The Feminist Transformation of Judaism:
Mt. Airy as a "Living Laboratory"

Julie Rubin
Senior Paper
Department of Religion
Swarthmore College
May 5, 1992
Reader's Note:

The many women and men of Mt. Airy who generously granted me interviews did so based upon the understanding that I would share this paper with no one other than my two advisors, Rabbi Leila Gal Berner and Prof. Joy Charlton, and the members of the Swarthmore College Department of Religion. Please do not show this paper to, or discuss its contents with, anyone other than the above-mentioned parties.
Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank the many Jews of Mt. Airy who took the time away from their very busy lives to speak with me. These women and men, who exuded incredible dedication to and passion for their work with Judaim, have not only provided me with ample material for this paper but have inspired me.

I would also like to thank my advisors, Rabbi Leila Gal Berner from Congregation Beth Israel in Media, Pa., and Professor Joy Charlton of the Swarthmore Department of Sociology and Anthropology. Both women generously took on this very difficult and time-consuming commitment though neither was sociologist and Leila as a rabbi and long-time resident of Mt. Airy. Throughout this project, both women provided me with not only technical assistance but an endless supply of moral support.

I would also like to thank my housemates Wendy and Jim. Not only did they open their Mt. Airy home to me, but they also provided a constant and seemingly endless source of both practical suggestions and emotional support.

I would like to express my deep appreciation to Richard Riddel from the Philadelphia Free Library for the Blind. He and his staff of volunteer readers have, often on extremely short notice, provided me with numerous books and articles on tape. I thank them all for generously volunteering their eyes, voices, and time.

Finally, I would like to express gratitude to my own eyes. First, for holding up as well as they did during the course of this project. Second, and perhaps of greater importance, for failing as often as they did. For in doing so, they have facilitated my discovery that some of the more important things in life cannot be seen.
Introduction

The late 1960's marked the beginning of a backlash against secularizing trends of Western culture.¹ Sociologist Robert Bellah explains this turn toward religion saying "...few have found a life devoted to ‘personal ambition and consumerism’ satisfactory and most are seeking...to transcend the limitations of a self-centered life."² Historian Jacob Neusner writes that many young Jews were sold on the idea of Judaism having centrality in their lives. They wanted a Judaism which "...affected their lives more deeply and in more ways than the rather limited way of life offered by American Judaism, in search, once more, for values, rejecting what they deemed the superficial, nearly public Jewish activities of their parents."³ Neusner identifies among young Jews from all branches of Judaism a trend of "reversion," of becoming more religious than their parents. Neusner observes that this is a trend which had a few adherents in the late 1950's and early 1960's but gained much momentum in the late sixties, and has continued through the 1980's.⁴

This trend of reversion has been paralleled by a trend towards increased women's empowerment. Beginning in the late sixties, many aspects of traditional Judaism proved unacceptable to young Jewish women informed by a strong feminist consciousness. For many women, this made unquestioning acceptance of older Jewish forms impossible. Thus, the notion of being both feminist and Jewish seemed to be an oxymoron,⁵ requiring a woman to choose one aspect of her identity at the

⁴ ibid, p. 306
expense of the other. But there were, and still are, Jewish women who do not feel that they need to make this choice. Instead, Jewish feminist scholar Judith Plaskow explains "...Judaism will have to change -- we will have to work to change it -- to make a whole identity possible."7

What Plaskow is suggesting is a fundamental, feminist transformation of Judaism. A meaningful feminist transformation of Judaism, is not, however, something which can be achieved in the course of a few days or even years. It must take the form of an ongoing feminist "dialogue" with tradition that requires a long process of experimentation with and trial of both old and new forms.

In Mt. Airy, a neighborhood in northwest Philadelphia, a significant number of Jewish women are currently engaged in this "dialogue." Though this phenomenon is often referred to as the "Jewish 'community'of Mt. Airy," the title is somewhat misleading. If one is to understand "community" as defined by Robert Bellah, sociologist of contemporary American society, as "a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices ...that both define the community and are nurtured by it,"6 then the Mt. Airy phenomenon is by no means a simple or discrete "community." Instead, it encompasses a collection of overlapping and intertwining "communities" and thus may more accurately be termed a "configuration."8

Within this configuration, each woman is engaged in a feminist dialogue with Judaism which contains two distinct, though intertwining, strands. The first strand is the dialogue between the individual woman and the Jewish, religious tradition. The

---

6 Plaskow, p. ix
7 ibid, p.ii
8 Bellah, p.333
9 While the Jews of the Mt. Airy configuration are in "communities" with other Jews, they are simultaneously in "communities" with non-Jews, both white and black. Mt. Airy is a racially integrated neighborhood. Thus, the Mt. Airy Jewish configuration should not be viewed as a discrete and enclosed social organization.
second strand is the dialogue between the individual woman and the configuration of other Mt. Airy Jews, each engaged in her or his own personal dialogue with tradition.

Due to the presence of a large number of people actively engaged in experimentation, Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi, a long time participant, has labelled this configuration a "living laboratory." This metaphor suggests two very important aspects of this configuration. "Living" indicates that this engagement with tradition is occurring not merely in the theoretical realm but as a vital element of the lives of the participants. "Laboratory" indicates that the Judaism that these people are living is in no way codified or final. Instead, the unique environment is associated with three minyanim (singular-minyan, which in this context means a group of people who join together in prayer), one synagogue, the rabbinical college of the Reconstructionist movement, at least five women's groups which meet regularly, and several Jewish-based political organizations. This environment fosters the generation and development of a variety of diverse feminist ideas and practices ranging from the highly traditional to what some might consider, the completely unconventional.

In this project I interviewed ten Jewish women living in Mt. Airy. First, I will illustrate the variety of women's individual visions based upon their personal "dialogues" with Jewish tradition. Second, I will show how these personal visions are influenced by their interaction with other, sometimes very different, visions. Third, I will show how this dynamic collection of visions informs the creation of meaningful communal structures. Finally, I will discuss the potential significance of this "living laboratory" to contemporary Judaism outside of the Mt. Airy configuration.

I did not come to Mt. Airy as a disinterested academic merely inspired by

---

10 Personal communication with Rabbi Leila Gal Berner
intellectual curiosity. I, too, have begun a dialogue with Jewish religious tradition. I was motivated to undertake this project by my sense that living in this environment, surrounded by others who are not merely engaging in a similar process, but are doing so at levels far more advanced than my own, will act to facilitate my own process.
Methods

In order to gather material for this project, I adopted an ethnographic approach. In an attempt to better understand the way in which the women I interviewed each experienced Jewish life in Mt. Airy, I spent four months living and actively participating in the Mt. Airy configuration. I lived with a Jewish family which belongs to the above mentioned synagogue. Their house is located within walking distance from all three minyanim. I attempted to adapt my lifestyle to that of the women I was observing. Because many of them observe Shabbat—the weekly day of rest, I too made the time from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday distinct from the rest of my week. On Friday afternoons, I joined the swarm of people rushing to finish their Shabbat grocery shopping. I attended informal Friday night Shabbat services and dinners held in people’s homes. On Saturdays, I alternated attending morning Shabbat services at the various minyanim and the synagogue. I frequently accepted Shabbat lunch invitations from other daveners (those who pray). I often attended a Saturday afternoon study session focusing on the siddur (prayerbook) led by a member of one of the minyanim. In addition to Shabbat observances, I attended a Torah (Hebrew Bible) reading class held in the home of one of Mt Airy’s residents.

