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IDOLOCLASM: THE FIRST TASK OF SECOND WAVE LIBERAL JEWISH FEMINISM

Melissa Raphael*

ABSTRACT: This article suggests that Second Wave liberal Jewish feminism combined secular feminist criticism of the ideological roots of social injustice with traditional criticism of idolatry. Together, these closely related discourses allowed Jewish feminists to argue, with Christian feminists of the time, that the monosexual God who demands that idols be broken is himself an idol: a primary ideational and linguistic projection whose masculine character obstructs the political and existential becoming of women. Liberal Jewish feminists such as Judith Plaskow, in dispute with early Orthodox Jewish feminism, therefore insisted that Jewish feminism must begin with a counter-idolatrous reform of the theological concepts that underpin the relationship between God, self, and world, not with making permissible alterations to halakhah. However, while liberal Jewish feminists reclaimed some of the female aspects of the Jewish God (notably the Shekhinah), the point of reforming a tradition is to be faithful to it. They did not join their more radical Jewish sisters in a more or less pagan break with ethical monotheism, not least because the latter's criticism of idolatry funded their own prophetic drive to the liberation of both women and God from captivity to their patriarchal idea.

From the late 1960s to the early 1990s Jewish feminists were at the forefront of an inter-religious coalition of feminist theorists who believed that idolatry is not one of the pitfalls of patriarchy but its very symptom and cause. Yet students of Jewish feminism have not paid sufficient attention to its idoloclastic turn, one claimed at the time to be the ground of liberation, both female and divine. Here, freedom and becoming were seen to be dependent on the liberation of consciousness from a three-fold captivity to the gods called God and Man - both creations of patriarchy after its own image - and from the idol of the feminine that patriarchy had also created and then substituted for the agency and subjectivity of real finite women. While, by the early 1980s, some radical Jewish feminists had abjured Jewish monotheism altogether, adopting a more or less pagan, Goddess-orientated theological anthropology, reformist Jewish feminists stood firmly in a liberal tradition that located human dignity and progress in emancipation from cognitive and political tyranny and the governance of life by the exercise of rights and rational assent. For them, a truly monotheistic Jewish theology was not possible until patriarchy's idols - human and divine - had been named and dismantled. The present article suggests that this idoloclastic moment may have been the last and most radically emancipatory moment of liberal Jewish modernity, which breaks from tradition in order to be true to it. Now, not only men but women and that ultimate Other: God, would be liberated from the power and authority of a pre-enlightened age.

The historical and intellectual origins of feminist idoloclasm are too manifold to rehearse here. But this brief study might begin in 1910, when Emma Goldman urged that

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before there could be women's emancipation – before women could “become human in the truest sense” – each woman would have to clear her mind of “every trace of centuries of submission and slavery.” Emancipation, Goldman said, begins “neither in the polls nor in the courts. It begins in a woman's soul” with liberation from “internal tyrants,”¹ namely idols.

Or again, in 1941, writing in a diary entry of August 1941, Etty Hillesum, under Nazi occupation, reflects on the inner conflict she feels between her own unruly appearance and that of an immaculately groomed, beautiful woman she'd passed earlier in the street. She's confident of being a good deal more interesting to talk to than her, yet she cannot help wishing she were also such a “plaything”; such an object of desire. She writes: “It is almost too difficult to write down what I feel; the subject is infinitely complex, but it is altogether too important not to be discussed. Perhaps the true, the essential emancipation of women is yet to come... We [women] still have to be born as human beings; that is the great task that lies before us.”²

Nothing but Westerbork and Auschwitz lay before Hillesum. She did not live beyond the age of 29 to undertake that “great task.” It fell largely to the Second Wave American feminist movement, in whose leadership, as Joyce Antler has pointed out, Jewish women were significantly over-represented. And it seems to me that Second Wave feminist theorists' criticism of patriarchy, whether they were from Christian backgrounds or Jewish, began not so much with protesting its manifold discriminations and injustices but its triple alienation of women as Other to their own subjectivity; Other to the normative humanity of men; as Other to the God whose masculine character is a projection created in the image of the elite patriarchal male.

