddess and God.

In *Blood, Bread, and Roses*, Grahn talks about our relationship with the sacred in all sentient beings. Yet when I first studied her work I saw it only as secular. I was not able to translate her concept of the sacred into terms I could readily adopt; the ideas she presented were exciting but to fully accept them I would first have had to value myself and other women in a way I had not yet learned to do. Not having been raised with a woman-centered origin story, this was not fully possible.

At a time when my own spiritual practice was under examination and in flux, my beliefs re-forming, metaformic theory and theology were lifelines for me, too long cut off from my own source of power and consciousness. My connection to the Moon and Her cycles deepened, as did my connection to deity; both brought my consciousness forward. Both the theory and the theology gave me strong places to stand that didn't require external approval, understanding, permission. As my relationship with the Sacred Feminine became stronger and clearer, I began to see proofs everywhere of women's intrinsic value, of our unlimited potential and access to divinity.

How could I possibly have imagined that women created the very foundations of culture? I had never been told. How can women imagine what they are worth in the absence of any information, without a range of role models? Metaformic theory was exciting but seemed at times far-fetched when I first learned about it. Only after living with the ideas Grahn presents over a two-year period, day in and day out, did I really begin to comprehend its implications. Only then did I start to see all the relationships between women's menstrual rites and culture creation, connections which intensified each time I studied the rituals in new cultural contexts. When I first explored Jewish puberty and other menstrual rites and saw the metaformic underpinnings, my view of both my religion and myself changed. In allowing myself the exploration, I finally recognized the embodiment, the immanence of divinity and Divinity, in me. I increasingly see metaformic connections within Jewish holiday ceremonies, lifecycle rites, ritual garb, sacred texts and sacred objects.

Issues Fueling the Inquiry

My research began as a response to the lack of woman-centered scholarship, liturgy or ritual in both academic and religious institutions recognizing women as central to the human origin story.⁶ Among other things, I saw that attempts to revise synagogue prayer books to reflect a gender equality sensibility had not gone far enough and rarely referred or spoke to a female deity. It was also clear to me that, as Mary Daly⁷ pointed out more than 30 years ago, the most foundational terms – religion, theology, liturgy – needed deconstruction and re-definition. Naomi Goldenberg did this when she used the term 'thealogy.'⁸ Liturgist Marcia Falk undertook such reconstruction over a 13-year period as she created her ground-breaking *Book of Blessings* (1996), which re-languaged many traditional Jewish prayers and was designed as a companion prayer book for synagogues and informal prayer groups.

Rachel Adler addressed egalitarian issues in her book *Engendering Judaism* (1998)⁹, calling for a theology of inclusion of both women and men. In it, she proposes

a marriage contract or *ketubah* based on partnership rather than on viewing one's wife as property. Melissa Raphael of the University of Gloucestershire, echoing the work of Naomi Goldenberg, Carol Christ and others, wrote *Theology* in 2000, and has recently published an important work, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*, which places a feminist Jewish woman's voice at the heart of a post-Holocaust theological conversation.

These and other Jewish feminist theologians have provided new interpretations of Jewish theology, which help me to re-think my own definitions of 'divine discourse.' Christian feminist theologians including the late Dorothee Sölle, Carter Heyward, Daphne Hampson, Luce Irigaray, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza have also been a critical part of the discourse, creating a framework from which we can more easily re-imagine women's relationship with the Divine. Each of them, I believe, has had their own struggles with the definitions and limits of theo/theology, as they explored which boundaries they could live and worship within, and which they found unacceptable.

One of the first questions I encountered when I resumed my education was whether a patriarchal tradition could best be changed by working within a tradition, or from without. Judith Plaskow asked this question of a mass audience in *Standing Again At Sinai*,¹⁰ orthodox feminists like Blu Greenberg¹¹ had been asking it in quiet ways since the '70s. Feminist scholars, writers, poets and theologians grappled with what Rosemary Ruether called "sexism and God-talk"¹² (1993) and others, often stimulated by the pioneering work of Carol Christ investigated the "rebirth of the goddess."¹³

Feminist reworkings of the constant interplay of language, liturgy and philosophy can be seen in such titles as *Re-Visions*,¹⁴ in which Rabbi Elyse Goldstein reinvents old *b'rakhot*, or blessings, and *She Who Dwells Within*,¹⁵ wherein Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb also creates new liturgy. The *Lifecycles* series, anthologies edited by Rabbi Debra Orenstein and others, have offered collections of rituals and essays reflecting the range of both discourse and practice in contemporary Judaism.

