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How *Shekhinah* Became the God(dess) of Jewish Feminism

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Abstract

Shekhinah, the 'cloud of Yahweh' in the Bible, a synonym for God's presence in the rabbinic tradition, and a feminine hypostasis in the Kabbalah, is a popular theological image in contemporary Jewish feminist circles. *Shekhinah* currently exists in many forms: she is another name for God, feminine, relational, experiential; she is a Goddess and the singular image that is sufficiently adaptable for a diverse range of postmodern feminist interpreters. However, the processes by which *Shekhinah* became the God/dess of Jewish feminism have not been researched. Therefore, this article tracks the evolution of *Shekhinah* iconography in the Jewish tradition to gain an understanding of the appeal of these images within the context of Jewish feminism's quest for an alternative to the androcentric Holy One, blessed be He. The article then traces the extent of *Shekhinah* theologies engendered by Second, Third-Wave and recent Jewish feminisms concluding that the plurality of contemporary spirituality and the general rejection of 'systematic' models of theology are not necessarily problematic. Rather, *Shekhinah* is argued to be a binding agent for diverse religionists, and one which has become *normative* to Jewish feminist theology.

Keywords

Shekhinah, Second-Wave, feminism, theology, Goddess, Judaism, rabbinic, Kabbalah

Introduction

By far one of the most popular theological images for contemporary Jewish feminists is *Shekhinah*. In the Hebrew Bible *Shekhinah* is retrospectively associated with the 'cloud' of Yahweh; in the rabbinic tradition *Shekhinah* is a metaphor for God's presence in the world. However, in the mystical tradition *Shekhinah* is a feminine hypostasis, an independent emanation within the Godhead. In contemporary feminist circles *Shekhinah* is

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another name for God and a Goddess in her own right. *Shekhinah* exists in a multiplicity of forms. But the processes that led to the appropriation of *Shekhinah* for Jewish feminist contexts are less clear. This article will argue that the adoption of *Shekhinah* began as part of Second-Wave feminism's quest for useable theological images as an alternative to the allegedly masculinist/androcentric God of Jewish tradition. *Shekhinah* was one of the only images within the tradition sufficiently malleable to feminist contexts: *Shekhinah* is feminine, relational, immanent; she is the attribute of presence and therefore suffers with the Jewish people in exile. *Shekhinah* is a wellspring of feminine and feminist images; she is perhaps the singular theological image that is adaptable enough for a diverse range of feminist interpreters and audiences. *Shekhinah* is a classically Jewish image that permits pluralistic, subjective, and eisegetical interpretations of the divine. *Shekhinah* allows Jewish feminists of any denominational or alternative background to maintain some connection, however vague, to Jewishness and Judaism. The first section of the article will outline the history of *Shekhinah* imagery and how the 3,000 year-old Jewish tradition gave birth to a range of diverse iconography. The second section will examine how Second-Wave Jewish feminism's search for an alternative to traditional masculine images of the Holy One, blessed be He (*Ha-Kadosh baruch hu*) led to *Shekhinah*. And finally, the third section overviews the extent of *Shekhinah* theologies engendered by Jewish feminisms since the 1970s. The article concludes with a discussion of the allegedly limited prospects for normative models of Jewish feminist theology. Instead, *Shekhinah* will be seen as a binding agent for Jewish feminists from a diverse range of cultural, denominational, and social backgrounds. As we will see, *Shekhinah* has in fact become *normative* to Jewish feminist theology.

Shekhinah in Jewish Tradition

Shekhinah has existed in a variety of forms since the dawn of Jewish tradition. The origins of *Shekhinah* can be traced to the biblical 'cloud of the LORD' and 'glory' which would fill the First Temple and the Tabernacle (Exod. 40:34): 'the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory [*kavod*] of the LORD filled the tabernacle [*mishkan* – meaning "abode"/ "dwelling"]' (Patai, 1990: 96–97). But the actual word, *Shekhinah*, successor to the 'cloud' and 'glory', did not appear in the Hebrew Bible (Patai, 1990: 97, 105). In the Hellenistic period the immanence of God was explained through intermediaries, similar to how *Shekhinah* would be envisaged in rabbinic Judaism. These powers were a reflection of God, but not one in the same (Urbach, 1995: 39). An anthropomorphized version of Wisdom (*Hokhmah*), often considered a precursor to *Shekhinah* (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2011: 233), appeared in Prov. 1–9 and Job 28. In Prov. 8:22–27 Wisdom is 'the first of the created beings' (Scholem, 1991: 142), declaring: 'The LORD made me as the beginning of His way, the first of His works … When He established the heavens, I was there'. Gershom Scholem (1991: 142) suggested that Wisdom was a 'confidant' of God during Creation, although never an equal. Instead, Wisdom was 'stripped' of her divinity and was 'a denizen of the invisible world, but hardly an aspect of the one God'.

In the *Wisdom of Sirach*, written by ben Sira in the second century BCE, Wisdom is personified as 'bride', 'mother', and 'teacher', although Wisdom does not possess directly feminine characteristics. In the *Sirach*, Wisdom 'came forth from … Most High,

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and covered the earth like a mist' (24:3). Comparably, in the apocryphal *Book of Baruch* (3:37–4:1), attributed to Jeremiah's scribe who claims to be writing during the sixth century (BCE) Babylonian exile (despite the text using the *Sirach*), Wisdom lives with 'humankind', not as a hypostasis but as the 'book of commandments of God' (Camp, 2001: 551–52). Yet in the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon* the relationship between God and Wisdom is 'conjugal' (Scholem, 1991: 143). The *Wisdom of Solomon* was probably written by a Hellenic Jew in first century (BCE) Alexandria, though is attributed by the author to Solomon. In the text, Solomon begins a relationship with 'female' Wisdom who is a 'pure emanation' of God's 'glory'. Wisdom is 'lover' and 'throne partner' to Solomon and God (Camp, 2001: 551), although it is difficult to decipher the extent of these relationships (Schroer, 1995: 17–18), particularly given that Wisdom is also an 'image' for God (Camp, 2001: 551). Moreover, Gershom Scholem (1991: 141) argues that the 'feminine' gender of the nouns is not 'proof' that Wisdom is a feminine entity. For Scholem, only in the Philonic literature does Wisdom become a 'female form'. The Alexandrian Jewish philosopher, Philo, writing in the first century (CE), posited that: 'God is … the husband of wisdom' (*On the Cherubim*, 14.49). Philo refers to 'Mother Wisdom' who is simultaneously 'virgin bride' and 'mother'. However, as Wisdom becomes 'daughter' in Philo's *De Profugis* she is 'masculine; for she is the father who sows and breeds wisdom'. The interchangeable nature of the masculine/feminine aspects of Wisdom will be significant in later Kabbalistic interpretations of *Shekhinah* (Scholem, 1991: 144), but the potential for Wisdom to be a 'female deity' was not realized (Long, 1992: 78). Rabbinic Judaism following the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) instead relied on biblical images of God's presence: 'dwelling', 'cloud', and 'glory'. These metaphors would come to represent *Shekhinah*,[1] a near tangible manifestation of the divine accompanying the Israelites from Sinai to present; not yet a feminine hypostasis, but the relational/experiential elements vital to Jewish feminism's appropriation of *Shekhinah* were about to take shape.