This is a bigger claim than can be comprehensively defended here, but I suggest that feminist activism, not only Jewish feminist activism, begins with the conviction that it is not subordination as such that is the problem for women, but, more fundamentally, the dehumanization of women. That is, feminism begins with criticism of the idolization of the feminine in a fabricated *idea* of woman as derivative, ornamental, compliant and ancillary that eventually supplants real women and holds them in captivity to a supra-human ideal. This idol of the feminine is a spectre that haunts the consciousness of living women, making them feel that to be desirable to men and acceptable before God, they must become her or, in a sense, languish outside the social, religious and cultural family and die.³

In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach had suggested that, in worshipping an impossible feminine ideal such as the Virgin Mary, men could the more easily dispense with real women to the extent that this ideal woman had become an object of love and worship to them.⁴ Shulamith Firestone, writing in the late 1960s, and shaped by traditional Judaism and Marxist thought, was thoroughly sensitised to the powerful

¹ Emma Goldman, “The Tragedy of Women's Emancipation,” in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Cosmino, 2005), 219-232. This was originally published in 1910.

² Etty: *A Diary, 1941-3*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (London: Triad Grafton, 1985), 48. See also page 43.

³ See further, Melissa Raphael, “Idolatry and Fixation: Modern Jewish Thought and Prophetic Criticism of the Technologically Perfected Face in Popular Culture,” *The International Journal of Public Theology* 7 (2013): 135-156, and Melissa Raphael, “A Patrimony of Idols: Second-Wave Jewish and Christian Feminist Theology and the Criticism of Religion,” *Sophia: International Journal of Philosophy and Religions* 53 (2014): 241-259, from which some of the present article is drawn.

⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, [1841], trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 26.

psychological and political effects of ideology on women. She criticised patriarchal love as a false or idolatrous counterfeit love because it is the desire for an idea of woman, not any real and particular woman herself. A man may have let a woman into his heart, “not because he genuinely love[s] her, but only because she play[s] so well into his preconceived fantasies.”⁵ She also knew, after Simone de Beauvoir, that for a woman “to be worshipped is not freedom.” It is possible that Firestone’s battle with schizophrenia was triggered by her struggle to destroy a normative idol of femininity that had set up a competing and irreconcilable duality or split within her own consciousness.

More popular versions of her critique had been in circulation since 1963, when Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan spoke for those middle-class American women of the time who sensed that the life they were leading was actually a form of death: a vacuous perfected replica more hyper-real to them than the real one that laboured beneath its pleasant suburban surface. As would later more radical feminists such as Mary Daly and Firestone, Friedan was protesting the internalization of a coercive, reductive idea of a woman that had become a substitute for who or what they could become.⁶ The will of real, intractable, importunate women had been evacuated and replaced with the compliant, domesticated surrogate of the housewife: a dead woman who lived only in so far as women who had been taught to aspire to become her, saw her as the end and measure of their attainment.⁷ The women’s liberation movement’s first act had therefore to be the breaking of the cognitive idol of compliant femininity.⁸

Friedan actually appears as a character in Ira Levin’s 1972 novel, *The Stepford Wives*. The men of Stepford ban her ideas from the town as the first move in their backlash against feminism, one that eventually results in each formerly independent-minded woman being turned into a visually enhanced, submissive post-human fembot.⁹ Even in 1986, before cosmetic technologies had started to make ever more women look like strangers to themselves, the Jewish feminist artist Joan Braderman had introduced her videotape, *Joan Does Dynasty*, with the reflection that her cultural environment was peopled by female aliens:

These campy [TV] creatures have been interceding in my key personal relations for several years now. I assigned myself to watch the show, to see how the thing works. Why do a hundred million people in 78 countries welcome this department store of dressed-to-kill aliens in their homes every week?¹⁰

⁵ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farah Straus Geroux, 2003), 44. This was originally published in 1970. Cf. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex.: Penguin, 1972), 201.

⁶ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1974).

⁷ Cf., de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 373.