My own feminist epistemology, expressed partially through metaformic theology, comprised the core of my research design, and allowed many explorations within the work. It was, as is any strong belief system, central to how I lived and made daily choices, and how I discerned what pieces—of my own and others' experience—were important to my inquiry.

Mikvah As Metaformic Container

I became intrigued by the idea that our faith, like the rest of our lives, might be rooted in and defined by metaforms -- especially when I understood that these might include such Jewish practices as the *mikvah* or ritual immersion; the rite of passage known as *bat mitzvah*, in which a girl 'becomes a woman' in the Jewish tradition; and the menstrual hut, or red tent, where women lived and continue to live¹⁶ in seclusion at puberty and at their "moon times."

The separation mandated in orthodox Judaism for married couples surely is the continuation of a metaform, a custom born out of women's menstrual rites and later interpreted with a patriarchal lens and incorporated into *halakhah*, Jewish law. The result, for many, became a set of rules and attitudes that produce shame and the hiding of natural body functions under the guise of maintaining "modesty"—though control of the female body and our sexuality seems to be the true agenda.

During her monthly menstruation, a married woman following these traditions separates from her husband for approximately two weeks; this period ends with emergence from the *mikvah* ritual bath. A woman's trip to the *mikvah* is often done with a degree of secrecy and concludes with the woman coming back to be 'fully seen' by her husband, any sons, her father or any other men in her community. During the period in which the Talmudic literature¹⁷ classifies her as "impure" a variety of taboos may apply. Depending on how observant a couple is, these include the couple not being allowed to sleep together, to hold hands or touch each other in other ways in public; the wife may not cook food for her husband.

Blood Covenants

As noted earlier, my recognition of metaforms over several years led me to a greater recognition of women's cyclical connection with the moon, and so with time and the cosmos. As my relationship with metaforms changed, then, so did my relationship with deity. These changes, in combination, led to an understanding of myself as sacred, which simultaneously deepened my connection to God. I saw what can happen if we perceive our bodies as inextricably connected to Nature, in natural harmony, not out of balance with the cosmos. As metaforms, I saw the *mikvah* and *bat mitzvah* reflecting women's blood and menarche rites as sacred and powerful, not defiling; they became visible as rites created by women rather than imposed by men, confirming that as a woman I, too, am made in God's image, allowing not only the possibility but certainty that God is both female and male, mother *and* father.

This confirmation led me to think that woman's menstrual blood must be God-given and natural, as understood by ancient peoples, and evidence of our divinity, not of a flaw or a punishment for eating the apple in Eden.

Rather than circumcision, which leaves out the female half of the human race, I envision that women's covenant with God is menstruation. Elyse Goldstein, too, believes that menstrual blood is women's covenantal blood – and a universal covenant which all women, not just Jews experience. It stands to reason then that our covenant is with life, and not just for the protection of the Jewish people, as Abraham's is said to be. In Grahn's metaformic theory, the apple is itself metaformic of the "menstruation" of nature, and Eve's eating of it a covenant with trees as sources of life.¹⁸

Realizing this connection as a dialogue humans have with Nature led Grahn to call, many years ago, for women to re-create positive rituals for menstruation—rituals

which greet it with celebration instead of with fear or shame. An increasing number of women are creating such ceremonies for their daughters, realizing the impact these rites can have on their sense of sexuality and self-worth. This kind of acknowledgment can be transformative on many levels for both girls and women; the need for such rituals has inspired a new project, *In Shekhinah's Image*, co-created by my Lilith Institute and DeAnna L'Am's Red Moon Rites of Passage. This series aims to educate and empower girls and women, in part through menarche circles for girls and their mothers in conjunction with Bat Mitzvah or other coming-of-age ritual preparations. In educating adolescent girls about their menstrual cycles and increasing their level of emotional and psychological comfort with menstruation, such efforts can lay the foundation for a powerful transition from girlhood to womanhood.

Lunar Connections

Metaformic theory heightened my awareness of the menstrual and lunar constructs and images inhabiting our daily lives. I saw them in the moon-shaped mealie meal patties, a staple made of white corn meal prepared by the women I interviewed in Hamangilasi, South Africa; in the red-ochre painted concrete 'seat' circling a tree on which the women sat and talked in Motati, another South African village. The theory, through its identification of metaforms, led me to make links I would not otherwise have made; it allowed me to make sense of things both Lemba women and men told me about their rituals with the moon as I did my field research.