From the first century (CE) onwards *Shekhinah* became a way of referring to God's presence. In *Targum Onkelos*, the Babylonian version of the Torah written by a first-century convert to Judaism, the author inserts 'Shekhina' into sentences that refer to God's immanence. For example, Exod. 25:8, 'And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them', becomes 'Let them make before Me a Sanctuary that I may let My Shekhina dwell among them', But despite the word *Shekhinah* being feminine in gender, the sex was not significant (Patai, 1990: 98–99, 313). However, in the *Targum Jonathan*, a Jerusalem translation of the Torah, a possible distinction is made between God and *Shekhinah*. In the sentence, 'The Lord, your God, and His Shekhinah go before you', it is implied that *Shekhinah* is separate from God. Similarly, in a later sentence: 'For the Lord, your God, His Shekhinah leads before you' (Schäfer, 2002: 100). These hints at potential separation would become more pronounced in the *Midrashic* literature, but for the time being *Shekhinah* was a synonym for God in the earthly realm.

1. Precursors to *Shekhinah* exist in 'Rachel weeping for her children' (Jer. 31:14); the representation of Zion as a 'maternal figure', such as in Isa. 66:8; and in 'Mother Zion' (Scholem, 1991: 144–45).

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The rabbis did not set out their theology systematically because there was nothing to debate: God is assumed, one, unique, and has no equals (de Lange, 1987: 108–109). However, the rabbis still had to explain how an aloof, transcendent, and unknowable being could relate to the Jewish people. Hence, when the rabbis referred to God's presence they were cautious, like the biblical sages, to differentiate between those elements of God that are visible and the 'mystery' that is incomprehensible. David Ariel (2000: 96) suggests that the rabbis created an 'abyss' between God and humanity that was only bridgeable through *Shekhinah*. By contrast to the radical separation of the individual and the transcendent, *Shekhinah* occupied a void that the indecipherable Yahweh could not fill (Scholem, 1991: 148). Accordingly, in retrospect, the rabbis assumed *Shekhinah* was present in the wilderness (Sotah 13a),[2] at Sinai (Sukkah 5a), and in the Babylonian exile (Megillah 29a). For the rabbis, *Shekhinah* was a tangible presence that could ring 'like a bell' in the ears (Sotah 9b), appear to religionists (Sotah 12b), 'righteous men' (Sukkah 45b), and inhabit 'every' and 'all' places (Baba Bathra 25a). The rabbis describe *Shekhinah* in anthropomorphic terms: *Shekhinah* can talk (Pesachim 87b), possesses metaphorical 'feet' (Kiddushin 31a), a 'face' (Sanhedrin 103a), and attends exilic synagogues listening for 'words of Torah' (Avoth 3). *Shekhinah* would visit the 'wise' (Shabbath 92a), enjoying 'rejoicing connected with a religious act' (Pesachim 117a), ritual purity (Yevamoth 46b), prayer (Sanhedrin 22a), and the *minyan* – prayer quorum (Sanhedrin 39a). However, these images were not intended to be literal; *Shekhinah* was also 'cloud' and 'pillar of fire' (Schäfer, 2002: 91). In sum, *Shekhinah* was a source of optimism for diasporic Jews reminding that the divine was continually present. Indeed, the 'wings' of *Shekhinah* were a symbol of protection (Yevamoth 48b), as was the 'camp of the Shechinah' (Pesachim 68a). In the Talmud *Shekhinah* is used in conjunction with or as a substitute for Yahweh to overcome unnecessary anthropomorphisms. *Shekhinah* explained the 'historical problem' of God's presence in the world (Urbach, 1995: 44–47, 54–55, 63; Moore, 1922: 58). Indeed, *Shekhinah* was a means of distinguishing between God's existence in 'heaven' and immanence in the earthly sphere (Schäfer, 2002: 89). Understandably, Jewish feminists have been drawn to *Shekhinah*'s immanent presence, but there has been less interest in the rabbinic use of *Shekhinah* as a synonym for the 'masculine' Holy One, blessed be He. However, in the *Midrashic* literature *Shekhinah* would become an independent entity, not yet distinctly feminine (Green, 2002: 17), but a step closer to the Kabbalistic image of a female hypostasis.

According to Raphael Patai (1990: 105), as early as the fourth century, Rabbi Aha, an *Amora*, differentiated between God and *Shekhinah*. For Patai, the rabbis used the terms 'Holy Spirit' and 'Shekhina' interchangeably. Therefore, when Aha stated: 'The Holy Spirit comes to the defence [of sinful Israel by] saying first to Israel: "Be not a witness against thy neighbour without a cause," and thereafter saying to God: "Say not: I will do to him as he hath done to me,"' he was referring to *Shekhinah*. The text suggests that the Holy Spirit is an independent manifestation, though Patai's use of 'She' to describe *Shekhinah* is less convincing. Similarly, in *Lamentations Rabbah* (seventh century) it is stated that 'Shekhinah … turned around and embraced and kissed the walls and columns of the Temple'. The implication is that *Shekhinah* exhibited feminine characteristics, but

2. Talmudic references are taken from Epstein (1936).

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as Gershom Scholem points out: 'there is no personification of a female figure … Not once does this older literature ever really liken the *Shekhinah* to a woman' (1991: 150; 2011: 7). Later potential distinctions between God and *Shekhinah* came in the ninth century, in *Pesiqta Rabbati* 29: 'As it were, there is weeping for me [Holy One, blessed be He] because I have deserted my Shekhinah'. Similarly, in *Midrash Tehillim* 8.2 (eleventh century): 'Upon your life, the Shekhinah, she is with me'. These texts may have been corrupted; nonetheless, Peter Schäfer suggests it is not 'inconceivable' that *Shekhinah* became 'independent' of God in the late *Midrashim* (Schäfer, 2002: 97–98). Indeed, in *Midrash Proverbs* (eleventh century) *Shekhinah* seems to be autonomous:

> When the Sanhedrin wished to designate him [King Solomon] along with three kings and four private individuals [as ones who have no share in the World to Come], the *Shekhinah* stood before the Holy One, blessed be He, and spoke to Him: "Lord of the Worlds! 'Seest thou a man diligent in his business?' [Prov. 22:29] – they wish to count him [Solomon] among the darklings [i.e., those to be damned]". At that moment a heavenly voice went out and said, "'He shall stand before kings' [ibid.] – and he shall not stand before darklings" (Scholem, 1991: 152).

For Scholem (1991: 152) this is the first instance of a distinction between *Shekhinah* and God. Equally, in *Bereshit Rabbati* (again, eleventh century) Moshe ha-Darshan states that: 'He [the Holy One, blessed be He] removed Himself and His Shekhina from their midst and ascended into the heights' (Patai, 1990: 106). These instances evidence the burgeoning of *Shekhinah* as an independent manifestation of the divine, although the feminine elements of later mystical literature are missing.