⁸ The destruction of idols might appear to be an act of violence more readily associated with masculinist religiosity than feminist. In fact, while attempting to smash the idols of femininity entailed the reclamation of the whole range of human emotions, including anger, feminist idoloclasm took the non-violent form of an activism that made available options such as political lesbianism, utilitarian or otherwise unconventional ways of dressing, and permissive attitudes to sex. Actual or imaginary hammer blows to images of women (of the sort notoriously committed in 1914 by Mary Richardson against Velásquez’s *Rokeby Venus*) were not typical of the movement. The inauguration of feminism’s Second Wave in 1968 by the staging of a demonstration at a Miss America contest in Atlantic City that protested women’s enslavement to ludicrous standards of female beauty [Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), 24-25] is far more characteristic of its praxis.

⁹ Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (New York: Random House, 1975).

¹⁰ Cited in Lisa E. Bloom, *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 120.

The aim of religious feminism in general, not only Jewish feminism, was to stabilise a comprehensively sexualised idea of the feminine that either idolises or demonises women's reproductivity, the former being no better than the latter. Indeed, it is the obverse of the same process. Both can have their origins in gynophobic disgust. While there is evidence of such disgust in the classic Jewish sources and the laws and customs they prescribe, it is not, of course, apparent in modern liberal Judaism. A previous generation of modern non-Orthodox Jewish thinkers such as Buber, Rosenzweig and Levinas may have idealised the feminine dimensions of Jewish domesticity but they had not exhibited disgust for women or adopted the Freudian legacy of woman as a mere lack or absence. Modern Jewish thinkers typically wrote against instrumental power and were advocates for the vulnerabilities of relationality. Levinas, in particular, followed Rosenzweig's valorisation of maternity and figured domicile or immanence, receptivity, dependency, hospitality and refuge as "feminine."¹¹ Even if accounts of the feminine were often more sentimental and analogical than actual, femininity was hardly equated in modern Jewish thought with temptation and sin. On the contrary, by the time he wrote *Otherwise than Being* (1974), Levinas had ceased to use the word feminine (perhaps stung by Simone de Beauvoir's critique of his having accorded woman the secondary status of silent, mysterious Other to the speaking male subject), and referred to femininity as not merely the condition of ethics, but, now as "maternity" – ethics *itself*: "In maternity, the natural becomes ethical."¹²

Yet it is notable that Second Wave Jewish feminists did not turn for inspiration to feminine tropes in existing modern Jewish thought. It had become important to show women the truth of what real femaleness – not its conservative male idea – actually looks and smells like. It was no coincidence that of the twelve women who produced the book *Our Bodies Ourselves*, first published by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective in 1971, nine were Jewish. This book, which became a best-seller in 1973,¹³ attempted to overcome women's alienation from their own embodiment by introducing women to intimate diagnostic self-examination and by rejecting any sanitized patriarchal fantasy of the feminine. Women were instead supplied with a demystifying list of the genital ailments and their symptoms that are a normal part of real women's sexual experience.

Indeed, what characterizes much of the Jewish feminist art and literature of the period and thereafter was its insistence, typified in books such as Adrienne Rich's 1976 *Of Woman Born*, that women were neither angels nor demons, neither Lilith nor the virtuous mainstay of the Jewish household (*akeret habayit*). Women were not to be praised as the tirelessly industrious "woman of worth" (*eshet chayil*) of the biblical book of Proverbs if they were then to be excluded precisely on that account from performance of most time-bound *mitzvot*. Rather they were to be engaged as ordinary, tired, human beings labouring with little reward to make this world a slightly kinder, cleaner place than they found it. The feminist performance artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles enacted this conviction from 1969,

¹¹ See e.g. Emmanuel Levinas, "Judaism and the Feminine Element," 1965, in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* Seán Hand, ed. and trans. (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 30-37; Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner Classics, 2000), 78, 154.

¹² Leora Batnitzky, "Dependency and Vulnerability: Jewish and Feminist Existentialist Constructions of the Human," in *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 135, 127-152.