I also participated in a monthly women’s group celebrating Rosh Chodesh (a holiday marking the beginning of the Jewish month). I celebrated two Jewish holidays, Tu B’Shevat and Purim, with the members of one of the minyanim. Finally, I attended the annual organizational meetings of two of the minyanim.

In addition to the relatively informal observation/participation methods I used to gather information about the Mt. Airy configuration, I also conducted eight in-
depth, semi-structured interviews,¹ lasting from one to two hours, with key informants² in order to gain information both present and historical about the numerous community organizations. My key informants included founding and/or active members of the minyanim, synagogue, rabbinical college, and women’s groups. I also read much of the available written material produced by these organizations and Mt. Airy’s Jewish political organizations.

Finally, I interviewed ten Mt. Airy women who are actively engaged in a feminist dialogue with Judaism. I selected these women because they represent a wide range of attitudes toward both tradition and feminism. In hopes of representing this range, I chose women affiliated with all four prayer groups. Some of my informants are affiliated with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (hereafter referred to as “RRC”). Of the women I interviewed, three are ordained Reconstructionist rabbis, two are students at RRC and one is a faculty member there. My third concern was finding women who represented a variety of sexual orientations. While the majority of women I interviewed are heterosexuality, two of them are lesbians.

Given my various concerns, I based my choices first upon my own personal observations of women’s participation and leadership in both prayer and women’s groups. Second, I based my choices upon the helpful advice of the numerous Mt. Airy Jews with whom I discussed, both formally and informally, my project. Third and most important, I based my choices on the advice of my advisor, Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, who, I am convinced during her six year stay in the neighborhood, managed to meet every Jew in Mt. Airy!

When possible, I performed these interviews, which ranged in length from

one to four hours, in the women's homes. When this was impossible, I conducted the interviews over the telephone. At the beginning of each interview, I provided the informant with an outline of my prepared set of questions (see appendix), indicating where I wanted to place the bulk of our emphasis. Additionally, during the course of each interview, I formulated and asked numerous other questions in order to clarify or delve more deeply into my informant's responses. Furthermore, I often created hypotheses which I suggested to the informant. My hypotheses, informed sometimes by minimal information and reflection, were often the springboard from which the interviewee provided me with a better informed and better thought-out analysis of the given situation.

I tape-recorded each interview and took extensive hand-written notes. I later listened to and transcribed all of these interview tapes in outline form. Based on these outlines and notes, I tried to discern a framework or a general pattern for the copious data which proved to be highly complex and sometimes contradictory.

I soon came to realize that social settings do not easily lend themselves to elegant models. I wanted to create a format which would allow me to show each woman's feminist dialogue with Judaism in its entirety. I was soon overwhelmed by the task; Judaism speaks to each woman on numerous levels, but these levels are not the same for every woman. It was difficult to find a format which would account for the complexities in a comprehensive way. So I sat for hours on the floor, affixing and re-affixing strips of data onto large 18" by 24" newsprint sheets. When I finally found a format which seemed to work, I feverishly plugged in the data and began to type a draft which, upon re-reading, proved to be little more than an uninspiring "laundry list". This cold list did not do justice to the thoughtful, powerful and impassioned ways in which these women described the role of a reinterpreted Jewish tradition in their lives. I felt like a small child who was
fascinated by a gracefully floating piece of seaweed in the ocean yet who, upon trying to handle it, was left with little more than a handful of olive-drab mush.

After much anxiety-wrought contemplation, I realized that I was trying to create a product which my research could not support. I wanted to create a comprehensive account of feminist reinterpretations of Judaism in Mt. Airy. Yet my pool of informants was neither random, representative, nor statistically significant. Moreover, I had not conducted my interviews in a scientific way and I had not subjected my data to statistical analysis. I finally realized that I had no desire to represent the totality of what Jewish feminists are doing in Mt. Airy, for not only did I lack the data, I also lacked the interest. What had intrigued me for the four months I lived there was the wide variety of often contradictory forms which different women’s personal feminist dialogues with Judaism had taken. I had also been intrigued by the ways in which this diversity played itself out in community.

Therefore, I have chosen several issues, including personal theology, Torah, halachah, study and liturgy and will show the various ways in which women have re-molded these aspects of tradition to reflect their feminist sensibilities. I have also chosen to discuss how several women have dealt with the difficulties posed by difference of opinion in their respective prayer communities. Therefore, the limited scope of my project has required me to foreground some pieces of information at the expense of others.

In my final section, I offer an in-depth description of the many prayer groups, separate women’s groups and political organizations which the Jews of Mt. Airy have created. I also describe the organizations which connect these Jews with other progressive Jews both in this country and the rest of the world.

---

3 Jewish religious law based upon the commandments of the Torah as interpreted in the Mishnah and the Talmud, the legal codes of Judaism, codified between the first and sixth centuries C.E. Halachah provides the observant Jew with rules, regulations and guidelines for all aspects of his or her life.
Three Approaches of Contemporary Women to Jewish Religious Tradition

The woman engaged in a feminist transformation of Judaism is simultaneously drawn to and repelled by tradition. For her, the Jewish religious tradition contains elements which will enrich her life, while it at the same time contains elements which hinder full enrichment. In order to clarify both the attraction and the repulsion, I will discuss two other approaches to Judaism that reflect the positions at either extreme of the "dialogue." The first approach is that of the ba'alat teshuvah (Hebrew for "master of return"), who embraces the Jewish Orthodox tradition in its entirety. The second approach is that of the radical, feminist theologian who rejects the tradition in its entirety. I will then show some of the specific ways in which Jewish feminist theologians have worked to forge a balance between these extremes. I have done so in order to contextualize the work of the Jewish feminists of Mt. Airy, whom I will discuss in the next section.

Sociologist Debra Renee Kaufman has interviewed more than one-hundred ba'alot teshuvah. In her book, *Rachel's Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women*, Kaufman outlines both the problems of modern secular society and the attractions of Jewish Orthodoxy which have led these women to become ba'alot teshuvah.

Many ba'alot teshuvah explained that life in secular society had left them hopelessly isolated. Sociologist Robert Bellah discusses this isolation by using the words of French social commentator Alexis de Tocqueville who wrote that among Americans, "Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart." For the ba'alah teshuvah, Orthodox Judaism offers an antidote for this type of isolation. Emphasis is placed not

---

2 Alexis de Tocqueville quoted in Robert N. Bellah *Habits of the Heart*, p.37
on the individual, but rather on both community and family. In times of need, an Orthodox Jew need not suffer, but can depend on the charity (tzadakah) of other community members. Social scientist Judith Stacey describes the phenomenon of "patriarchal pro-familialism" within the family, according to which the man is expected to support the woman in her role as mother, placing her well-being and that of their children above his own personal success. In fact, several of the women interviewed explain that they and their husbands choose flexible jobs so that they can spend a maximum amount of time with the family.

But success for many Orthodox Jews is understood in a radically different way than for members of the mainstream secular world. While for the latter, achievements in the workplace primarily define success, a satisfying family life is the primary indicator of success in the world of Orthodox Judaism.