The medieval poet Judah Halevi, in his *Kuzari* (c. 1140), makes a similar distinction between *Shekhinah* and God. Halevi lists 'intermediaries' as means of comprehending the divine; these include: 'Glory (*Kavod*), … dominion (*malkhut*), fire, cloud, image/likeness (*tzelem*), image/form (*temunah*)'. Each of these terms is associated with *Shekhinah*. Likewise, the philosopher Maimonides, in his *Guide of the Perplexed* (twelfth century), differentiates between God and *Shekhinah*. Maimonides praises the *Targum Onkelos* for not describing God in corporeal terms by substituting 'throne' for *kavod* (glory), meaning *Shekhinah*: 'For should the term "throne" have … referred to God … He would have been conceived of sitting upon an [sic] body … Accordingly … [Onkelos] referred the term "throne" to "His Glory," I mean to the Shekhinah' (Schäfer , 2002: 110, 115). In a comparable statement Maimonides assumes that *Shekhinah* is not 'identical with God': 'He [the targumic translator, Onqelos] does the same thing with regard to the dictum of scripture: "And the Lord passed by before his face" … which he translates: "The Lord caused His Shekhinah to pass before his face."' These texts testify to a tradition established in the twelfth century (that would flourish in the Kabbalah) of imaging *Shekhinah* as an entity distinct from God (Schäfer, 2002: 114–15). In the following century *Shekhinah* would take on the recognizably feminine characteristics currently popular with Jewish feminists (see Tirosh-Samuelson, 2011).

The Kabbalists distinguished between the indecipherable *Ein Sof* and the unknowable's manifestation through the ten *Sefirot* ('emanations'). Each of the *Sefirot* are hypostases symbolizing different elements of God (Scholem, 1991: 160). In the Kabbalistic texts *Shekhinah* is often referred to as *Matronit* (Matron); she is the 'intermediary' between

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Ein Sof and the Jewish people. As the tenth *Sefirah, Shekhinah* is undoubtedly female – 'daughter', 'bride', and 'mother' (Scholem, 1991: 159–60). The *Bahir*, a fragmentary early Kabbalistic text attributed to first century *Tanna* Nehunya ben HaKanah (though probably compiled in the thirteenth century), contrasts the feminine characteristics of *Shekhinah* with the other *Sefirot*: 'This is compared to a king who wished to plant nine male trees in his garden, all of which were palm trees. He said: "If they are all of the same gender, they cannot survive." What did he do? He planted an *ethrog* [female] among them' (Scholem, 1991: 158–60, 169). There are two versions of *Shekhinah* within the *Sefirot*. The 'upper *Shekhinah*', represented by the third *Sefirah, Binah*, symbolizes 'creative power' and 'birth'. *Binah* inhabits the space leading to the lower seven *Sefirot* that are her product; she is resonant of 'supernal Wisdom or Sophia'. Correspondingly, the 'lower Shekhinah', the tenth *Sefirah* (*Malkhuth* meaning 'kingdom'), is at the 'edge' of worldly Creation. Both are mothers: the 'upper' of the emanations, the 'lower' of the earthly realm. The 'upper' *Shekhinah* is associated with the 'World to Come' and is generally referred to as 'king' in the *Zohar* (Scholem, 1991: 174–75), the classical elucidation of Kabbalah frequently attributed to the thirteenth century rabbi, Moses de Leon (though Orthodox Judaism attributes authorship to Simeon bar Yochai, a first century *Tanna*). The 'unity' of the divine emanations is dependent on the copulation of 'male and female'. The relationship between the 'upper' *Shekhinah* and the second *Sefirah*, the supernal father (*Hokhmah*), is not affected by human activity. Alternatively, 'lower *Shekhinah*' is 'passive'; as the tenth *Sefirah* and bottom rung of the emanations she is 'receptacle' to the 'downward flow'.[3] Indeed, 'lower' *Shekhinah* was expelled from the Garden of Eden along with Adam and Eve; she too is in exile. However, human activity – obeying the *mitzvot* and reading Torah – can bring about her restoration (Scholem, 1991: 174–76).

In the *Zohar* 'lower' *Shekhinah* is female 'partner' to the male figured as either *Tifereth*, the sixth emanation, or *Yesod*, the ninth emanation and centre for the higher *Sefirot* which represents the 'phallus'. *Tifereth* emanates through the phallus/*Yesod* as the only route to *Malkhuth*. The 'sacred marriage' is central to Kabbalah. In this process *Shekhinah* is understood through male symbology such as 'Adonai'. As Gershom Scholem notes, *Shekhinah* 'is not itself the force, but rather the means of transmitting the force'; she is 'purely receptive' (1991: 174–86; 1996: 107; Fishbane, 2009: 402; Schäfer, 2000: 221–42). Indeed, for Elliot Wolfson (1997a: 339; 1995: 105) *Shekhinah* 'is visualized as only part of … the corona of the penis' (Ostow, 1995: 310; Abrams, 2004); her menstrual fluid is a product of *Yesod*, the phallus (Biale, 2007: 92), her breasts are described in phallic terms, as 'towers', and her womb is the 'phallus' often personified as King David when it 'overflows' with 'the upper masculine divine potencies' (Wolfson, 1995: 102–103). Thus, 'lower' *Shekhinah* is the 'phallic crown' of Prov. 21:4: 'A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband' (Wolfson, 1997b: 291). But the masculine imagery, however offensive, need not diminish *Shekhinah*'s vital role. The 'lower' *Shekhinah* absorbs the emanations and channels them to earth; she is 'mediator' between God and humanity, the heavenly and corporeal worlds. According to Peter

3. The *Sefirot*: 1. *Keter*; 2. *Hokhmah*; 3. *Binah* ('upper' *Shekhinah*); 4. *Hesed*; 5. *Din*; 6. *Tifereth*; 7. *Netsah*; 8. *Hod*; 9. *Yesod*; 10. *Malkuth* ('lower' *Shekhinah*).

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Schäfer (2002: 126–28, 134), *Shekhinah* ‘is the most important and strongest of them [the *Sefirot*], because … Only through her does Israel have access to God’. These proto-feminist positives are however counter-balanced by extensive masculine imagery (Raphael, 1998: 213). Feminist theologians prepared to adapt *Shekhinah* imagery, as we will see, wrestle with these androcentric metaphors.