These changes in my thinking, and my increased awareness of my own lunar cycles and connections led me to a fuller sense of the divine as immanent as well as transcendent, leading me to the theology—a way of believing in God, of deepening my faith which tied immediately, directly back to me and did not come out of organized religion. Here was a way of thinking and feeling which did not require me to surrender my intelligence and will to a "higher power" that was both male and invisible, detached and disembodied; often punishing, stern, and authoritative rather than supportive, just, and an indivisible part of me.

Why is this important? Maintaining connection and re-connection

If we suffer "disconnection from source" (Grahn 1999), if at times we forget, or if we never see our unique relationship as women with Nature, with our bodies, ourselves, we suffer disconnection from Spirit as well as Self.

In Jewish tradition there are ways in which menstruation is held sacred, yet this is little known. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein writes:

...I am fascinated by the tension in the Torah between blood as purifying and blood as defiling, a tension whose modern implications still resonate with me. Do I feel a partner in God's creation at this wondrous moment or do I hate being female, cursed and burdened...? As a rabbi, I can choose to teach about menstruation in a new feminist way, glorifying it as a sacred moment and a life-

cycle event. In the Torah, is our blood holy, is it defiling, or is it just plain blood?" (Goldstein, 1998)

Rabbi Goldstein goes on to note that in the Torah, every potent symbol has a dualistic quality:

Every aspect of the bodily experience has the potential to sanctify, but also to pollute...Symbolically, our ancestors believed it [blood] was the container of the soul and the life force of every living creature, while on a practical level they used it as the necessary tool in major sacrificial rites. They deeply respected and feared the life-and-death power of blood. (Goldstein, 1998).

Metaformic theory shows us through its many examples that these qualities are true of ancestral peoples all over the globe, thus universalizing the experience of metaformic theology, without undermining the religion of one's own specific lineage and the traditions we each knew growing up.

The Power of a Blood/Moon Blessing

*B'rucha at Shekhinah eloheinu melech ha'olam she'asani isha:
Blessed are you, Shekhinah our god, Creator of the world/Source
of Life, who has made me a woman.* (Goldstein, 1998).

This prayer is adapted from one created by Rabbi Goldstein which she recites when she gets her menses each month, a time during which she believes women are "vessels of transformation...in a time of power."

This is an amazing tool of transformation in itself, especially compared with a young girl being slapped when she gets her period for the first time. This is a tradition in some Jewish families, and is meant to impart the idea, indeed a blessing, from the mother or grandmother of the maiden, "May this be the worst pain you ever have".¹⁹

Goldstein writes: "I realize that the slightest change in wording, changing the negative 'who has *not* made me a woman' [per the orthodox Jewish prayer] into the positive 'who has made me a woman' affirms my own holiness and sanctity in God's eyes within the context of menstruation, not in spite of it" (ibid.)

Making these comparisons, finding this rich yet hidden lineage within a tradition I often rejected in many ways as an adult led me, too, to the creation of a metaformic theology. The theology gave me a way to call on subconscious remembrances alive within both my brain and body—a treasury I never would have been able to call on through 'conscious' or more critical-analytical means. By connecting me more fully with my body, it has also given me a way to be more present.

Synthesis: Proposing A Feminist Metaformic Thealogy

What began as a tentative attempt to create a Jewish feminist theology in 1999 evolved into the following feminist metaformic thealogy. In my dissertation there was a marked difference in my description of it; in it, I wrote:

I have returned to using the word “theology” rather than “thealogy.” If we want God to be thought of as female as well as male—despite many protests that God is not gendered but pure Spirit, by those who still use a male-based liturgy—if we seek to transform people’s thinking, to have them more fully accept divinity as female and females as sacred, then we need to work towards a paradigm shift in which the word “Goddess” is no longer an add-on, afterthought or joke but becomes, at least half the time, the very definition of God.

I have since decided that I was playing it safe by staying with the “theology” spelling. My spiritual practice is based on a deep belief in the Sacred Feminine—as source and flow of life, *ruach* or breath and Spirit, Shekhinah, Creatrix—and so the word “thealogy” is more appropriate here.