Several of Kaufman's informants explained that material success is meaningless compared to living a life of mitzvot. The mitzvot are the 613 commandments (collectively known as the halachah) that prescribe every aspect of the Orthodox Jew's behavior from something as mundane as eating to something as profound as prayer. This comprehensive system provides the ba'alah teshuvah with the meaningful formula for living her life which secular life cannot provide. Kaufman cites an article by Charles Y. Glock, who writes that the scientific world view adopted by most contemporary Americans offers no clear formula for living one's life in a meaningful or purposeful way. This has led to what he describes as "crisis in

---

3 Kaufman, pp.8-10
4 ibid., p.155
5 ibid., p.89
6 ibid., p.90
7 ibid., p.92
8 ibid., p.90
9 ibid., pp. 37-42
10 ibid., p.156
meaning."11 But what may seem meaningless to the non-devout, takes on great importance for the Orthodox Jew, since each mitzvah is ordained by God. A life governed by halachah is always spiritual and holy.12

Even time takes on spiritual significance. Halachah requires the recognition of life's natural cycles. The year is divided by the holidays and the work week by Shabbat.13 The month is divided according to the woman's menstrual cycle. The laws of Niddah require her to visit a mikveh (ritual bath) for immersion each month.14

The laws of Niddah, also require a twelve-day period of separation of husband and wife during the menstrual cycle.15 Many ba'alot teshuvah cherish these laws for the private time it affords them. One ba'alat teshuvah explains that the laws of Niddah give her a "bed of her own" analogous to Virginia Woolf's "Room of one's own."16

This part-time separation of husband from wife within the home is mirrored by a full-time separation of men from women within the greater community. While from a contemporary, secular perspective, this separation might be viewed as the exclusion of women from the more important male realm, it is perceived by ba'alot teshuvah as being the source of great fulfillment.17 While in the secular world, many ba'alot teshuvah felt they were forced to adapt themselves to a system created by and for men, in the gender-segregated world of Orthodox Judaism these women can foster a supportive and nurturing community of with other women19 and can together build structures which facilitate and enrich their lives.20

---

11 ibid., p.155
12 ibid., pp. 37-41
13 ibid., p.90
14 ibid., p.71
15 ibid., p.75
16 ibid., p 75
17 ibid., p. 113
18 ibid., pp.113-16
19 ibid., pp.106-112
20 ibid., pp. 126-130
The existence of this uniquely female space is believed by many ba'alot teshuvah to be the source of not only fulfillment but much tangible power. Gender segregation fosters a powerful solidarity between women which can be used to make demands upon the greater community (the building of a new mikveh or school, for example), which a single individual might not otherwise be able to make. Many ba'alot teshuvah describe their power not just as a group within the community but as individuals within the home. Many Orthodox men completely defer to the decisions of their wives when it comes to matters of the household and family. This power is by no means insignificant given the reverent attitude toward the home that characterizes Orthodox Judaism. Many ba'alot teshuvah therefore feel that they can exert more power and control in the world of traditional Judaism than they ever could in the contemporary secular world.

Some women would argue, however, that the female power and community of meaning which the ba'alot teshuvah claim they have is hopelessly circumscribed by men, who have created the system. Women have no access to the texts which dictate their lives or to the institutions where these texts are interpreted by men. Women have not helped to create the system and are not in a position to change it. At best they can make due with the roles and space which men have carved out for them.

Though such women would agree that the contemporary secular world is highly problematic, they do not view Jewish Orthodoxy as the solution to these problems. They view that the Western religious traditions as patriarchal and misogynistic.

Israelite men created a male God in heaven, characterized by power and the need to

---

21 ibid., p.80
22 ibid., p.90
23 ibid., p.134
24 ibid.
25 ibid., pp.121-122
subjugate. Such a God legitimates male power on Earth. Women can only view themselves as created in God's image if they deny the gender-specific parts of themselves. With God as male, female power becomes an irreconcilable anamoly. A number of feminist theologians thus view Western religion as an "Uncle Tom" theology for women.

Many Jewish feminists have abandoned efforts to work within Jewish tradition and have joined the ranks of radical, feminist theologians working to create a theology that can both speak to the experiences of women and legitimate their equality. To attain this goal, radical, feminist theologians believe that they must delve into very ancient history and tap religion's pre-patriarchal roots. Many turn to the ancient mother goddess traditions that were practiced in the ancient Near East. Such traditions, they contend, managed to survive and even flourish alongside Judaism and early Christianity until they were crushed under the Byzantine Empire in the 6th century C.E.

Though goddess religion could not flourish during the Middle Ages, some women did manage to keep the tradition alive in covens in Europe. Such women were often persecuted as witches. Radical, feminist theologians such as Starhawk believe that the witch tradition must be embraced, for it is the last remnant of women's strength and power.

But these theologians view neither goddess nor witch traditions as absolutely

---

28 Soelle, p. 93-4
29 Sheila Collins, "Reflections on the Meaning of Herstory", in Womanspirit, p.70
30 Merlin Stone, "When God was a Woman", in Womanspirit, p.130
31 Starhawk, "Witchcraft and Women's Culture", in Womanspirit, p.260
32 ibid., p.262
33 ibid., p. 260
authoritative. It is the role of the radical, feminist theologian to selectively glean from tradition those aspects which she views as powerful, important and relevant to her experience. And if she cannot find what she needs from ancient Near Eastern or European traditions, she is free to draw on any tradition which feels compelling to her, be it Mediterranean, pre-Christian European, native American, Hindu, or African. Thus, her sources are eclectic, and it is always within her power to be selective.

In this approach, what the radical, feminist theologian cannot find in one of the various traditions, she is free to invent from her own imagination and experience. These theologians believe that traditional experiences -- both in the form of skills women have cultivated for millenia and the bodily attributes with which they are naturally endowed -- must be uplifted and revalued. Though such skills and biological characteristics have been denigrated by modern, secular society, they must be revived and can serve to help form the basis of a new feminist theology.

The revaluing of traditional female experience is, however, not enough for these theologians, since these experiences have been shaped by male domination. They believe that women must also embrace the religious and secular experiences which have been denied them by thousands of years of patriarchal rule. Many radical, feminist theologians recognize the difficulty that women may have getting in touch with the experiences which are naturally their own. Since all modern women have been raised in a patriarchally defined system, their experiences and perceptions are strongly informed by men and male thought. In order for women to get in touch with their own experiences, many feminist theologians advocate the creation of uniquely

34 Collins, p.59, and Christ, p.276 both in Womanspirit
35 Starhawk, in Womanspirit
36 Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View", in Womanspirit, p.23
37 Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., Womanspirit, p.197
38 Ibid., p.8
39 Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Motherearth and the Megamachine", in Womanspirit, p.51
40 Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., Womanspirit, p.6
female contexts in which women can engage in group consciousness-raising. In such
groups, women can gain strength and solidarity by uncovering the experiences which
they share in common and which are uniquely female.

These theologians also recognize that there is no absolute uniformity in
women’s experience. Though all women share a similar biology and the experience
of alienation from it, women have related to these in different ways. Therefore, the
unfolding creation of a definition of “women’s experience” must be an ongoing
dialogical process that allows for difference.

While recognizing the importance of women’s experience to the creation of a
theology which speaks to women, other Jewish feminist theologians do not believe
that the Jewish tradition need completely be abandoned in order to create this religion.
Though they realize that Judaism has traditionally silenced women’s voices and
ignored the experiences of Jewish women, these women feel confident due to the
characteristics valued by the ba’alot teshuvah. Judaism is worth transforming.

Many Jewish, feminist theologians have worked with the tradition in ingenious
and creative ways. One technique, shared with Christian feminist theologians, is to
claim the power of interpretation which for millennia has resided in the hands of men.
Such feminist theologians believe that biblical stories need not be read as supportive
of female oppression. For example, according to the reinterpretation of the Creation
Myth offered by Phyllis Trible, Adam is not dominant over, but in fact more passive
than, the intelligent, curious, independent and active Eve.