In the sixteenth century Safedian Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, the ‘Ari’ (‘lion’), ‘lower’ *Shekhinah* became Nukvah in the cosmic family. Luria reorganized the *Sefirot* into five *Partzufim* (‘countenances’), with the three higher *Sefirot* constituting Arich Anpin (*Keter*), Abba, the father (*Hokhmah*), and Imma, the mother (*Binah*). The six lower *Sefirot* were organized within Zeir Anpin, the son, and *Malkuth* again correlates to *Shekhinah*, the daughter (Patai, 1990: 115, 139). In Luria’s model *Ein Sof*’s ‘withdrawal’ produced the ‘empty space’ for Creation. The ‘powers’ that would become the *Sefirot* existed in ‘harmony’, but *Ein Sof*’s forcing ‘Din’ (‘stern judgment’, the ‘root of evil’ in the *Zohar*) into exile was ‘destructive’. The ‘divine light’ entered the ‘empty space’ creating Adam Kadmon, the ‘Primordial Man’, who comprised the *Sefirot*. But with the ‘Breaking of the Vessels’ protecting the *Sefirotic* light, the divine ‘sparks’ were scattered. *Ein Sof* responded by sending cosmic light through Adam Kadmon’s forehead, creating the *Partzufim*. The ‘couples’, Imma and Abba, Zeir and Nukvah, could once again copulate. However, Adam’s sin repeated the ‘Breaking of the Vessels’. Thus, Nukvah, like the Jewish people, is in exile from the Godhead (Armstrong, 1999: 314–19) and will only be restored when the sparks have been returned to their original source. Indeed, *tikkun* (‘repair’) is possible with Israel’s ‘good works’ (Scholem, 1973: 43; Idel, 1995: 178) which will stimulate *Shekhinah* who in turn arouses the ‘male’. No longer a ‘repository’, Luria’s concept of *mayin nukvin* (‘female waters’) allows *Shekhinah*, when aroused, to force the ‘lower waters’ up beyond *Yesod*; now, each of the *Partzufim* incorporates her flow (Scholem, 1991: 187–89; 1996: 114–16). Luria’s *Shekhinah* was the subject of numerous visions. Indeed, Rabbi Abraham Berukhim visualized *Shekhinah* at the Wailing Wall (Idel, 1988: 80); Rabbi Abraham Halevi witnessed ‘the figure of a woman’ and with ‘respect’ opted not to ‘record the garb in which he saw her’ (Scholem, 1991: 192); rabbis Hayyim Vital, Solomon ha-Levi Alkalbez, Joseph Caro, and the later Hasidic leader Levi Isaac all experienced *Shekhinah* as a ‘beautiful woman’ (Simon, 2010: 22; Idel, 2005b: 66). In the Lurianic tradition rituals are preceded by: ‘For the sake of the unification of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His Shekhinah’. But by the eighteenth century, following the failure of the Sabbatean movement, the denigration of Sabbatai Zevi’s messianic claims, and his embarrassing conversion to Islam, the Hasidim, heir to Luria’s doctrines, generally neglected to refer to *Shekhinah* as ‘mother’ (Scholem, 1991: 192–94). But it is easy to see why the Lurianic Kabbalah has been a wellspring for feminist imagery. In Luria’s conception *Shekhinah* is a ‘beautiful woman’, her sparks inhabit the earth, and she can penetrate the upper countenances. Moreover, *Shekhinah*’s exile, whether from Zeir or the Promised Land, will become indicative of the alienation of ‘women’ in contemporary Judaism.

To conclude the first section, we have seen that the Jewish tradition(s) generated a plethora of *Shekhinah* images. *Shekhinah* is sufficiently fluid to allow interpreters from a range of backgrounds to modify traditional imagery towards individual spiritual aspirations. In the Jewish tradition(s) *Shekhinah* is ‘daughter’, ‘bride’, ‘community of Israel’,

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'Night', 'earth', 'moon', 'sea', 'garden', 'shrine' (Scholem, 1996: 106; 1991: 176), 'female counterpart' to God, Rachel (Idel, 2005b: 107–108; 1998: 311), 'mother of Israel', 'virgin', wife of Jacob, Moses, and the divine; she is 'attracted' to religionists who observe the *mitzvot*, study the Law, and perform good works, and she is 'warlike' and punishes idolaters. Alternatively, Samael is determined to 'penetrate' and 'defile' *Shekhinah* (Patai, 1990: 140–45, 148); she is associated with the 'demonic' realm and the 'Tree of Death', mother of Naamah and Lilith; weakened by Israel's lack of 'good deeds' she is susceptible to the 'Other Side' and is 'dark' and 'destructive' (Scholem, 1991: 189–91; 1996: 107). However, what remains consistent is *Shekhinah*'s immanence, presence with Israel, and her exile. These qualities drew feminist theologians to *Shekhinah* as an alternative to biblical Yahweh.

Shekhinah as Alternative to Masculine Images of Deity

Second-Wave Jewish feminism which began in the early 1970s inspired change across the Conservative, Reconstructionist, Liberal, and Reform denominations in the United States, and found voice in the Renewal movement. The overriding aim of the liberal-academic elite that guided the movement was 'equality' in Jewish religious life (see Weiss-Rosmarin, 1970; Adler, 1971). The key issues were gender inequality in marriage and divorce, sexual discrimination in the synagogue, the *halakhic* restrictions on women's study and interpretation of the sacred texts, the sexism of the traditional liturgy, the all-male *minyan*, and women's limited access to communal and religious leadership (see Devine, 2011). Accordingly, the focus was on praxis – theology, on the back of the 1960s, secularism, and the post-Holocaust loss of faith in traditional God-language, was not considered vital (Raphael, 1998: 203–204; 2006: 206). Indeed, author Anita Diamant (2009: xii) lauded the achievements of Second-Wave feminism: 'It's over. We won … the Jewish people have been blessed with a new, vital chapter in our history … thanks to the work and wisdom of Jewish women'. But the necessary drive towards equality precluded the development of Jewish feminist theology. According to Judith Plaskow, the early efforts at theology were scarce: 'As it turned out … only Rachel Adler, Tamar Ross, Melissa Raphael, and I have published full-length Jewish feminist theologies' (Plaskow, 2009: 4, 8; 1991). Plaskow's initial question, 'Is feminist theology the expression of a new religion', was never actually answered (1979: 204). The assumption of religionists' individual contexts, personal and spiritual aspirations, and self-defined roles has taken precedence over the tradition, significant elements of which are considered irrelevant (Raphael, 2006: 205). Since the early 1990s, the essentializing assumptions of Second-Wave feminism, such as that 'all women' are 'oppressed vis-à-vis men', or that women are 'univocal' (Jelen, 2005: 195), have given way to subjective pluralism and liberal individualism that pervades theological discourse. For Anglo-Jewish theologian Melissa Raphael (2006: 198–201):

> The problem is … that Jewish feminist theology's origin in modern egalitarianism and the postmodern pluralization of truth, together with its focus upon the immediacies of women's experience …, has left women religio-intellectually marginalized, and experience of the heteronomous, nonordinary dimension of Jewish revelation has been all but precluded. …

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> Jewish feminists tend to neglect or dismiss the androcentric tradition as too inhospitable and too negligent of women's experience to be … termed as "useable" … All this, as well as postmodern Jewish thought's refusal of normativity, has together rendered Jewish feminist theology … an impossibility.

Any prescriptive theology is perhaps unrealistic, but this is not necessarily a bad thing, and does not mean that common denominators do not link Jewish feminist approaches to theology. As we will see, *Shekhinah* is one such denominator.

Early approaches were concerned with critiquing the masculinist underpinnings of traditional theology and the location of useable, proto-feminist, and egalitarian images within and beyond the sacred texts. The earliest analyses were rejectionist; traditional Judaism was considered 'androcentric' and 'inhospitable' (Raphael, 2006: 201; Wolf, 1998: 351). Equally, feminist theologians, the majority untrained in theology, were already limited by an unwillingness to engage with classical elements of theology and eschatology such as 'transcendence' (Adler, 1998: 89), '*kedushah* (holiness)', 'hierarchy', 'numinous otherness', messianic redemption, 'supernaturalism' (Raphael, 2006: 199–201, 205; Blumenthal, 1993: 23; Eisenstein, 1997: 81), and 'chosenness' (Ruttenberg, 2001: xxi; Plaskow, 1991: 96–107). It is hardly surprising that the earliest influences came from outside the Jewish community.

