

## The Feminist Revolution

**Talmud Megillah 23a** The Sages taught: All may read from the Torah {lit: rise among the seven}, even a minor and even a woman. However, the Sages said that a woman should not read the Torah, out of respect for the congregation {*mipnay k'vot ha-tzibur*}.

**“Prayer for the Congregation”** *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book*, Rabbinical Assembly, 1946.

May He who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, bless the people of this congregation, and of all other congregations; them, their wives, their sons, their daughters and all their dear ones. May His blessings also be vouchsafed unto those who dedicate and maintain Synagogues...

**Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings*, 1996.**

בְּרַךְ אֶת עֵין הַחַיִּים  
הַמוֹצֵיָאָה לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

### ***Blessing Before the Meal***

Let us bless the source of life that brings forth bread from the earth.

### ***Blessing of Creation***

Let us bless the source of life, Source of darkness and light,  
Heart of harmony and chaos, Creativity and creation.

### ***Shema Yisrael***

Hear, O Israel—  
The divine abounds everywhere  
and swells in everything;  
the many are One.

Loving life  
and its mysterious source  
with all my heart  
and all my spirit,  
all my senses and strength,

I take upon myself  
and into myself  
these promises:  
to care for the earth  
and those who live upon it,  
to pursue justice and peace,  
to love kindness and  
compassion.  
I will teach this to our children  
throughout the passage of the  
days I dwell in my home

and as I go on my journeys,  
from the time I rise  
until I fall asleep.  
And may my actions  
be faithful to my words  
that our children's children  
may live to know:  
Truth and kindness  
have embraced,  
peace and justice have kissed  
and are one.

### ***Havdallah***

Let us distinguish parts within the whole  
and bless their differences.

Like the Sabbath and the six days of creation,  
may our lives be made whole through relation.

As rest makes the Sabbath precious,  
may our work give meaning to the week.

Let us separate the Sabbath  
from other days of the week,  
seeking holiness in each.

## **Marcia Falk, “The Problem is Hierarchy”**

*Havdil*: the making of distinctions. I’ve been thinking about this subject for as long as I’ve been a feminist, which is to say, for half a century. The fundamental insight of feminism is that, in the patriarchal world we inhabit, there is an ever-present, underlying dualistic hierarchy that privileges male above female, and this primary distinction generates m

When, 35 years ago, I began creating new Hebrew prayer from a feminist perspective, the very first blessings I wrote were for *Havdalah*, the closing ritual of the Sabbath, which distinguishes the Sabbath from the rest of the week. It struck me then that of all the liturgical subjects in need of re-conceptualizing — and, hence, re-imagining — none was more important than how we make distinctions. *Havdalah* is not just a performative ritual separating two realms of time; it is a symbol of all Jewish theological distinctions. And, as we know, theological distinctions such as this one have fundamental moral meaning and material influence when analogized to the world of human relations.+

The blessing for distinctions in the traditional *Havdalah* offers this list of parallel pairs: holiness/secularity (the mundane); light/darkness; Israel/the (other) nations; the seventh day (Sabbath)/the six days of creation. Demarcated by ritual, the separation between Sabbath and weekday thus relies on a hierarchy implicit in the pairs holiness/secularity and light/darkness. By dint of its inclusion in this list of binaries, the distinction between Israel and the other nations is also hierarchized — and here is where the problem becomes acute and its implications become crucial. Clearly, we must distinguish between self and other in order to live in the world and engage in ordinary life. But when the distinction between self and other, whether individual or communal, is viewed as hierarchical, we cease striving for a world of authentic, Buberian I-Thou relationships and valorize instead a polarized world of Us/Them — a stance all too familiar in the public domain today.

My re-creation of the blessing for distinctions challenges the fundamental Jewish hierarchies of *Havdalah*, initially by suggesting that holiness may be sought everywhere, in everyday life. The deeper intention of the blessing is to enjoin us to seek relationships of reciprocity and integrity and to see holiness in the face of the other.

**Judith Plaskow** ... The Otherness of women is given dramatic expression in our language about God. Here, we confront a great scandal: the God who supposedly transcends sexuality, who is presumably one and whole, is known to us through language that is highly selective and partial. The images we use to describe God, the qualities we attribute to God, draw on male pronouns and male experience and convey a sense of power and authority that is clearly male in character.

The female images that exist in the Bible and (particularly the mystical) tradition form an underground stream that reminds us of the inadequacy of our imagery without, however, transforming its overwhelming male nature. The hand that takes us out of Egypt is a male hand—both in the Bible and in our contemporary imaginations...

The maleness of God is not arbitrary—nor is it simply a matter of pronouns. It leads us to the central question, the question of the Otherness of women, just as the Otherness of women leads to the maleness of God... If God is male, we are in God’s image, how can maleness not be the norm of Jewish humanity? If maleness is normative, how can women not be Other? ...

.....The Jewish tradition affirms that the God who is Other is nonetheless at the same time the covenant partner of Israel ... The language of dominance, however, is in tension with the language of covenant, because it denies the reality of human power and responsibility that the covenant presupposes. ...Attempting to link the re-imagining of God to a new vision of community, feminists repeatedly choose metaphors that picture the divine power not as something above and over us but in and around. God’s power is not a power that dominates us, but one that elicits our power, meeting us in the shifting and changing forms of our lives.

...The use of feminine imagery, then, so far from “sully” monotheism, becomes a test of whether Jews are able to sustain a genuinely monotheistic framework. Is our God sufficiently God that we are able to incorporate the feminine and women’s experience into our understanding of divinity? ... Feminists need to assert that the full range of images for God we have tested and will test are also different guises of the same One. Indeed, the capacity to see the One in and through the changing forms of the many, to glimpse the whole in and through its infinites images, is finally what monotheism is truly about.