Reinterpretation does, however, have its limitations. Not only have women been

---

41 Ibid., p. 6
42 Carol P. Christ, “Spiritual Quest and Women’s Experience” in Womanspirit, p.230
43 Ibid., p. 231
44 Ibid., p. 10
45 Phyllis Trible, “Eve and Adam: Genis 2-3 Reread,” in Womanspirit, p.74
46 Ibid., p. 79
excluded from the process of text interpretation, they have also been excluded from the process of determining which texts are to be considered authoritative. Perhaps there were once wonderful stories written by women, but even if this were the case, they have been lost to history.

It is therefore the job of Jewish, feminist theologians to write their own stories. Many have done this using biblical stories and rabbinic tradition as a springboard. Judith Plaskow does just this with her story “The Coming of Lilith.” According to the Midrash, (a collection of rabbinical commentaries and interpretations of biblical stories), Lilith was the first woman created by God, but was banished from the garden when she refused to be subservient to Adam. Through the ages, men have warned against the demonic figure Lilith who is said to harm women in childbirth. Plaskow has rewritten the Creation Myth, displacing Adam as hero. She has not, however, replaced Adam with a single woman who will dominate over him, as he has traditionally dominated over Eve and the Garden, but has instead created a new type of heroism -- that of solidarity between Lilith and Eve.47

Jewish feminist theologians have also created new prayers appropriate for women. Using traditional liturgy as a base, they have replaced all male God language with its female equivalent.48 In addition to female God language, these Jewish feminist theologians have infused traditional prayers with new female metaphors and images of the divine. For example, Janowitz and Wenig have replaced a male God image with that of a God “...whose womb covers the whole Earth.”49 Female God language and images are used not to imply that God is a woman, but in part to shock the listener and thus facilitate the breakdown of the notion of a male God.50 Janowitz and Wenig have also replaced entire sections of liturgy with sections

47 Judith Plaskow, “The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology” in Womanspirit, p.205
48 Naomi Janowitz and Maggie Wenig, “Sabbathi Prayers for Women” in Womanspirit, p. 176
49 ibid., p.176
50 Rita Gross, “Female God Language in a Jewish Context” in Womanspirit, p.168
which speak to their experience as women. In place of Moses' song they have created Miriam's song.51

In addition to the creation of feminist stories and prayers, there has also been considerable work done on the creation of feminist life cycle rituals. In traditional Judaism there is no female equivalent of the brit milah, the circumcision rite performed on the eighth day after a boy's birth to signify his entrance into the Covenant of the people of Israel.52 Along with many others, Judith Plaskow has created an analogous baby-naming ceremony for girls.53 She has infused the traditional brit milah ritual with stories of mothers named in the Bible, such as Hannah and Sarah as well as those left unnamed, conspicuous in their absence in numerous, long genealogies.54 In addition to creating new rituals, some Jewish feminist theologians have completely reworked traditional ones, infusing them with special meaning for women. Aviva Cantor has re-worked the Passover Seder55 which she believed was, in its traditional form, highly problematic for women. The source of this problem lies in the fact that although Passover is meant to celebrate liberation, even after the Exodus women remained in many ways enslaved to men.56 Cantor has created a Seder exclusively for women and replaced Jewish, male liberation from Egypt with various accounts of female liberation from different oppressors. These women include female ghetto fighters, Soviet women, female Zionist pioneers, and Jewish women everywhere who

51 Janowitz and Wenig, in Womanspirit , p.176
52 Judith Plaskow, "Bringing a Daughter into the Covenant" in Womanspirit , p.179
53 ibid., p.182
54 Since the mid-1970's, when the early feminist Jewish work on the creation of new life cycle rituals was done, such liturgical innovation has become much more common in feminist-conscious Jewish communities consisting of both women and men. Today, hundreds of feminist-oriented Jewish rituals exist for a variety of moments in the life cycle. -- Personal communication with Rabbi Leila Gal Bemer.
55 "Seder" is the Hebrew word for order, and refers to a special meal held during the Passover celebration.
56 Aviva Cantor, "A Jewish Woman's Haggadah", in Womanspirit , p.187
fight against the trend toward assimilation.  

Cantor found her Seder, though successful at glorifying female liberation, unsuccessful at fulfilling her need for resonance with the Passover tradition of her childhood. Part of the importance of the Passover tradition to many Jewish women is the gathering of family members of different ages and genders. In the absence of men and children, it did not truly feel like Passover to Cantor and other women. Cantor does, however, see her work as an important first step in the feminization of the Passover tradition. For her, the final goal is the creation of a Seder which includes a feminist perspective but can include the participation and address the needs of Jews of both genders and all ages.

Much of the innovation thus far mentioned reflects the work of very early Jewish feminist theologians. In the past twenty years, Jewish feminism has undergone considerable evolution. While much of early Jewish feminist work excluded men with, for example, the creation of purely female God-images, or Seders which speak exclusively to women's experience, more current Jewish feminist work has sought to include men and reflect their experiences as well. This development reflects the desire of Jewish feminist theologians to create a truly inclusive Judaism which will not merely benefit Jewish women, but Jewish men who have also suffered for millennia under a tradition developed with half of its people silently standing on the sidelines.

Though I have set up three distinct contemporary approaches to Jewish religious tradition, I would argue that the ba'alah teshuvah, the radical feminist theologian, and the Jewish feminist theologian have much in common. All have rejected elements of contemporary, secular society and all have embraced religion as a source of meaning in their lives. Although, they do not degree upon the authority of

57 ibid., p. 192  
58 ibid., p.188  
59 Cantor, in Womanspirit, p.192, and also see Soelle, p. 83
the Jewish religious tradition, each has embraced the religion best suited to her needs.

What is confusing, is that while the ba’alah teshuvah does not consider herself a feminist, the other two do. From the literature I have reviewed for this section and from my interviews with ten of Mt. Airy’s self-defined Jewish feminists, I have found that there are as many definitions of the word “feminist” as there are those defining it. Thus, the word “feminist” is simultaneously divisive and inclusive in problematic ways. It falsely divides women who hold a common value but do not agree on the “feminist” label. And it falsely unifies women who agree on the “feminist” label but hold conflicting values. As an example of the first case, both the ba’alah teshuvah and the radical feminist theologian view the creation of separate women’s space as an important aspect of their spirituality, yet they are divided because of a label. My interviews provided a rich source of the second case. Each of my interviewees defined herself as a “feminist,” but each had a different understanding of what that label said about her and the transformation of Judaism.

I therefore suggest that, for the sake of this paper, the word “feminist” (placed in quotation marks) should be understood to mean “personal feminist consciousness.” With this expression I suggest no specific agenda. Rather, I have chosen it to mean “each woman’s freedom to reject what she feels oppresses her and embrace what she feels empowers her.” Based on this definition, the women in all three categories, as well as all the women I interviewed, are “feminist.”

---

60 Thus, I will henceforth put the word “feminist in quotation marks (“feminist”) to mean “personal feminist consciousness.” When the word does not appear in quotation marks, I am referring to its more generic meaning.
A Variety of "Feminist" Visions of the Transformation of Judaism

Like the Jewish feminist theologians discussed in the previous section, the Jewish women of Mt. Airy attempt to bridge the gap between the extremes represented by the ba'atot teshuvah on the one hand, and the radical feminist theologians on the other. Though all the women I interviewed are actively pursuing the "feminist" transformation of Judaism, each is informed by her own, unique vision, a vision which is often quite different from, and sometimes contradictory to, the visions held by other women. Because these women are working to transform Judaism not in isolation, but as part of a community, these personal visions are sometimes enhanced and circumscribed by the personal visions of other Mt. Airy Jews.