The Second-Wave was predicated on Simone de Beauvoir's (1949: 6; Plaskow, 1991: 2–3) groundbreaking thesis that: 'Woman … is nothing other than what man decides. … He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other'. The notion of 'woman' as 'Other' became central to understanding the androcentrism of the sacred texts. Similarly influential, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969) reinforced the assumption that 'Patriarchal religion could consolidate this position by the creation of a male God … constructing a theology whose basic postulates are male supremacist' (Millett, 2000: 28). Equally important, Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* (1985: 13) suggested that masculine God-language enforced societal gender inequalities: 'If God in "his" heaven is a father ruling "his" people, then it is … according to divine plan … that society be male-dominated'. Daly's supposition that 'father God' authorized 'patriarchy' was vital to explaining 'women's oppression' in the Jewish tradition (Plaskow, 1991: 126; Daly, 1979: 53–62). However, while Yahweh was 'patriarchal' an alternative existed in the ancient Goddesses. Catholic scholar Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983: 54–56) argued that the primeval Goddesses were a potential counterweight to masculine images of deity: 'From archaeological evidence we know that … Yahweh simply replaced Baal as the husband of the Goddess. Asherah, another form of the Canaanite Goddess, continued to be worshipped alongside Yahweh'. The burgeoning Goddess movement embraced precursors to Yahweh and the 'patriarchal' tradition. It was the influential 'post-Christian' feminist Carol Christ (1979: 275, 286) who claimed that the 'male God' maintained women's 'psychological dependence on men and male authority'. For Christ, the Goddess could reverse the 'denigration' of the 'female body, distrust of female will, and denial of … women's bonds and heritage'. Consequently, several Jewish feminist scholars embraced the Goddess. Indeed, for Naomi Goldenberg (1979: 4, 10; 1993) feminism was 'engaged in the slow execution of … Yahweh'. Equally, for Merlin Stone (1976: 6) the Goddess was an alternative to 'The lessons learned in the Garden of Eden' that

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'Woman was made for man', and that 'Only man was made in God's image'. And for Ellen Umansky (1989: 191), the Goddess was a potential resolution to the question of instituting a Jewish feminist theology. Umansky recommended the use 'of an existing Hebrew word that refers to the Divine (but not necessarily to the Hebrew God)' and its appropriation as a 'Goddess'. This was one of several solutions each with pitfalls. Umansky identified early on the conflict between the 'tradition' and 'personal experience' that hinders the development of any Jewish feminist theology. Umansky (1989: 193) consequently asks: 'when does a personally experienced image become Jewish'?

For the majority of Goddess feminists however the tradition's masculine theology was 'jettisoned', while social ties with the community remained (see Starhawk, 1979). The definitions of deity began to shift with individual religious identity (Raphael, 1998: 198–99) given that the alleged restrictions of mainstream congregations were no longer considered binding. Indeed, for the majority of Goddess feminists the use of alternative God-language is not an attack on monotheism (Plaskow, 1991: 146, 150; 2009: 4). By assimilating the Goddess feminists have created, according to Melissa Raphael (1998: 199–200), an 'eclectic, and non-systematic notion of Judaism'; in this way Goddess feminists 'customize' what they believe to be 'meaningful' in the tradition even as they continue to be accused of 'paganism'. Goddess feminists, for Raphael, exist in the 'fuzzy middle' between Goddess 'spirituality' and being 'Jewish' (1998: 199). Moreover, although Orthodox religionists are often unwilling to sanction the Goddess as 'Jewish', Goddess feminists are accepted within postmodern 'Humanistic, Polydox, and Open Judaisms' where 'belief' and 'ancestry' are not essential (1998: 201). The attraction of Goddess feminism, Raphael contends, can be found in its sanctification of the 'female numinous', the 'sacred power' embodied in 'women', and in the absence of 'law and custom', which can be 'hyperfocused' and 'repetitive'. Accordingly, Goddess feminists often reject 'systematized' or 'doctrinal' thealogies as the product of 'an intellectual feminist elite'; it is the 'plural' nature of Goddess spirituality that is empowering (1998: 203, 207, 212). It is thus unsurprising that Goddess feminists have established *Shekhinah* as an independent Goddess in her 'own right' (Raphael, 1998: 213). But for those feminists committed to traditional contexts, the Goddess is not acceptable. Early criticism came from Cynthia Ozick (1995: 121) who condemned Goddess imagery as a 'preposterous' affront to Jewish monotheism. For those feminists uncomfortable with pagan or polytheistic imagery, though unwilling to sacrifice their Jewish identities, the alternative was to salvage 'useable' material already present in the sacred texts.

Christian feminist theologian Phyllis Trible (1976: 217–18; 1978) set the tone, warning that by rejecting the Bible, 'women ironically accept male chauvinistic interpretations and thereby capitulate'. Instead, Trible advised that it was necessary to 'reread' Scripture and 'translate Biblical faith without sexism'. For Trible, ancient Israel rejected 'andromorphisms' and 'anthropomorphisms'. Indeed, in Hos. 11:9 the divine states 'for I am God, and not man, the Holy One in the midst of thee'. Trible (1976: 220) also pointed to feminine images of Yahweh 'as one whom his mother comforts' (Isa. 66:13) and 'Thou art He that took me out of my mother's womb' (Ps. 71:6). Specifically, Trible rejected assumptions about the patriarchal nature of Yahweh: 'Contrary to Kate Millett, the Biblical God is not on the side of patriarchy, and … does not "blame all this world's discomfort on the female"' (1976: 234). But the reluctance to work with classical

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theology was endemic to liberal feminists. Judith Plaskow (1991: 123, 140, 164) claims that the biblical tradition 'begins with unyielding maleness'; in particular, the image of *Shekhinah*, a mere 'subordinate' of God, can only be 'useable' if 'it is partly wrenched free from its original context, so that the tradition becomes a starting point for an imaginative process that … transforms it'. For Plaskow, *Shekhinah* is to be used with caution; its original meaning has to be modified, and theological imagery has to be based on a God who is not 'over us', but 'with us' – a 'partner in dialogue' (1999: 164).

