

# *Tackling the Patriarchy of Jewish Theology*

A LOOK BACK AT MARCIA FALK'S *THE BOOK OF BLESSINGS*

RABBI DAVID ELLENSON

It is not too much to say that the publication of *The Book of Blessings* in the last decade of the twentieth century revolutionized and revived the foundations of Jewish liturgy. The prayers and commentary in this volume provide nothing less than a full liturgy for the redirection of Jewish life, a project that is as impressive in its scope and vision now as it was twenty years ago. In affirming a nongendered, nonhierarchical, and immanent divine, *The Book of Blessings* challenges some of Judaism's most deeply held theological assumptions and offers a poetic and serious alternative. The decision of the CCAR to republish this classic work is an act of great significance, for the issues it raises remain of great import to a Jewish people still struggling to realize fully the legitimacy and depths that multiple modes of spiritual expression provide.

Educated as an undergraduate at Brandeis and recipient of a doctorate from Stanford, Marcia Falk was foremost among those who ushered in two sea changes within American Judaism in the last quarter of the twentieth century. First, with Sally Priesand, Rachel Adler, Judith Plaskow, Susannah Heschel, Blu Greenberg, Paula Hyman, Tova Hartman, Judith Hauptman, and Ellen Umansky, Falk helped change the status of women by insisting on the inclusion of feminist concerns in Jewish liturgy and life. Falk knew that for centuries Jewish women could not raise their voices in the public realm. Indeed, the voice of a woman, as one notorious Talmudic passage had it, could not be raised in a mixed assembly of men and women, for the "voice of a woman is *ervah* [lewd]" (Berakhot 24b). Refusing to accept such restrictions, Falk began offering her prayers and prose to the Jewish community at a rapid pace during the 1980s, emphasizing that the ability to express words

in public conferred an essential level of dignity upon those who uttered them. Her intensely passionate, spiritually enriching, and early public work thus constituted in itself an act of rebellion against the past silence of women in the public spheres of Jewish religious life.

When *The Book of Blessings* appeared in print after thirteen years in the making, it tackled the patriarchal nature of Jewish theology head-on. This prayer book did not mimic traditional forms of worship; rather, it aimed to explain and demonstrate how a richer and more equitable Judaism could be forged, calling for the reconstitution of Jewish communal, personal, and prayer life on foundations that recognized the full dignity of every human being—women and men alike. And, indeed, the book was met with an outpouring of enthusiasm. “We’ve waited three thousand years,” proclaimed *Lilith: The Independent Jewish Women’s Magazine*, “Marcia Falk’s Jewish Feminist Prayer Book Is Here.”<sup>1</sup> Moshe Waldoks, writing in *Hadassah Magazine*, pronounced the work “a truly magisterial and exciting collection . . . *The Book of Blessings* is a remarkable antidote to the spiritual dissonance created by the traditional prayer book.”<sup>2</sup> David Teutsch, then president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, wrote, “*The Book of Blessings* will stand as a major landmark in the history of American Jewish liturgy. The immanentist theology behind Falk’s work has never been so clearly and systematically expressed in liturgy.”<sup>3</sup>

As might be expected, the book also raised controversy. One review claimed that Falk defined “only feminine God imagery” as “acceptable” and that, in a reversal of classic gender roles, she had consigned the male to the role of the “Other.” However, this critique was founded on a serious misreading, one that failed to note the careful distinction Falk drew in *The Book of Blessings* between grammatical gender and semantic gender. Let me explain. Falk freely used nouns of both grammatical genders as metaphors for divinity in her blessings, and a critique of her work should not have centered upon specific gender issues that she herself never raised. She simply did not assert that masculinity must be banished from liturgy.<sup>4</sup> For example, *ma’yan*, one of the nouns that Falk employs in her *sheheḥeyánu* blessing (**Blessing for the New and for Renewal**), is, in fact, masculine, as is the phrase *nitzotzot hanéfesh*, which appears in her *havdalah* ceremony (**Havdalah: Parting Ritual for the Sabbath**). Hebrew is not a gender-neutral language; all nouns have grammatical gender, and Falk has no problem creating new images for