Personal Theology

All the women felt it was necessary to reformulate the traditional image of God characterized by domination and stern judgment. Yet these women offered a diverse and often contradictory collection of ways to achieve a new image.

Priscilla,¹ raised in a "Conservadox" (Conservative, bordering on Orthodox) synagogue, felt that this new image can only emerge if we change the language that we use to describe God. She explained that both Adonai (the traditional way in which the name of God is uttered) and melech (translated as "king," one of the traditional ways in which God is described) imply a God whose salient characteristics are distance and domination. She explained that for her, God does not exist above or even outside of the Jewish people but rather permeates every aspect of their existence. In order to facilitate this imminent rather than transcendent image of God, Priscilla changed the language she used to describe God. In place of

¹ Knowing that I would be writing about them, several women felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts anonymously. Therefore, throughout this section I have used pseudonyms.
Adonai, she exhaled the sound “Yah,” which, she explained, describes what God is, the very breath inside of us. In place of melech, she said either ruach, which means “spirit,” or Chey Ha-Olamim, which means “life of the worlds.”

Jocelyn, an ordained Reconstructionist rabbi who has adopted a highly mystical approach, has reformulated her image of God not by changing the traditional God-language but rather by reinterpreting it. Jocelyn explained that while melech is often interpreted to mean “king” like “Louis XIV,” one must not get stuck in this very narrow and superficial understanding of the word, for the word melech was carefully crafted with layer upon layer of resonances. In order to perceive those resonances, she has engaged in a mystical interpretation of the word melech, which focuses on the interrelationship of its Hebrew letters mem, lamed, and chaf. The first letter, mem, stands for the Hebrew word for water, mayim. Mayim is like the maternal waters of creation, the source of all life. It is the water we carry in our blood and amniotic fluid. The second letter, lamed, stands for melamed which means “teacher”, “guide” or “channel”. And the final letter, chaf, is also the Hebrew word for “the palm of your hand,” which is open to receive. In light of this analysis, melech can be understood to represent the powerful life source that is channeled to the outstretched hand. When one replaces melech with words that are superficially less problematic, this powerful image of God becomes unattainable.

Torah

Virtually all of the women I spoke with expressed an appreciation for the richness of the Torah. Laura, the rabbi of a Reconstructionist congregation, likened the Torah to a fig tree (as is done in the Talmud) whose fruit does not ripen all at once. Instead, each fig ripens at a different time, ensuring the perpetual presence of edible fruit. She explained that the Torah, like the fig tree, always has something
new and ripe to offer her.

Lisa, also an ordained Reconstructionist rabbi, felt somewhat differently about the Torah. Were she to embellish upon the metaphor used by Laura, she might say that the men who have tended the tree through history have clandestinely plucked and hidden much of the tree's fruit, making it inaccessible to contemporary Jews, especially women. She felt that while the Torah has preserved the powerful voices of biblical men, it has been robbed of women's voices. In order to hear those voices, she searched beyond the authoritative text. She explained that she often found clues from the work of archeologists. For example, fertility goddess amulets have been found in archeological sites known to have been inhabited exclusively by Hebrews. Using this clue as a springboard, she and a group of like-minded women, created a prayer service which they hoped would approximate the rituals of their foremothers. The women removed their clothing and davened the traditional liturgy assuming the pose of the fertility goddess.

Jocelyn, mentioned above, explained that the voices of biblical women are not absent. Rather, they are severely muted. She explained that these voices can be heard if one carefully "listens between the lines." She likened her sensitivity to the hushed voices of her foremothers to her sensitivity to the crying of her newborn baby. She heard every sound he made while her husband, undisturbed, slept straight through the night.

Halachah

All of the women interviewed were aware of halachic laws, yet there was a wide range in the strictness with which women adhered to it. Leah, a woman raised in a Modern Orthodox home who is currently an RRC student, explained that when it
came to halachah, she started with the assumption that she would accept "the whole package." Since halachah was the "language of her upbringing," it was only through it that she could relate to the world. For example, she related to food as either kosher or non-kosher. Nonetheless, while she accepted all of the commandments as binding, Leah infused them with her own personal meaning. She explained how she had done this with both the commandments for a woman to cover her hair and attend the mikveh (ritual bath) monthly. Although as a child she never doubted that she would one day take on these commandments, she ended up doing so in an unconventional way, which actually made these practices more meaningful for her. While the commandments to cover the hair and visit the mikveh are incumbent only upon married women, Leah chose to fulfill these commandments at age 21 before she was married. She explained that since she experienced these practices as an important part of her spirituality, it made no sense that their fulfillment should in any way be linked to her relationship with a man. She explained that, as a young woman, it was very confusing to think about what these practices meant to her. Because they were connected to marriage, it seemed to her that these practices functioned to make the woman suitable for her husband. She embraced these commandments before marriage out of the strong sense that they had bearing on her relationship to God alone. She covered her hair out of deference to a Force greater than herself and visited the mikveh for monthly spiritual rebirth.

In contrast to Leah, Jocelyn, who was raised in a secular home, did not assume the acceptance of the "whole package." She explained that she struggled with the fact that through the millenia women have had a very limited role in the development of halachah. She did, however, have a deep reverence for a system developed by male visionaries. She explained that through the performance of each commandment, she became a spiritual being, for each act made her a vessel for
humility, wonder, and respect for the gifts of the world. Since halachah was not the “language” of her upbringing, she had a very different relationship to it. She was in a position to pick and choose what she would embrace and what she would reject. In explaining her method of picking and choosing, she offered her version of a conversation between Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, paraphrased as follows:

Buber: "You need to check out all of halachah, and then do what you like and throw out what you don't like."

Rosenzweig: "Wait a minute, not so quick, how can you know what will and won't have meaning for you for the rest of your life? What has meaning for someone at twenty is not the same as what has meaning for that person at forty. Sometimes there's a process of development, sometimes you need to live long enough to accrue the wisdom necessary to accurately pick and choose. Something which you dropped as meaningless in our youth may turn out to be the most precious gift of all."

Buber: "So does that mean that you do it all?"

Rosenzweig: "No, it doesn't mean that I do it all. But for the things I choose not to do, I say 'not yet'."

Study of traditional Jewish texts

All women were well versed in and showed an appreciation for traditional Jewish texts which have been passed down through the generations. All felt strongly that women should have access to the study of all Jewish texts, especially those such as the Talmud, from which women have historically been excluded. Carol explained that although her parents belonged to a Conservative synagogue, they lacked a passion for these great works. However, she was introduced to the joy of reading these texts.

---

2 Martin Buber was an Austrian Jewish philosopher, theologian, and Zionist thinker, 1878-1965
3 Franz Rosenzweig was a German, existentialist philosopher and theologian, 1886-1929.
by her rabbi, who “took her under his wing.” After Saturday morning Shabbat services she would go to his home for lunch and then spend the afternoon studying Torah. As she got older, she began to take after-school classes at the Jewish Theological Seminary (the rabbinical college of the Conservative branch of Judaism) in order to refine her skills of text interpretation. She continued to pursue her passion for studying the texts and each week she studied a different portion of the Talmud⁴ with another Mt. Airy Jew.