Shekhinah therefore was a necessary compromise between the tradition and individual feminist aspirations. Indeed, while the rabbinic *Shekhinah* was 'subservient' to and a synonym for the masculine divine (Raphael, 1998: 211), the relational and experiential aspects continue to be appealing. Similarly, while the mystical *Shekhinah* was imaged in phallic terms, her exile, presence in the earthly realm, and potential redemption are comparable to contemporary gender inequalities and experience. Thus, *Shekhinah* became a 'useable' and pluralistic image; though to repeat Plaskow, providing she could be partially (or completely) removed from the original context(s). As Marcia Falk (1989: 129) suggests, no 'single' image can 'reflect us all'. Therefore, only a 'multiplicity of images' can reveal the 'diversity' of each religionist. However, Falk shares Plaskow's concerns; to present the 'male' God in 'feminizing' language is tantamount to 'transvestite masquerade' (see Falk, 1996; Janowitz and Wenig, 1979). Instead, Falk contends that anthropomorphisms require 'correction'; the use of metaphors such as 'rock of Israel', 'tree of life', and 'well source of life' are more inclusive (1989: 132–33). But for most feminists *Shekhinah* is acceptable because the negative connotations associated with the tradition(s) can be ignored, even to the extent of eisegesis. As Reform rabbi Elyse Goldstein (1998: 168–70) notes, *Shekhinah* is merely what 'male' scholars believed to be 'feminine'; she is 'receptive' and 'passive'. It is thus essential to remove *Shekhinah* from the original context. This approach is best understood, according to Goldstein, as 'symbiosis' – 'merging the old goddess imagery, the new ways of thinking about God, and the Kabbalistic notions of the Shekhinah with a rejection of stereotypical femininity; together with a staunch monotheism, [and] an engagement with Rabbinic theologies'. *Shekhinah*, in her current guise(s), is an amalgam of traditional and personal images; a fluid reflection of the individual feminist and their immediate spiritual context which is often 'private' and non-denominational (Zaidman, 1996: 54); anything more prescriptive is considered unnecessary. Furthermore, *Shekhinah* imagery is not necessarily about theology per se; *Shekhinah* is the focus of rituals, prayers, *midrash*, songs, poems, personal/group experiences, and discussions. In sum, *Shekhinah* iconography is diverse enough to appeal to multiple feminist perspectives.

Shekhinah as the God(dess) of Jewish Feminism

As we have seen, the location of exploitable imagery was central to the Second-Wave's refiguring of the masculine-defined Yahweh – *Shekhinah* imagery was, and continues to be, sufficiently flexible. In one of the earliest efforts to appropriate *Shekhinah* Arlene Agus (1976: 85) examined the historical association between the 'moon' and Jewish 'women'. For Agus, the connection began at Creation; the moon is symbolic of women, the feminine 'Community of Israel', and *Shekhinah*. The contemporary inequality of 'women',

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therefore, is related to God's vow that the moon will eventually equal the sun, and the promise that *Shekhinah* will receive divine light when the 'world is redeemed'. Agus:

> On the fourth day of Creation "God made the two great luminaries." According to the Talmud (Hullin 60a), the two stars were originally of equivalent size, prompting the moon to ask God, "Sovereign of the Universe, can two kings share a single crown?" He answered, "Go and make yourself smaller." "Sovereign of the Universe!" the moon cried, "Because I presented a proper claim, must I make myself smaller?" And God, realizing the justice of her plea, compensated for her diminution by promising that the moon would rule by night, … that in the future, he would intensify her light to equal that of the sun.

Agus (1976: 85–86) suggests that because of Eve's sin the size and light of the moon were reduced, forcing *Shekhinah* into exile. However, with *Shekhinah*'s redemption, 'women' will be restored. Agus bases this premise on the *Pirke DeRabbi Eliezer*, which is traditionally attributed to the *Tanna*, Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, though could have been an eighth century composition. Eliezer assumes that because the Israelite women refused to give up their jewelry for the Golden Calf, God promised that 'they are destined to be renewed like the New Moons'. Agus' blending of talmudic and mystical material with contemporary feminist aspirations to link *Shekhinah* to future redemption would become a benchmark.

Indeed, Goddess feminist Rita Gross (1979: 167; see Plaskow, 1991: 136), who originally practiced Judaism but turned to Tibetan Buddhism in 1977, argued that the emphasis on exile (*galut*) in the mystical tradition was comparable to the 'reality and pain of present existence'. According to Gross, it is vital to reunite the 'masculine and feminine' aspects of God in order that 'the female half of humanity' be 'returned from exile'. For Gross, *Shekhinah* imagery is about saying 'God-She' – imaging a 'bisexual androgynous' God using female metaphors. Traditional God-language, Gross suggests, is rooted in an 'androcentric model of humanity'. However, 'God-She' enables 'women' to enter the covenantal community; 'the Holy One, blessed be He' can then become 'the Holy One, blessed be She' (1979: 168–73). Gross contends that relevant imagery can be located in the Jewish mystical tradition and in 'Religious-symbol systems that have not been so wary of feminine imagery'; as a 'first step', Gross recommends the 'Goddess' as a counter to the stereotype of female 'weakness' expressed in 'patriarchal' and hierarchical contexts such as 'God and his *Shekhinah*' (1995: 241–46; see Pirani, 1991). The hierarchical connotations of the God-*Shekhinah* relationship and the divine-human relationship have been a source of alienation to liberal Jewish feminists. According to Judith Plaskow (1991: 132–33), God's 'dominance' and the 'hierarchical relationship' between men and women, 'Jewish' and 'pagan', 'regal' and 'poor', 'spirit' and 'flesh' are indicative of traditional Judaism; coupled with 'chosenness' and the distinction between 'Israel' and 'other peoples', these 'hierarchical dualisms', for Plaskow, contribute to a system predicated on an 'image of God as exalted one', with 'everything else' being of 'lesser reality and value'. Again, it is understandable that *Shekhinah* would need to be wrenched from her original 'hierarchical' context(s).

Arthur Green, formerly a Conservative rabbi and Dean of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and now active in the Jewish Renewal movement, argued that

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feminine images of deity could be located within the Jewish tradition, despite its inherent androcentrism (1995: 249): 'There is … a body of material to work with, and it is considerably greater than many would first assume'.[4] Green identified mystical *Shekhinah* as 'a dynamic, multifaceted, ever-flowing, separating and uniting, new kind of ten-in-one monotheistic deity' (1995: 255). For Green, *Shekhinah* is the focus of the 'divine and human search for wholeness', the 'bride of God within God, mother of the world and feminine side of the divine'. These qualities, Green suggests, can become useable metaphors given that 'The names of the *Shekhinah* change with the generations, as do the names of every other aspect, male and female of divinity' (1995: 255, 258). Similar to Agus and Gross, Green compares *Shekhinah* to contemporary gender inequalities; he encourages feminist interpreters to relativise the ways in which they refer to *Shekhinah* to enable a 'truly feminine, and truly Jewish, spirituality' (1995: 259). Green equally highlighted the experiential qualities of *Shekhinah*, the only element of the mystical Godhead that can be experienced by religionists. Indeed, for Green (1995: 255–57): '*Shekhinah* … is the only one we see, … *Shekhinah* is the God we know. Surely, that *Shekhinah* stands in relation to a transcendent deity'. Jewish feminists have since appropriated the Kabbalistic *Shekhinah* to their immediate contexts, even to the extent of eisegesis. The experiential/relational positives outweigh potential negatives, which can be ignored. Indeed, it is difficult to relativise *Shekhinah* to feminist contexts without removing the original meanings. If, as Green (2012: 179) states, it is vital to restore '*Shekhinah*, making her once again the perfect bride', it is only possible with modification. But even Green (2011: 145) has reservations; the problem is that 'experience' itself is venerated, potentially transforming *Shekhinah* into another 'Golden Calf'. However, this is a paradox given that the appeal of *Shekhinah* is her *presence* – the experiential element. The 'mystery' Green talks of is space for religionists to exercise their spiritual imagination. Indeed, Judith Plaskow (1991: 169) compares feminist theology to a search for 'presence': 'Jewish feminists, in seeking to name this God of our experience, search for images … that convey God's … presence'. *Shekhinah*, unpacked from her traditional context(s), is such an image.