¹³ The Boston Women's Health Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973.

when she wrote her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*. The daughter of a Modern Orthodox rabbi, Ukeles (who has held the post of artist in residence at the New York Department of Sanitation since 1977) performed her 1977-80 *Touch Sanitation* piece, for example, over eleven months with 8,500 New York cleaners. Working with male workers as well, she told the truth about the reality of almost all women's lives, naming them as that of an ancient maintenance caste whose repetitive physical labour keeps the world not merely clean from germs and disease, but alive.¹⁴ Yet while most of the of the world's women are unremarked cleaners of homes and public institutions operating in the sphere of the profane or ordinary, they are fed on empty fantasies of becoming something gloriously other to that: a mass idol in the form of a limitlessly rewarded film or pop star or fashion model. Not only Ukeles, but Jewish women across a wide spectrum of academic specialisms, professions and media – Andrea Dworkin, Robin Morgan, Susie Orbach, Kim Chernin, Joan Semmel and others too numerous to mention – popularised a project that assumed, even if it did not state, that women could not become the speaking subjects of their own experience until they had destroyed their own idol. They could not come alive until they had killed off their own death as more of the mass-produced feminine same, whether lustrous or dull.

I further suggest that even before a relatively few Jewish women with a training in theology and religious studies began to argue that the god called God at once occludes the becoming of both women and God, Jewish feminism drew on the prophetic biblical literature's polemical equation of idolatry and spiritlessness or death in order to offer women a new way to live. In biblical idiom, idolatry is a hardening of the heart: a carrier of death or the prevention of becoming. An idol is made out of dead material – wood, silver, stone – that is crafted to look as if it is alive. An idolatrous image or idea of a woman turns a living woman into the appearance of a dead one. For an idol of the feminine does not exist in her own right, but is achieved at the existential cost of the authentic autonomous selfhood towards which the women's liberation movement were struggling. One of the first Jewish feminist theologians to inaugurate this struggle to liberate a Jewish woman's agency from her idol was Rachel Adler. In her now classic article, "The Jew Who Wasn't There," she wrote:

For too many centuries, the Jewish woman has been a golem, created by Jewish society. She cooked and bore and did her master's will, and when her tasks were done, the Divine Name was removed from her mouth. It is time for the golem to demand a soul.¹⁵

Two further examples drawn from Jewish feminist art of the period might serve to illustrate my point. Joan Semmel's paintings of the 1970s celebrated women's real, living, and thereby less than perfect, embodiment. Her 1970s "Sex Paintings" series, painted in New York soon after she discovered the feminist movement, worked from photographic self-portraits taken looking down at her own body from her own point of view, refuses its objectification as the creation of the patriarchal gaze. In later work, such as *Hot Lips* (1997)

¹⁴ See Jessica Weisberg, "The Hardworking Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles is Here to Clean Up Your Mess," *Tablet Magazine*, 22 July 2013, accessed 20 December 2015, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/138254/mierle-laderman-ukeles>.

¹⁵ Rachel Adler, "The Jew Who Wasn't There: *Halakah* and the Jewish Woman," in *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 17.

and *Stacked* (1998), her idoloclasm became more explicit. So too, since 1976, Laurie Simmons has been making dreamlike dolls houses and life-sized housewife and sex dolls photographed in realistic poses, actively breaking the second commandment in order to insist on the urgency of observing it.

In her 1983 book *Femininity*, Susan Brownmiller, whose previous theoretical work had offered a critique of the physical coercion of women through rape, now sought to address the ills of its psychological coercion. The book begins by reflecting on how she was inducted as a child into the ideology of femininity by being provided with (i)dolls and by threats and promises: “Being good at what was expected of me was one of my earliest projects.” After noting that she had, in fact, once “loved being a fairy princess, for that was what I thought I was,” she describes how, before the Second Wave of feminism broke, she grew increasingly confused by the mixture of “little courtesies and minor privileges” that rewarded conformity and the threats of disqualification from the category of desirable women that punished resistance. The more a woman exaggerated her femininity in order to better approximate her own idol, she argues, the greater her capacity to compete for two scarce resources – good husbands and good jobs – the greater her capacity to make men feel more masculine.¹⁶ A rigid cultural code for femininity was therefore imposed on the natural process of her maturation into a woman until she found herself walking “in limbo,” a “hapless creature,” terrified of catching sight of herself as such in the mirror, and disorientated by contradictory requirements that she comport herself through, “in equal parts, modesty and exhibition.”¹⁷ Chapter by chapter, Brownmiller’s book proceeds to dismantle the idol of the feminine: from her spectral body, hair, clothes, voice, skin, and movement, to her emotions and ambitions.