Edna, an ordained Reconstructionist rabbi and long-time educator of Jewish children, explained that while studying Jewish texts is important, it is an activity which has become centralized at the expense of other activities which have historically also been important to the Jewish people. While the men studied, the women were baking challah and sewing beautiful and intricate bridal trousseaus. She rhetorically asked, “In the Hebrew schools, why do we only teach children how to study. Why can’t we also teach them, how to bake challah in a wonderful way? Why is what our ancestors studied any more important than what they ate?”

Language of the service

Though all women were knowledgeable in the Hebrew language, they felt differently about the proper role of Hebrew in the liturgy. Priscilla explained that though she was fortunate enough to have been raised in a congregation which encouraged girls to learn Hebrew, many contemporary Jews, both male and female, lack Hebrew reading skills. Profoundly influenced by the feelings of exclusion she experienced when she left the fairly egalitarian synagogue of her youth, she explained that a “feminist” restructuring of Jewish practice must strive to include all

⁴ The Talmud was canonized in the sixth century C.E. and forms the basis for the halachic system. Although the rabbis generated two Talmuds, one in Jerusalem and one in Babylon, the Babylonian Talmud is more extensive and considered more authoritative.
Jews, regardless of gender or Jewish education. Therefore, she felt that all prayers must appear in English as well as Hebrew.

Hilda, currently an RRC student, explained that prayers written in English fail to express certain powerful spiritual concepts important to her. She explained that English has been informed by the very Christian and "male" notion of the body/spirit split. As a result, words in English dichotomize the two concepts. She felt that her spirituality was based upon her soul's connection to her body rather than transcendence over it. Hebrew, she explained, allows for the conceptual linking between body and spirit with words such as nefesh and ruach, each of which simultaneously connotes spirituality and physicality; they mean "soul/breath" and "spirit/breath," respectively.

Hilda was also fascinated with Hebrew words and their complex interconnections. She explained that English translations cannot begin to convey the richness and complexity of the original Hebrew text. As an example, she explained that zan, the Hebrew word meaning "giving food," has the same root as the word zona which means "harlot." There are often passages about eating which also have strong sexual connotations. Yet when these passages are translated, the double entendre goes completely unrecognized. She explained further that an alternate meaning of the word zona is "female innkeeper." She interpreted the double meaning of zona to indicate that due to their economic independence from men, biblical innkeepers were free from patriarchal control and, unlike other women, could freely decide their own sexuality. This radical, feminist interpretation is unattainable when the Hebrew text is translated.

The dialogue in community

From the variety of personal visions expressed by the women I spoke with, I
found it remarkable that there were so few clashes when they came together for communal worship. But just as each woman's personal dialogue with the tradition required give and take, so was it necessary for each individual to engage in a flexible and open-minded dialogue with other community members. Several women had been successful in reshaping communal practice to meet their own personal feminist visions. Edna, the lesbian mother of three children, explained that she and several of her friends were incensed by the fact that their prayer community (which at the time, despite its commitment to gender equality, was led predominantly by men) was insensitive to the needs of single mothers. So these women approached the group's leadership and demanded that the issues of childcare and affordability be seriously addressed. Since then, these concerns have been successfully dealt with in their community in the form of quality childcare at every community gathering and a sliding pay scale for all community events.

However, it is not only with men that some women had to confront differences. Based solely on the information offered in this section, it is clear that different self-defined feminists often held differing views. Leslie told the story of another woman who was angry and frustrated that, despite the minyan's stated commitment to gender equality, the weekly Torah discussions were consistently dominated by a few men. This woman suggested that the minyan adopt a policy of alternating the gender of those who wished to speak. Leslie explained that she and many other members were skeptical and unconvinced that a problem existed. However, the group agreed to try the suggestion, and discovered that the result was nothing less than a radical transformation of the Torah discussion. The men, who had once dominated discussion, were forced to keep quiet, yielding time to those who had been more reticent. Leslie explained that this policy heightened people's awareness of, and respect for, different styles of engaging in discussion. Some
prefered to speak off the top of their heads, while others preferred to take their time carefully formulating their responses. Furthermore, she said that this policy greatly improved the quality of the discussions, since more people were then contributing their ideas.

Madeline, raised in a secular Jewish home, told me that at her synagogue, there was considerable controversy over the issue of occasional separate women’s prayer. She attributed the controversy to two discrete problems. First, there was a profound fear on the part of several men that separate women’s activity would be unnecessarily divisive. Second, those on opposing sides in the issue lacked a “shared definition of ‘feminism.’ ” Several men took “feminism” to mean nothing more than women’s equal access to positions of leadership. Out of this controversy, several women decided to institute the “Feminist Scholar in Residence” program which had, for the three years of its existence, brought Jewish, feminist scholars to the synagogue for a weekend of services, talks and activities. Madeline explained that this program had been highly successful at raising awareness about issues of feminist transformation of Judaism.

While many women discussed the benefit of confronting problems and actively fighting for change, they also explained that compromises must be made for the sake of communal unity.

Laura, an ordained Reconstructionist rabbi raised in a Reform home, explained that many members of the synagogue where she often prayed did not share her desire to engage in feminist transformation of the traditional liturgy. She explained that because many of the other members were unfamiliar with the traditional liturgy, they were more concerned with becoming better acquainted with prayers than with scrutinizing them. When I asked why she did not attend one of the minyanim where many of the members were Jewish scholars, she explained that for
her, the liturgy was not the most important part of the service. The bonds of community which had been built between the members were far more important than the actual service.

Margalit, the mother of a thirteen-year-old daughter, explained that though she was far less traditional than the members of her minyan, she had no intention of switching. For the past ten years, she and her family had worked hard to build strong bonds of caring and friendship with the other members of their minyan. These bonds, she explained, were the most important part of any communal practice.
The Mt. Airy Jewish Configuration

What is exciting about Mt. Airy's wide variety of "feminist" visions, is that they do not merely remain the subject of personal pontification or even group discussion but instead inspire the formation of creative communal structures of meaning. Just as personal visions are dynamic, so are these communal structures. Let us trace the development of these communal structures from their origins in the early seventies.

The founding members of the first communal structures of the Mt. Airy Jewish configuration were strongly influenced by and active in the counter-culture movement of the late 1960's. They were among a group of young Jews whose activities have since been labelled (and continue to be labelled) the Havurah movement. Herb Levine, Chairperson of the National Havurah Committee, explains that in the late 1960's their was a "zeitgeist" of radicalism which led to the flowering of independent havurot -- small, non-hierarchical, egalitarian, prayer groups, in many parts of the United States¹. Many young rabbis and rabbinical students from the Jewish Theological Seminary (the rabbinical academy for the Conservative branch of American Judaism), were highly critical of what they viewed to be the overly bureaucratic, hierarchical, impersonal, even anti-human nature of US military-industrial complex. Many of these students felt that Jewish organizations and institutions were, like the US government, sorely in need of reform.

These young rabbis and students wished to transform the structure of prayer so that it would be less hierarchical, fully egalitarian and more personal. With these goals in mind, they eliminated the role the of the all-powerful congregational rabbi, sharing instead the responsibility for services, alternating leadership each week. In addition, all members were encouraged to participate regardless of who was...

¹ Personal communication with Herb Levine 2/27/92. All information on the Havurah movement is from Levine unless otherwise indicated.
leading. Women were encouraged to play the same roles as men. And a circular seating arrangement was set up to encourage intimacy.

In the last few years of the 1960's, counter-culture havurot formed in Boston (Havurat Shalom), Washington DC (Fabrengen), New York City and Chicago. In the early 1970's, the members of these independent havurot began to hold inter-city retreats at a place called Weiss farm, located in New Jersey. It was in 1974 that a group of young Jews from Mt. Airy attended a Weiss farm retreat and decided to form their own havurah.