divinity that are grammatically masculine. In fact, while the grammar of the images she puts forth for the divine in *The Book of Blessings* is sometimes masculine, sometimes feminine, the images themselves, being neither personal nor animate, do not express gender at all. This theological posture of neutrality, which once seemed so controversial, informs and directs all of Falk's work. Twenty years later, it has become almost commonplace, as the value of nongendered liturgies has been more widely accepted. Nonetheless, it remains important, not least because it gestures toward Falk's second great contribution to Jewish community.

Falk's decision not to employ male (or female) images of and metaphors for God emerged from her judgment that *personal* images of God, whether masculine or feminine, are limiting and stand in opposition to her emphasis upon divine immanence. As Rachel Adler, in a respectful and thoughtful consideration of the theology that animates *The Book of Blessings*, observed, "Falk's unique innovation is to incorporate [her] theology of immanence into the primary forms of Jewish liturgy. She has coined a *b'rakhah* formula that counters traditional theologies of transcendence by collapsing God into nature and community." This more unifying vision of the divine initially met with two forms of opposition—one essentially philosophical-ethical and the other principally theological-anthropological. An outline of each will shed needed light on the nature of what remains of a debate over Falk's work in some liberal Jewish precincts.

The philosophical-ethical critique of Falk followed the path hewn almost a century ago by Hermann Cohen, who pointed out that the moral realm was marked by freedom and choice, whereas the natural world, in contrast, operated according to set laws and patterns. Defining humanity as one with nature collapses these realms and thus renders morality philosophically incoherent. Convinced that humans could choose to improve and perfect the world, Cohen emphasized an ethical imperative that humans be seen as distinct from nature and advocated a philosophical monotheism in which a transcendent ideal of divinity functioned in a regulative manner. A version of this critique remains among some theologians today.

Supplying a theological-anthropological critique to immanence, Bible scholar Edward Greenstein was among the first to criticize Falk for not naming God in personal terms. He charged that her compositions were, at best, "preludes to prayer," and he wrote that for "prayer to be prayer," it "must

relate to God personally, in direct address. To pray in any meaningful sense one must say ‘You.’”<sup>5</sup> Otherwise sympathetic critics such as Adler, Lawrence Hoffman, and Arnold Jacob Wolf also challenged what they saw as Falk’s rejection of a personal God. Hoffman favored a model of “covenantal relationship” because God “can be known only in relationship and can never adequately be described outside of relationship.”<sup>6</sup> Wolf contended that only a personal vision of God “can inspire or mandate religious commitment.”<sup>7</sup> The notion of divine immanence that Falk advocates, he wrote, demands that God not be “imaged as an Other at all.” And Adler contended that “eradicating otherness, breaking down all boundaries between self and other, self and God, God and world, simultaneously eradicates relatedness.” Covenant, Adler affirmed, demands “an Other,” and she concluded that “opposite Falk’s unitive spirituality, I would set a spirituality of otherness.”<sup>8</sup>

Falk, who had anticipated such critiques, responded, “While I would agree that relationship is an important element in theology, I do not see why it is necessary to envision God as transcendent Other in order to affirm relationship. This view certainly fails to account for the deep sense of connectedness I personally feel when I am in touch with my participation in the greater whole of creation.” Falk also noted that she was not alone; Arthur Green had emphasized divine immanence, writing “We seek a religious language that goes beyond the separation of ‘God,’ ‘world,’ and ‘self’ that seems so ultimate in most of Western theology. . . . We refer rather to a deity that embraces all of being, a single One that contains within it all the variety and richness of life, yet is also the Oneness that transcends and surpasses all. . . . But where do we allow room for the truth that all is One if our religious language is that of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’?”<sup>9</sup>