The notion that it was *religious* ideologies of femininity that at once funded and reflected the cultural and political dehumanization of women was the impetus for feminist scholarship in religion from about 1970-1990. Not one of the world religions, feminist scholars claimed, fully affirms women’s personhood. In 1979, the Jewish feminist novelist and critic Cynthia Ozick famously pointed out that the whole point of the Torah is to countermand the ways of the world, yet its ethic does not extend to the dehumanization of women. This gaping ethical omission led Ozick to propose an 11th commandment, “Thou shalt not lessen the humanity of women.” With this new commandment she was, in effect, charging the masculine order – mundane and cosmic – to refrain, not least in the name of its own humanistic ethicality, from turning women into another of its idols.¹⁸

Ozick was not persuaded by Judith Plaskow’s contention that it was with theology that Jewish feminists ought to begin the process of humanizing women and re-divinising God.¹⁹ For Ozick, as it would be for most Modern Orthodox Jewish feminists, it was the political and legal reform of Judaism that would actualize women. Led by its founding president Blu Greenberg, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) was eventually established in 1997 to provide opportunities for women to express themselves fully in communal life and thereby transform not just their own lives, but that of the entire Jewish people. Judith Plaskow, however, argued that “where a religious tradition makes the masculine body the

¹⁶ Brownmiller, *Femininity*, 16-17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14, 19.

¹⁸ Cynthia Ozick, “Notes toward Finding the Right Question,” in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed. Heschel, 146-150.

¹⁹ Judith Plaskow, “The Right Question is Theological,” in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed. Heschel, 223-233.

normative bearer of the divine image of a God imagined in male language alone, and in ideas that cannot be ‘tampered’ with, its anthropology should be considered idolatrous.”²⁰ A minority of Jewish feminists, including myself, agreed with her.²¹ Probably the first Jewish feminist manifesto for a shifting, provisional, counter-idolatrous God was set out in the late Rita Gross’s 1976 proposal in *Davka Magazine* of an androgynous model of God that was intended to disrupt the fixed gender roles ordained by an exclusively male God in defence of exclusively male interests. Male and female pronouns for God should, she recommended, be at least alternated in theological discourse.²² Androgyny as a non-literal strategy would suspend theology somewhere between knowing and unknowing, its “prolific manifold” would always queer its own idols. Just as Marcia Falk’s feminist prayers and translations would convey her counter-idolatrous sense of the unstable, permeable, dispersive boundaries of the human, natural and the divine, Plaskow was to move beyond idoloclasm into a third-wave condition of permanent theological revolution in her more recent notion of a transgendered God. In the third of her Sherman Lectures given in 2000 at the University of Manchester, and in work done thereafter, she drew on the talmudic expansion of gender categories – as well as the contemporary studies by Daniel Boyarin and Charlotte Fonrobert – to move beyond bi-polar concepts of God, including an androgynous one which, in her view, failed to disrupt ideas of the masculinity and femininity by simply defining God as a combination of the two.²³ Instead, Plaskow made a bid for Jewish theology to use a mix of gendered and non-gendered images for God so that none are fixed; all are disposable or capable of giving way to the self-replenishing flow of others.

In short, Jewish feminist theologians knew that women will only be who they will be when *God* will be who God will be. When God is rendered a mere loud-speaker for the patriarchal will to power ordaining what women will be, his ventriloquial voice must be silenced before women can begin to hear themselves, and all subject others, speak. Jewish feminist theologians knew that political reform must begin with the reformation of theology. As Maimonides argued long before Feuerbach, substitutive idols are made of words as well as stone; that the most dangerous idols are in the head. It is here, in its conviction that the first task of a theology is to destroy its own idols, that Jewish feminism is at its most quintessentially reformist and Jewish. And in so far as all feminism is a project for the avoidance and criticism of masculinist self-idolatry, then Judaism itself, rather than a self-preoccupied project for personal actualization, is a primary moral and psychological driver of the women’s liberation movement. *Avodah zara* (literally, in Hebrew, the worship of alien things), is after all, widely considered to be Judaism’s defining moment: the very

²⁰ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 147-8.