Rachel Falkove and her husband Michael Masch were among the founding members of the havurah created in 1974. They had recently moved to Mt. Airy in part because it had a sizable population of intellectual and politically liberal Jews. But the couple found religious life at Mt. Airy's Conservative synagogue, the Germantown Jewish Centre, large, impersonal and less than satisfying.

After attending a retreat at Weiss farm, Rachel and Michael held a havurah-style Shabbat service in their living room to which they invited five other like-minded Jews. Since most of them were affiliated with the Germantown Jewish Centre and wished to remain so, the group asked the synagogue to grant them space for their small havurah. The synagogue agreed and the group began holding weekly services there. By the second week, there were fifteen daveners. And after three months, the group grew to forty people. Of the forty, most had been living in Mt. Airy before the formation of the havurah minyan, but some were friends whom Rachel

---

2 Personal communication with David Teutsch 3/11/92. Teutsch is currently Vice President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and Director of the college's Department of Contemporary Civilization.

3 Personal communication with Rachel Falkove 3/3/92. Falkove was one of the founders of the original Mt. Airy Havurah in 1974 and has been one of its active member in the 18 years since. All information on the history of the Mt. Airy Havurah minyan is attributable to Falkove unless otherwise indicated.

and Michael had encouraged to move to Mt. Airy from West Philadelphia.

Other than the three vital tenets of the havurah movement—commitment to a non-hierarchical structure, gender equality, and intimacy, the group had no systematic method for creating their services. As the group grew, it became more eclectic in nature, attracting more traditional as well as more experimental Jews. Soon after the formation of the havurah, Kathy and Dr. Arthur Green moved to Mt. Airy. Arthur, an ordained Conservative rabbi, professor of religion at the University of Pennsylvania, and one of the founding members of Havurat Shalom in Boston, was followed to the neighborhood by many of his students who had been living in West Philadelphia. The Green’s and Dr. Green’s students were all highly knowledgeable in, and committed to Jewish tradition.

Approximately one year later, Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi moved to Mt. Airy. He had also been a founding member of Havurat Shalom but was ideologically much more experimental than the Greens. Reb Zalman was ordained as a Lubavitcher Hasidic rabbi, received his doctorate from Hebrew Union College (the rabbinical college of the Reform Movement) and had studied with Sufi masters, Buddhist teachers, native American elders, Catholic monks, and humanistic and transpersonal psychologists. Reb Zalman, like Arthur Green, was followed to Mt. Airy by many of his students. Reb Zalman, deeply influenced by Hasidism, practiced and taught a brand of Judaism which was much more mystical in orientation than that of other early the havurah participants. The teachings of Reb Zalman, for the most part, attracted Jews who had less Jewish education than the earlier havurah participants.

By 1976, this eclectic davening community had grown to eighty people. It became difficult to know, let alone be intimate with, everyone in the group. Moreover,

---

5 "P’nai Or Religious Fellowship" pamphlet, p. 3
the range of Jewish knowledge and commitment to Jewish religious tradition became so wide, that the service lost any semblance of consistency from week to week. If one of the more traditionally minded members led, there might be a full, traditional service with a great deal of Hebrew. If Reb Zalman or one of his followers led, there might be a service which included a physical warm-up and a guided meditation. Soon the radically different styles of the members began to clash.

In 1980, the tensions become so strong that the group splintered into several factions. First, the more traditional members split off to form their own separate minyan, also housed in the Germantown Jewish Centre. Soon after, Reb Zalman began to hold services in his home every Friday night and one Saturday morning each month. Then eight of the remaining couples formed a private home minyan. And there still existed a minyan of those who chose not to align with any of the splinter groups.

In the next few years, the traditional minyan grew as did Reb Zalman's group. The original minyan remained relatively constant. And the home minyan disbanded, its members either settling at one of the three minyanim or floating with dissatisfaction between the three.

In the early 1980's, a new wave of progressive Jews became involved with the havurah activity in Mt. Airy. When the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) moved to Wyncote (a fifteen minute drive from Mt. Airy) in 1982, many young rabbinical students began to daven at the minyanim. The ideology of the college meshed well with the havurah activity already going on in Mt. Airy. The Reconstructionist movement, founded by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan in early part of the

---

6 Personal communication with Bob Zimmering 3/10/92. Bob Zimmering was one of the original members of the minyan created in 1974 and a founding member of the more traditional, splinter group created in 1980. He continues to be an active member of the more traditional minyan.

7 Personal communication with David Teutsch 3/11/92. All of the information on the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, unless otherwise indicated, is attributable to him.
twentieth century⁸, became the newest stream of American Judaism. Reconstructionism views Judaism as the evolving civilization of the Jewish people. As such, Judaism must be continually restructured in order to reflect the historical context in which its adherents find themselves⁹. Therefore, innovation, within the context of tradition, is the necessary and on-going process which allows Judaism to remain vital and satisfying¹⁰.

For the first thirteen years of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College's existence, this theoretical compatibility did not translate into concrete connections between RRC (then located on North Broad St. in Center City Philadeophia) and the Mt. Airy configuration. Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, president of RRC from its creation in 1968 until 1981, is described by Teutsch as a rational humanist who was more interested in Jewish culture than ritual and spiritual life. As a result, RRC did not encourage its students to think about or get involved with havurah activities. When in 1981, Ira Silverman became president, the emphasis of the college shifted. Silverman wanted to align with the havurah movement. For various reasons, the college moved to Wyncote, facilitating student participation in the minyan. The college began, and today still continues, to strongly encourage its rabbinical students to participate in the religious life of the Mt. Airy configuration. According to Teutsch, the college is also currently making efforts to facilitate and foster feminist re-working of Jewish religious tradition. To this end, it has created a Jewish Women's Studies Committee, consisting of students and faculty, whose aim it is to work to incorporate a "feminist" perspective into the RRC curriculum. The presence of a large number of rabbinical students, starting in 1982, added to the strength of all

⁴ RRC Catalogue 1990-1993, p. 3
"Ibid.
three minyanim, especially the floundering, original one.

Today, over ten years after the split, three minyanim still exist. All offer egalitarian, Saturday morning Sabbath services led by a different volunteer each week. Despite these basic similarities between the three minyanim, each is unique in terms of membership as well as structure, content and tone of prayer service.

The more traditional of the Germantown Jewish Centre minyanim is now called Minyan Masorti but is commonly referred to as the “Downstairs Minyan”, due to its location in the building. The services, which are conducted entirely in Hebrew, attract Jews who are, for the most part, highly knowledgeable in Jewish subjects. In fact two rabbis, three RRC faculty members (including Dr. Arthur Green who is now President of the RRC) and two RRC students regularly attend services there. Each week there are approximately fifty daveners. There are approximately twenty children under the age of thirteen affiliated with the Downstairs Minyan. They roam in and out of services, spending part of their time in the prayer room and part of their time at the childcare program which includes a one hour children’s service.

Prayer services are liturgically traditional. Although each member might lead somewhat differently, it is expected that the service will include the Shacharit (morning service), the full Torah reading, the Haftorah (prophetic) reading, and the Musaf (supplementary service). In terms of liturgical innovation, each week a different member delivers a d’var Torah - an interpretive talk on the weekly Torah portion in which the speaker is free to draw on a variety of written sources, both secular and sacred, as well as personal experience. Although the addition of the d’var Torah is a highly acceptable innovation, innovations which require the changing of actual liturgy are not acceptable at the Downstairs Minyan. For example, a leader would not change the God language of a Hebrew prayer to make

---

11 Personal communication with Bob Zimmering 3/10/92. All of the information on Minyan Masorti is attributable to Bob Zimmering unless otherwise indicated.
it gender inclusive. The only liturgical innovation which is acceptable, though not commonly used, is the inclusion of the names of the biblical matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah) alongside the names of the biblical patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob).