My thealogy—interpreted not just as God-talk but as divine discourse between human beings—can be described as a set of principles, as a way of being. It:

- believes we can only connect with God through working towards a unity of human spirit, born of compassion and human interaction
- holds women’s and men’s lives, minds *and* bodies as sacred
- regards women’s monthly cycles as evidence of a non-violent, sacred covenant with the Divine, a contract of co-creation with God and the universe
- encourages rather than discourages “divine discourse,” allowing for the creation of a covenant with God on a daily basis; in other words, a thealogy that allows one to enter into a direct conversation or relationship with the Divine at any time, without need for an intermediary
- encompasses an ability to view sexuality as sacred, not sinful
- asks that we regulate ourselves to maintain a high ethical standard, without needing the fear of divine retribution as a controlling mechanism. That is, it simply asks that we do what we believe, and believe in what we do.²⁰

- seeks ways of expressing our faith which are non-exclusionary, non-judgmental and which can cross traditional religious “lines” to bring disparate groups together to worship as one, while allowing for cultural diversity
- embodies an active recognition of deity as having both female and male aspects
- honors the power of the individual to make change
- seeks a religious system that incorporates equal voices, and equanimity of power and decision-making—in liturgy, in the service or mass, from the pulpit, called the *bimah* in synagogues, and in circles
- supports the study of traditional sacred texts as part of this system—by all interested clergy as well as laypeople.²¹
- expects an equal role for both women and men in interpretation and application of religious law

I offer this as a blueprint, as a means of deepening and extending our conversation with God “in and through each other”; as Martin Buber believed, one can meet God through a genuine dialogue with others.²²

Conclusion

I began this work wanting to honor the sacrality of the active female principle that infuses my relationships, my learning, my teaching. As I sought ways to do this, and through the application of metaformic theory, I paid more attention to women’s bodies as one of the most important and our most primal source of information, a source I had consistently ignored, often with deliberate intent. The change in my thinking and in my spiritual practice during the course of my research transformed both my intellect and my faith. As I moved from trusting primarily text and others’ authority as sources of “valid” information, to trusting metaformic data, the wisdom of my own intuition and my body’s visceral knowing, I formulated a metaformic theology. A short time later, I realized that the theology had taken on the attributes of a methodology as well.

Metaformic theology has provided a way for me to talk with Goddess differently, directly, with a more powerful sense of connection; to explain and deepen the overwhelming sense of awe I feel in those moments I reach for and find d/Divinity. Most of all, it has expanded my understanding of where the divine lives in me.

ENDNOTES

¹ Marcia Falk. *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

² Judith Rae Grahn. "Are Goddesses Metaformic Constructs?" Dissertation. San Francisco. Accession # AAT 9988405, 1999.

³ See Judy Grahn, *Blood, Bread, and Roses*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

⁴ I wrote my dissertation, "For She Is A Tree of Life: Shared Roots Connecting Women With Deity" with members of the South African Lemba nation--Diasporic Jews who often practice Christianity combined with traditional African religious practices--and European-American Jewish women living in the United States who observe a range of religious practices.

⁵ Organic inquiry, one of my chosen methodologies, suggests that research is sacred, and insists that the researcher trust a more intuitive way of knowing; both of these aspects were key to my ability to trust embodied, non-textual sources of information. See Clements, Jennifer; Ettlign, Dorothy; Jenett, Dianne & Shields, Lisa. *Organic Inquiry: If Research Were Sacred*. San Francisco. Unpublished manuscript, 1998.

⁶ Grahn, *Blood, Bread and Roses*.

⁷ Mary Daly. *Beyond God the Father : Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.

⁸ Naomi Goldenberg. *Changing of the Gods*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.

⁹ Rachel Adler. *Engendering Judaism*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998.

¹⁰ Judith Plaskow. *Standing Again at Sinai*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990.

¹¹ Blu Greenberg. *On Women and Judaism*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1981.

¹² Rosemary Radford Ruether. *Sexism and God Talk*, 1993.

¹³ Carol Christ. *Rebirth of the Goddess*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1997.

¹⁴ Rabbi Elyse Goldstein. *Re-Visions: Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998.

¹⁵ Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb. *She Who Dwells Within: A Feminist Vision of a Renewed Judaism*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995.

¹⁶ This separation is still practiced by Ethiopian and other Jews today.

¹⁷ For example, in the quote "Hence only objects that were touched by the woman after the discovery become ritually unclean. All objects touched prior to that moment remain clean" from Talmudic Tractate Niddah 2a, Ch. 1. Might this also be interpreted to mean that the writers of Tractate Niddah understood that women became most powerful once they were *aware* they were bleeding?

¹⁸ Judy Grahn. *Goddess of the Blood of Life*, unpublished manuscript, 2004.

¹⁹ Personal communications with Kaye Schuman, Patti Moskowitz, 2002.

²⁰ Thanks to Byron Sherwin for his wording of this concept (in Dorff and Newman, 1999).

²¹ What Chava Weissler might term elite and non-elite groups. Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs*, 1998.

²² Soncino. 1986.