²¹ See Ellen Umansky’s contribution to Carol P. Christ, Ellen M. Umansky and Anne E. Carr, “Roundtable Discussion: What Are the Sources of My Theology?” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1 (1985): 119-131, 124. More recently, Susan Shapiro has revisited the notion that the right, or primary, question for Jewish women is theological, or at least philosophical in her article, “A Matter of Discipline: Reading for Gender in Jewish Philosophy,” in *Judaism since Gender*, eds. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (New York: Routledge, 1997), 158-73.

²² Rita Gross, “Female God Language in a Jewish Context,” reprinted in *Womanspirit Rising*, eds. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 168-171.

²³ <http://www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/sherman-lectures-2000/>, accessed 20 December 2015. See also Judith Plaskow, “The Challenge of Transgender to Compulsory Heterosexuality,” in *Heterosexuality in Contemporary World Religions: Problems and Prospects*, eds. Marvin E. Ellinson and Judith Plaskow (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 34, and Hava Tirosh Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes, eds., *Judith Plaskow: Feminism, Theology and Justice* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 45-68.

activity that the rabbinic literature claims defines a Jew.²⁴ Just as other progressive Jews had deployed Marxism as an oppositional stance compatible with Judaism's ban on idols – the ultimate oppositional critique –²⁵ so too Jewish feminists found their tradition to be one that intimately acquainted them with the criticism of false gods and erroneous worship.

Indeed, for this very reason Jewish feminism was fraught with potential and actual conflict with other religious feminists. In the early 1990s, Jewish feminists were disturbed by what they perceived to be anti-Judaism in some Christian feminist writing which implied that a Jewish crusade against idolatry had been responsible not only for the death of Jesus (too often regarded by Christian feminists as effectively the first and only Jew ever to have been sympathetic to women) but also for the death of the Goddess and her replacement with a merciless patriarchal God.²⁶

While Naomi Graetz was later to suggest that to worship God using Goddess imagery may be no more idolatrous than using certain other linguistic Jewish means of imagining God,²⁷ liberal Jewish feminists, as reformers, not radicals, did not wish to break with ethical monotheism.²⁸ Indeed, they could not, for it was this that funded their practical prophetic criticism. It was Jewish theologians, after the publication of Naomi Goldenberg's post-Jewish *Changing of the Gods* in 1979,²⁹ who would reject Jewish and Christian monotheism altogether as intolerant of plurality and difference. For Jewish theologians like Goldenberg and Starhawk, there was no God behind his idol: the projective Father-idol of masculinity *is* God and the Judaeo-Christian tradition that mediated him was regarded as a necessary, not contingent, domination and exploitation of female energies to its own ends. But most Jewish and Christian theologians considered theology's claims exaggerated and their commitment to a gender-inclusive truth made it impossible to reinstate an equally projective Goddess or Great Mother. Cynthia Ozick was always hypersensitive to the possibility of idolatry, and considered even her own literary inventions to be, by their nature, at risk of descending into such.³⁰ She considered any Jewish feminist turn to the Goddess (even one operative in the ancient history of Israel or "buried" in classic Jewish texts) to be a regression into a Pagan idolatry that Judaism existed precisely

²⁴ See Sanhedrin 93a. Sources on idoloclasm as the originary principle of Judaism are too numerous to list here. However, see, e.g. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3.27-28 and *Mishneh Torah*, book 1, ch. 1, "Laws Concerning Idolatry and the Ordinance of the Heathen"; Kenneth Seeskin, *No Other Gods: The Modern Struggle Against Idolatry* (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1995), 20: "the litmus test for being a Jew is seeing things in the created order for what they are: natural objects of finite value and duration"; Jeffrey Salkin, *The Gods are Broken: The Hidden Legacy of Abraham* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

²⁵ Jean Axelrad Cahan, "The Lonely Woman of Faith under Late Capitalism; or, Jewish Feminism in Marxist Perspective," in Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy*, 114, 106-126.