Although this position did not lead Green to abandon personal language in prayer, Falk maintained that, to be authentic, prayers ought to align with the beliefs of those uttering them. Explaining her creative process, she wrote, “I create and use new images—images such as *eyn habayim*, ‘well-spring of life,’ *nishmat kol hay*, ‘breath of all living things,’ and *nitzotzot hanéfesh*, ‘sparks of the inner, unseen self’—to serve as fresh metaphors for divinity. With these images, and still others, composed of all the basic elements of creation—earth, water, wind, and fire—I hope to construct a theology of immanence that will both affirm the sanctity of the world and shatter the idolatrous reign of the lord/God/king.”<sup>10</sup> *The Book of Blessings* and the

nonpersonal images for divinity found in it testify to the consistency Falk has displayed on this matter for her entire career.

I personally applaud *The Book of Blessings* for the dialogue and multiple opinions and voices it has fostered and encouraged. These are made apparent when, for example, one considers that Falk's English blessings do not represent literal renderings of her Hebrew blessings. Instead, Falk consistently authors Hebrew and English blessings that express a multiplicity of perspectives and celebrate, by extension, a diversity of voices in the community. Her Hebrew and English blessings complement one another, and the English-language-only reader is invited to share in this richness not only by reading the English prayers but by consulting the literal translations of the Hebrew found in the book's extensive commentary. This emphasis upon multilingualism is emblematic of Falk's desire not to provide dogmatic answers to the questions her liturgy raises but rather to provide options and provoke thought.

*The Book of Blessings* is a work of neither "absolutism" nor "insistence." Poetic ambiguities abound. Falk's liturgy is not about setting new rules. It is about opening new doors. It is about the heart and the spirit as well as the mind, and it is certainly not about excluding men or anyone else. On the contrary, it welcomes into the community a wide swath of Jews who have felt alienated from synagogue life, offering them a way to pray with integrity. For these reasons, her influence upon contemporary Reconstructionist liturgy has been extensive, and, since the time of their original publication, her compositions have also had an impact on the development of Reform liturgy. Indeed, several prayers from *The Book of Blessings* are featured in the new Reform *maḥzor*, *Mishkan HaNefesh*, as well as in the new Conservative prayer books, *Siddur Lev Shalem* and *Maḥzor Lev Shalem*; the Reconstructionist prayer book series, *Kol Haneshamah*; and many prayer books used by congregations in the Jewish Renewal movement.

Like our teacher Lawrence Hoffman, I would claim that "Falk's *Book of Blessings* stands out as a liturgical and literary masterpiece that should be bought, studied, prayed from, and assimilated into our communal consciousness. It is a culminating work of a gifted author who celebrates her generation of Jewish feminism, and does so splendidly."<sup>11</sup> I am delighted to see the book come back into print so that it may teach and inspire a new generation of Jews.

- 1 *Lilith*, Fall 1995.
- 2 Moshe Waldoks, "Bookmark," *Hadassah Magazine*, August–September 1996.
- 3 David Teutsch, "The Poet as Liturgist: Marcia Falk's *The Book of Blessings*," *The Reconstructionist*, Spring–Fall 1997.
- 4 Simone Lotven Sofian, "Pushing the Envelope: Reflections on *The Book of Blessings* by Marcia Falk," *CCAR Journal* (Spring 1999): 84–95.
- 5 Edward L. Greenstein, "'To You Do I Call': A Critique of Impersonal Prayer," *Reconstructionist* 52:7 (1988): 14.
- 6 Lawrence A. Hoffman, "A Response to Marcia Falk," *Tikkun* 4:4 (July–August, 1989): 57.
- 7 Arnold Jacob Wolf, "The New Liturgies," *Judaism* 46 (Spring 1997): 239.
- 8 Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), pp. 90–92.
- 9 Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology*, (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1992), pp. 8–9.
- 10 Marcia Falk, "Toward a Feminist Jewish Reconstruction of Monotheism," *Tikkun* 4:4 (July–August, 1989): 55.
- 11 Lawrence A. Hoffman, "Marcia Falk's *The Book of Blessings*," *Prooftexts* 19 (1999): 95.