Arthur Waskow (1995: 260–63, 266), a rabbi in the Renewal movement, examined 'usable' *Shekhinah* imagery in the Talmud. In particular, Waskow links Isa. 30:26, 'the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun', to Chullin 60b, the talmudic text that Arlene Agus connected to the 'future' redemption of 'women'. In Sanhedrin 42a Waskow notes a similar reference: 'The moon He ordered that she should renew herself as a crown of beauty for those whom He sustains from the womb, and who will, like it, be renewed in the future'. According to Waskow, these texts attest to a tradition that at Creation the sun and the moon were equal. Waskow expands on Agus' thesis claiming that the moon is a valid metaphor for Jewish 'women', *Shekhinah*, and *tikkun*. The patriarchs Jacob and Isaac had married into the family of Lavan, the name being associated with the moon. Indeed, Waskow argues that in order to bring about a 'feminist transformation of Judaism' it is necessary to 'develop that element of Jewish theology, already

4. There now exists a corpus of feminist Torah commentaries; see Antonelli (1995); Frankel (1996); Goldstein (1998; 2000); and Handelman (2006).

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present in Kabbalah … the "still small voice," the *Shekhinah*' (1995: 268). Waskow thus echoes Agus, Gross, and Green in the merging of rabbinic and Kabbalistic symbology.

Jewish Renewal is a recent non-denominational movement that encourages multiple metaphors for God. Renewal theologians use prophetic, mystical, and contemporary imagery. Religionists experience *Shekhinah* in their own way, though it is understood that, according to Chava Weissler (2005: 54–64, 68–69, 78), *Shekhinah*'s exile reflects 'the absence of women's voices and feminine spirituality from Judaism'; certainly, traditional hierarchical images of God as 'King', 'Father', and 'Lord' are considered 'offensive'. Alternatively, images of *Shekhinah* as 'Queen', 'Goddess', and 'mother' abound. In the first book-length feminist *Shekhinah*-theology, Lynn Gottlieb's *She Who Dwells Within* (1995: 20–22, 27–28), *Shekhinah* is described as 'Goddess', 'feminine divine', 'Mother', 'Moon', 'Grandmother', and 'Womb'. For Gottlieb, a Renewal rabbi, *Shekhinah* is based on ancient Canaanite and Sumerian Goddess traditions. Indeed, Gottlieb (1995: 37–38, 106) incorporates a range of Near Eastern and Native American material into *She Who Dwells Within; Shekhinah*'s lot is even compared to 'the story of Cinderella'. The use of external sources is standard in Renewal Judaism. Similarly, in her song 'The Ways of a Woman', Rabbi Hanna Tiferet (also affiliated with Reconstructionism) connects *Shekhinah* with the 'earth' and 'natural cycles':

> The ways of a woman a man cannot know,
> He does not understand
> The cycles, the seasons, the ebb and flow.
> The prayers of the earth are the secrets women know (Weissler, 2005: 69).

Likewise, for Rabbi Leah Novick (1989: 209–11) *Shekhinah* is 'The Jewish Goddess'; she is the product not of tradition, but of 'musicians, dancers, storytellers, and actresses, therapists and healers, who developed their insights first and then found themselves drawn towards … "Shechinah."' Novick argues that 'experiences' come from 'within' and precede 'study'; moreover, 'the role of women in creating and expressing their Shekhinah awareness, in their own words, makes it possible for women to project their visions and experience of Shekhinah' (2008: 9–10). Renewal images of *Shekhinah* have their origin in Kabbalah, but draw on a range of non-traditional and non-Jewish sources. Again, the individual interprets *Shekhinah* in their own way, where necessary merging traditional and contemporary material. But the use of Goddess iconography need not contradict Jewish monotheism.

Reform Rabbi Elyse Goldstein (1998: 169; 2009: 1–2) asks whether 'monotheism' in its classical form can 'offer a sense of self-validation and self-esteem to women'? For Goldstein, *Shekhinah* awakens the 'goddess-like aspects of YHVH' and incorporates 'new goddess symbols'. Thus, *Shekhinah* imagery develops 'personally relevant religious vocabulary, a vocabulary that has been lacking in traditional sources'. Accordingly, Goldstein's Goddess theology continues to be monotheistic though assumes there are many ways of describing God (Hammer, 2009: 32). In mainstream Judaisms reference to Goddesses is often considered an attack on monotheism; feminists are sometimes forced to choose between paganism and Judaism. However, the Goddess is acceptable in eco-feminist, alternative, Renewal, and some liberal Judaisms (see Laura, 2011; Diamond,

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1997, Waskow, 2000). According to Jill Hammer, scholarship demonstrating that the ancient Israelites worshipped Goddesses enables religionists to maintain their Jewish identities while revering the Goddess (2009: 22–23). These feminists label *Shekhinah* 'Goddess' and are untroubled by questions of polytheism. Hammer argues that 'Shekhinah is a revision of earlier Goddess images'; she is 'embodied' in Torah, 'Tree of Life', and heir to Asherah. Hammer suggests that theologians using 'feminine God language' will have difficulty avoiding 'terms associated with goddesses'. This is because 'Binah' and 'Shekhinah' are 'Jewish formulations' of earlier Goddess traditions (2009: 28, 31–32; 2007: 378). In this way, Goddess feminists retain their commitment to monotheism by accepting that God's 'oneness' need not be affected by using diverse theological metaphors. Hammer (2009: 31–32) calls these feminists 'transmonotheists': 'Jews who assert the oneness of God without being particularly disturbed by polytheism' (see also Kien, 2000). Similarly, poet Alicia Ostriker (2007: 28; 1997: 29, 253) envisages 'God-She of the mystics who is Shekhinah, wisdom, the God who is friend, companion, co-creator, the God who is both place and abyss, transcendent and immanent'. For Ostriker, these 'diverse images' still refer to the same deity although *Shekhinah* is heir to the 'Great Goddess' who existed 'prior to any male gods'. Likewise, Ryiah Lilith (2001: 105–107, 110), who identifies her rituals as 'Jewish Witchcraft', is untroubled by her association with paganism. Lilith defiantly claims: 'just because I am not a Reform Jew or a Conservative Jew, it doesn't mean that I'm not a Jew'. Lilith could not relate to the traditional *Shekhinah*, but discovered her origins in the ancient Goddesses. In this way, Goddess feminists define their own identities and relationship to Judaism beyond traditional ritual, which can be alienating. Lilith is attracted to Witchcraft because of the centrality of 'personal responsibility for one's own spiritual development and expression' (2001: 107). Goddess feminists authenticate their theology in archaeological and biblical research that suggests the early Israelites accepted the Goddesses (see Hadley, 2000); *Shekhinah* is often considered one in the same with Asherah.