²⁶ See Susannah Heschel, "Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Theology," *Tikkun* 5: (1990), 25-29; Judith Plaskow, "Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 116-29, reprinted as one of four papers on the subject in a "Special Section on Christian Feminist Anti-Judaism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7 (1991) 95-133.

²⁷ Naomi Graetz, *Unlocking the Garden: A Feminist Jewish Look at the Bible, Midrash and God* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005), 163.

²⁸ See Melissa Raphael, "Goddess Religion, Postmodern Jewish Feminism and the Complexity of Alternative Religious Identities," *Nova Religio*, 1 (1998), 198-214.

²⁹ Naomi Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), esp. 29-30, 33, 36, 38.

³⁰ See Cynthia Ozick, "The Riddle of the Ordinary," *Moment* 2 (1983): 55-59.

to break.³¹ In this and other senses, Jewish feminist theology's idoloclasm did not exempt its sister movements.

The idoloclastic moment extended beyond the Second Wave. Idoloclasm also produced Third Wave feminism's rejection of any essentialist "totalization" of women, including any proposed by cultural feminists of the previous wave. Virtually inaugurating feminism's Third Wave, was Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990,³² which she acknowledged was heavily influenced by her Jewish upbringing. As she said later in an interview, "I grew up with a generation of American Jews that understood assimilation meant conforming to certain gender norms that were presented in the Hollywood movies. So my grandmother slowly but surely became Helen Hays. And my mother slowly but surely became kind of Joan Crawford."³³

Butler's campaign against all essentialist ideas about gender, feminist or otherwise, urged women to own their identity as women by its plural, fluid performance in multiple spaces.³⁴ Her work, which played a significant role in the end of Second Wave feminism, would not have been possible without the Second Wave having broken the idols of super-human masculinity and sub-human or animal femininity.

Of course, no one thought idoloclasm was going to be easy. Feminist commentators of the time were sharply aware that all ideas, including feminist ones, were inevitably compromised by sharing the same cognitive and linguistic forms as the patriarchal ideology that made the world comprehensible and for which no liveable alternative had yet been known. Susan Brownmiller suggested that even after the advent of women's liberation the majority of women remained "emotionally and financially needy" and they would continue to "admire the effect" and "scrutinize the imperfection" of their mimetic femininity. But even these latter could at least thank feminism for ensuring that women "need not put up with the armature of deceptions and handicaps of earlier generations" and "in their awareness if not yet their freedom to choose [they would be] a little closer to being themselves."³⁵

Many, perhaps most, reformist religious feminists felt that if they were not to relinquish all ties with their past, and erase all the categories and texts that defined their identity, they were going to remain "stuck with" the god called God. Perhaps, for Jewish reformist feminists, in a very Jewish way, alienation from God seemed a lesser evil than alienation from their own Jewishness. In the mid-1990s, the feminist biblical scholar Athalya Brenner, for example, noted the irony that the Jewish God who demands that idols be broken is himself an idol. And it is an idol that she – a divorced, non-religious Israeli woman – cannot escape: "This is my heritage. I am stuck with it. I cannot and will not shake it off. And it hurts."³⁶ But in its courageous existential struggle to break free from

³¹ Ozick, "Notes toward Finding the Right Question," in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed., Heschel, 121-2, 120-151.

³² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, new edition (New York: Routledge, 2006). See also, Miriam Peskowitz's *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender, and History* (Oakland CA: University of California Press, 1997), which uses Marxist theorizations of ideology to examine rabbinic accounts of gender as cultural and material productions rather than biological givens.

³³ <http://www.critical-theory.com/judith-butler-documentary/>, accessed 26 June 2015.

³⁴ See for example, Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 81, on the mask of womanliness that can be assumed or removed at will.

³⁵ Brownmiller, *Femininity*, 237.

³⁶ Athalya Brenner, "The Hebrew God and His Female Complements," in *Feminism and Theology*, eds. Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 172, 155-174.

the crippling constraints of the feminine condition without turning women into mere “honorary men”; to hold on to the possibility of a God of their own futurity, and to reform the interpretation of every text, ritual and relationship in a tradition that it insisted was ineluctably its own, I wonder if Second Wave liberal Jewish feminism comprised perhaps the most radically counter-idolatrous movement in the history of modern Jewish thought.

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