

## Feminist Sexual Ethics Project

Literature Review by Dawn Robinson Rose

Rachel Adler. *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988.

*Rachel Adler is Associate Professor of Jewish Religious Thought and Feminist Studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles. Engendering Judaism won a National Jewish Book Award for Jewish Thought and a Tuttleman Foundation Book Award by Gratz College.*

In *Engendering Judaism*, Rachel Adler outlines a text-oriented Jewish feminist approach to issues of law, liturgy, and heterosexual relationships. This book is written explicitly for those women and men who would seek equalitarianism and mutuality without straying altogether from some concept of *halachah* (Jewish law). Adler combines and reinterprets *halachah* and *aggadah* (rabbinic story) towards the theological and ethical (re)construction of Judaism.

Setting her theoretical foundation, Adler beautifully illustrates the importance of stories in the creation of Jewish life. For example, Adler retells the story of an irascible female character from Yiddish folklore named Skotsl who climbs a tower made of women to speak to God. According to Adler, the story was purposely left open-ended. We never know if Skotsl succeeds in presenting women's case to the Almighty. The story of women's liberation in Judaism is left without end, just as the struggle itself. As long as lives were structured by *mitzvot* (commandments), Judaism maintained a society in which men kept to themselves the study of Torah and the company of each other. Women, confined to their children, businesses, and chores, were left to struggle for liberation on their own—an impossibility. For Adler, modernity has brought two primary changes to this schema: 1) the Law no longer holds absolute sway over the governance of our villages; and 2) and women and men no longer need or want to be kept apart by the Law.

“Engendering” Judaism is thus a two-tiered endeavor: becoming “fully attentive to the impact of gender on the texts and lived experiences of the people Israel,” and addressing “the questions, understandings, and obligations of both Jewish women and Jewish men” (p. 24).

For Adler, progressive Judaism's failure thus far can be attributed to its ambivalent attitude toward Jewish law. Rather, she would have us rename and redefine “*halachah as praxis—a holistic embodiment in action...of the values and commitments inherent to a particular story*” (p. 26; italics hers). Having ideas and new stories about ourselves in which women and men are equal in Judaism is meaningless without some method of enactment. But rejecting traditional *halachah* and the hierarchical concept of rabbinic authority, how do we conceptualize and construct a body of Jewish practices that could embody a truly engendered Judaism, shaping our lives in equality and mutuality?

To answer, Adler turns to Robert Cover, an American legal theorist. Law, according to Cover, is generated by “a *nomos*, a universe of meanings, values, and rules.” It is “a world to inhabit” (p. 34). The traditional rabbis created such a world, living out, for example, the stories of Israel’s chosenness and separateness. Their world, or *nomos*, is of the sort that according to Cover might be called *imperial*, or world-maintaining. So much did they want their world to stay the same that Skotsl had to climb all the way to heaven to try to change it.

A *nomos* does not have to be imperial. It can, in fact, be proactive or *paidaic*, that is, world creating, and here is the crux of Adler’s argument. To engender Judaism, we must create a new *nomos*, a new universe of meaning, values, and stories in which to live.

But the problem remains—how to get from here to there. With no central authority structure to create and enforce a new *nomos* (and the profound inappropriateness of such an authority in the first place), how can we go about creating and agreeing upon Jewish practice in a liberal framework? Cover again suggests an answer, in his description of law not as the “new world” but rather as the “bridge toward.” As Adler explains:

Cover offers the image of the bridge to express the dynamism of the meaning-making component that both constitutes and propels law. Law-as-bridge is a tension system strung between “reality,” our present world..., and “alternately,” the other normative worlds we may choose to imagine (p. 35).

Those worlds we choose to envision would guide our ethical and *halachic* decisions, our praxis towards the attainment of those worlds. The bridge imagery helps us understand that law-making is an ongoing process here, which for Adler would of necessity be highly dialogical, incorporating the diversity of Jewish communities. A central component of this praxis, then, would be a commitment to “*nishmah*, [that is,] we will listen” (p. 44). Listening, reflecting on all sides the “spectrum of meaningful human differences” (p. 40)—male and female—is of utmost importance. What is required, then, is a community committed to speaking and listening, envisioning, creating, and enacting *nomos* or law towards an engendered Judaism.

In the final two chapters, Adler approaches the ethics of heterosexual relationships. Finding the traditional *halachah* on marriage unacceptably lacking in mutuality—marriage is described as ownership in Scripture and upheld as such by the rabbis—Adler searches the tradition for a precedent of mutuality between two people which may inform and provide structure for a new covenant between loving adults. She finds her template not in the laws on marriage but in those of business partnerships. It is here that she finds the proper balancing of the needs of the individual, the vision of mutuality, and the necessary communal standards addressing economic and welfare issues.

Calling her new commitment covenant *b’rit ahuvim*, or lover’s covenant, she attempts, through the construction of these laws—this *nomos*—to answer a question that has plagued the Jewish feminist movement since before it was but a gleam in Skotsl’s eye,

that is, with this long history of oppression and separation, how do Jewish women and men who love one another make a relationship that can truly be equal? How can they avoid the inequities of Jewish marriage and divorce law yet still create binding relationships that provide for children, illness, and old age?

Finally, while the primary thrust of the book has been the critique of traditional Jewish marriage law from the contemporary viewpoint of a liberating feminism striving for equality in heterosexual relation, Adler suggests that her newly minted *b'rit ahuvim* is likewise appropriate for lesbian and gay couples. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered Jews may indeed find her model a useful basis for thought, although they may instead choose to create new Jewish models based on their own experience.

The concept of *b'rit ahuvim* as developed and illustrated by Adler seems to successfully address the dual problems of mutuality in relation and social realities. Adler's proposal is unique and deserves serious debate in the Jewish community.

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