According to Melissa Raphael (1998: 203–204), Jewish feminists who have turned to 'thealogy' have done so for many reasons: 'protest' against gender inequalities, the post-Holocaust 'collapse' of 'patriarchal' versions of theology, the possibility that 'challenging God … is Judaism at its best', and because of the 'anger' at God's silence 'in the face of human sufferings'. For Raphael (2003: 54–55), 'Jewish feminism has been asking "Who is God?" for several decades and … wants to name the God of their experience Shekhinah'. This is exactly what Raphael does in her feminist theology of the Holocaust, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*. Accordingly, *Shekhinah* was 'present' in the death camps, though she 'may have been so "ordinarily" present among women whose personhood was getting ever less perceptible that she was herself imperceptible'. In this example *Shekhinah*'s accompanying of the Jewish people into exile means that she too experiences their 'suffering'. This interpretation assumes 'God-She in Auschwitz, manifest as Shekhinah, could not be that imagined by patriarchal, androcentric post-Holocaust theology' (Raphael, 1999: 65). Raphael's (2003: 149) *Shekhinah* instead represents 'Women's divine image, obscured … by the sin of patriarchy, … engaged in a restorative struggle'. Like earlier feminist manifestations, Raphael merges rabbinic, mystical, and contemporary feminist principles; in the process *Shekhinah* continues to be a synonym for the divine, 'the real presence of a suffering God', and in geographic 'exile'. These are

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rabbinic projections, while '*tikkun*', restoration, *Shekhinah*'s 'maternal' nature, and her exile within the Godhead are Kabbalistic in origin (2003: 42, 54, 82, 156). Indeed, Raphael (2003: 5; 2006: 201) 'attempts to unify cosmic, historic, and domestic revelation' in a feminist 'revision' of *Shekhinah* that uniquely rejects 'theological complicity with evil'.

Similarly, Orthodox feminist Judith Antonelli merges historical, biblical, rabbinic, and Kabbalistic traditions in her *Feminist Commentary on the Torah* (1995: xxi–xxii) to refute 'the common feminist stereotype that Judaism is a "patriarchal religion."' Instead, Antonelli examines the biblical texts within the context of the ancient Near East to conclude that far from oppressing women, the Torah attempted to improve the status of women in comparison to other societies. For Antonelli, it is problematic to analyze early Israelite culture from a twentieth-century perspective. Antonelli's *Shekhinah* exists 'Whenever God is perceived through the physical senses' (1995: 167). Therefore, it was *Shekhinah* who led the Israelites out of Egypt; she was the burning bush, she presented the Law at Sinai, she accompanies the Jewish people in exile, and her beauty is reflected in all women (1995: 168). Like Melissa Raphael, Antonelli is content to refer to the biblical and rabbinic *Shekhinah*'s as 'she', despite the fact that these manifestations were not feminine (except in gender). This is retrospective license. Likewise, Orthodox Israeli feminist Tamar Ross (2004: 119, 216) argues that analysis of the Torah as 'patriarchal' is misleading. Instead, Ross suggests that a process of 'cumulative revelation' is vital to engaging with the tradition. This approach accepts that 'patriarchy' was necessary in the biblical period even if it now unacceptable. However, Ross accepts that 'feminine' theological imagery is a vital 'counterbalance' to the androcentrism of the tradition. Echoing her liberal contemporaries, Ross suggests Kabbalistic images of *Shekhinah* as an alternative to the 'supreme male deity' (2004: 129–30). Nonetheless, feminine God-language, the same as masculine God-language, can diminish God's transcendence (a welcome characteristic for liberal feminists); equally, describing a deity that supposedly transcends gender in anthropomorphic terms is contradictory. Another Orthodox feminist, Tova Hartman (2007: 70–72), suggests that 'any human naming diminishes God', though she does concede that 'depersonalizing' the divine removes the 'relational' elements of theology. Certainly, as an immanent presence *Shekhinah* relates to religionists in a way that the Holy One, blessed be He and non-anthropomorphic images cannot. This explains *Shekhinah*'s popularity: regardless of the interpreter's background *Shekhinah* is always relational, experiential, and comforting; she inhabits the earth and endures with humanity.

Conclusion: the Future of *Shekhinah*

As we have seen, *Shekhinah* is an empowering metaphor for Jewish feminists, though only if removed from her original contexts. But even for those who revere her, *Shekhinah*, a feminine image, can encourage essentialism, the propagation of stereotypes, and questions of 'duality' – the difference between 'feminine' *Shekhinah* and 'masculine' *Adonai* (Weissler, 2005: 64, 68–69, 72–73). Reconstructionism rejects the use of pagan Gods, the supernaturalist claims of the tradition, and its anthropomorphic images. Goddess inspired *Shekhinah* images, despite their popularity, are thus discouraged. Instead, Arthur Green, as we have seen, advises feminists to use *Shekhinah* imagery already present within the Jewish traditions (Zaidman, 1996: 53, 57–59; Green, 1986: 33–35). But

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Shekhinah's value as a relational and experiential hypostasis/Goddess is difficult to marginalize. As we have seen, Judith Plaskow (1991: 139–40, 197) is sceptical of *Shekhinah* theology but accepts that as 'an image of divine immanence … in non-hierarchical relation … Shekhinah … is precisely that aspect of God with which we can be in relation'. Accordingly, Rachel Adler's (1998: 100; see 1982: 60) claim that it might be difficult to 'extricate *Shekhinah* from the essentialist meanings with which it is endowed', and the late Tikva Frymer-Kensky's (1994: 50) assumption that *Shekhinah* contradicts God's unity, seem irrelevant. The same can be said of the late theologian Steven Schwarzschild (1990: 249–50), who argued that 'More literalist, hypostasized interpretations of *Shekhinah* … contain serious dangers to the austere, rigorous monotheism of Judaism'. These criticisms have no meaning when the majority of individual feminists, particularly those affiliated with Renewal, alternative, ecological, and even Reform Judaisms, and those who confine their religion to the private sphere, experience *Shekhinah* on their own terms (Zaidman, 1996: 54; Weissler, 2005: 68). As we have seen, even Conservative and Orthodox feminists use a range of historical, mystical, and contemporary sources to define *Shekhinah*.

Indeed, the future of *Shekhinah* imagery is bright. The assumptions of Judith Plaskow (2009: 3) and Melissa Raphael (2006: 201) about the preclusion of a prescriptive, 'normative', or 'systematic' theology are perhaps correct. But the question is: 'does it really matter'? As we have seen, Jewish feminists from diverse backgrounds have visualized *Shekhinah* from within their own socio-religious backgrounds. In fact, the appropriation of *Shekhinah*, despite the diversity of imagery and purpose, has in itself become 'normative'. *Shekhinah* is perhaps the only theological construal that binds Jewish feminists; she is an alternative, a synonym, a facet of, and a rival to the Holy One, blessed be He. *Shekhinah* is something that the Holy One, blessed be He can never be: experiential, relational, comforting, non-hierarchical, and continually present; when religionists suffer, she 'suffers' too (Raphael, 2003: 55). This is why *Shekhinah* continues to be a relevant, applicable image even with contemporary loss of faith in traditional Judaism. Accordingly, Jewish feminists such as Plaskow and Raphael might lament the absence of a 'systematic' Jewish feminist theology, but popular reverence for *Shekhinah* might yet be the closest thing to 'normative'; a commonality that unites religionists regardless of background. Perhaps we should 'open our eyes to the reality of the divine presence (Shekhinah)', as Elliot Cosgrove (2013: 65) suggests; *Shekhinah* might yet become (and possibly already is) Plaskow's (1991: 169) 'presence in [the] community'.

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