Although the structure and content of the service is highly traditional, the minyan is made up of members with widely varying theological orientations. One member believes that such varying theologies are possible because the service is structured to include large blocks of time during which members may pray independently. In addition to praying independently during the fairly long silent Amidah prayer, members may pray independently throughout the service, free from the expectation that all will keep the same pace as the leader.

The descendent of the original minyan, devastated by the split and revitalized with the influx of RRC students, is now called Dorshei Derech, (Hebrew for “seekers of the path”). Like the Downstairs Minyan, Dorshei Derech attracts a highly consistent group containing from fifty to seventy-five daveners each week. These people are for the most part also highly educated in Jewish subjects. Dorshei Derech attracts many members of the RRC faculty including David Teutsch. A large minority of the daveners, almost one-fourth, are student at RRC. This means that each year there is an influx of several new daveners. As is true of the Downstairs Minyan, there is a flow of children between the prayer room and childcare facilities.

Services at Dorshei Derech are also traditional, though somewhat less so than those of the Downstairs Minyan. Though both minyanim use the Silverman Conservative prayerbook, Dorshei Derech has more actively engaged in creative

---

12 Personal communication with Betsy Teutsch 3/9/92. Betsy Teutsch has been a highly active member of Dorshei Derech since 1986. All information in this section is attributable to her unless otherwise indicated.

13 David Teutsch estimates that twenty-two RRC students daven there on a regular, if not weekly, basis.

14 Personal communication with Rachel Falkove 3/3/92 and personal observation.
additions and replacements to the traditional liturgy. Like the Downstairs Minyan, Dorshei Derech has added the interpretive drar Torah as an integral part of the service. Unlike the Downstairs Minyan, however, they have also made a highly interactive and intellectual discussion following the d'var Torah an integral part of their weekly service. Another standard liturgical addition is the naming of the biblical matriarchs alongside the naming of the patriarchs. Less frequent, though not unheard of is the, insertion of female or gender neutral God language.

While an important element of Downstairs Minyan services is the fostering of independent prayer, an important element of Dorshei Derech services is the fostering of unity and interaction between members. The structure of the service has evolved to reflect this goal. In addition to the interactive Torah discussion, interconnectedness is fostered through the sharing of elements of daveners' private lives. Dorshei Derech has embellished upon the tradition of Mi-sheh-beyrach (prayer usually recited for healing) calling members to Torah to celebrate major life events. Although tradtionally only certain events are recognized, such as birth and marriage, at Dorshei Derech, the Mi-sheh-beyrach is expanded to include a wide variety of personal accomplishments as well as hardships. Members may, for example, ask for a Mi-sheh-beyrach of congratulations on a joyous occasion such as the beginning of a new job, the buying of a new home, a birthday, or for support during a difficult period wrought with a death or illness of a family member.

Though Dorshei Derech's service is the result of many creative expansions and innovations, the service is now quite stablized with a high degree of consistency from week to week. Though the content and tone of the Torah discussion may change, the basic elements remain fixed.

Unlike Dorshei Derech and the Downstairs Minyan, the third Mt. Airy minyan

---

15 Personal communication with Rachel Falkove 3/3/92.
is housed not at the Germantown Jewish Centre but at the Summit Presbyterian Church, five blocks away. P'nai Or, the Philadelphia affiliate of the P'nai Or Religious Fellowship, the descendent of the splinter group led by Reb Zalman, was denied space in the Germantown Jewish Centre because many members of the Conservative synagogue's Board felt that P'nai Or was too untraditional.

Unlike the other two groups who adhere rather strictly to the Silverman, Conservative prayer book, P'nai Or has its own prayerbook called Or Chadash, which draws from a variety of sources. In addition to traditional prayers, there are new prayers informed by less mainstream Jewish sources such as Hasidic prayer, kabbalistic philosophy, and the experience of Jews who have historically been marginalized such as women in general and lesbians in particular. There are also prayers from non-Jewish religious traditions, (Native American, for example) as well as several informed by secular traditions such as meditation, humanistic and transpersonal psychology. The eclectic nature of the prayerbook is reflective of the movement's goal to forge a new Judaism with relevance to a Jew's multi-faceted experience in the modern world.

As is evidenced by their prayer book, P'nai Or highly values inclusivity. There is a commitment to include those historically excluded by traditional Judaism, especially those who may lack any Jewish knowledge. Although many core members of P'nai Or are rabbis, rabbinical students and other Jewish scholars, the service contains much English and explanation in order to reach even the least

---

16 Personal communication with Rabbi Leila Bemer 10/8/91.
17 Personal communication with Phyllis Berman 2/16/92. Phyllis Berman is an active member of P'nai Or and was one of the 6 co-editors of Or Chadash.
18 P'nai Or Religious Fellowship pamphlet, p.3
19 Personal communication with Phyllis Berman 2/16/92.
20 P'nai Or Religious Fellowship pamphlet.
21Ibid.
22 Personal communication with Phyllis Berman 2/16/92.
learned. Inclusion also means that every part of the person, not just the intellect is incorporated into prayer. Thus the service always contains some type of physical movement as well as an opportunity to get in touch with and then share emotions.

Unlike Dorshei Derech where past innovations have become stabilized into a highly consistent service, at P'nai Or the innovation continues. The form of their prayerbook can be seen as a metaphor for their attitude toward liturgy. One member and participant in the creation of the prayerbook explains that the book is intentionally in the form of a loose leaf binder. Thus new prayers can always be added; the book is never seen as complete or final. Moreover, the weekly leader is not bound by any specific format and is free to pick and choose the prayers which he or she finds relevant. Not only does the service vary according to the intentions of the leader, but also those of the daveners. Throughout the service, daveners are given the opportunity to participate, sharing feelings and thoughts which they find relevant. The inconsistency of the service is intensified by the fact that, in sharp contrast to the two Germantown Jewish Center minyanim, there is very little consistency in who daven each week.

Mishkan Shalom, a Reconstructionist synagogue led by Rabbi Brian Walt, offers an alternative to the Mt. Airy, member led havurot. Though located in Havertown, Pennsylvania (approximately one-half hour drive from Mt. Airy), Mishkan Shalom attracts about one-third of its 171 member households from Mt. Airy. Mishkan Shalom is a place where these Jews can simultaneously fill their needs for

---

23 Personal communication with Merle Berman 3/13/92. Berman is a member of the P'nai Or steering committee.
24 pamphlet
25 Personal communication with Phyllis Berman 2/16/92 and personal observation.
26 Personal communication Merle Berman 3/13/92.
27 Personal communication with Phyllis Berman 2/16/92.
28 Personal communication with Merle Berman 3/13/92.
29 Personal communication with Judy Goldschmidt 3/17/92. Judy Goldschmidt is membership coordinator of Mishkan Shalom.
religious community and social action. It was, in fact, over the issue of the appropriate degree to which political activism is connected to religious observance that Rabbi Walt and several families split from Congregation Beth Israel in Media in 1987, and founded a new congregation - Mishkan Shalom. Those who formed Mishkan Shalom believe political activism and religious observance to be inextricably intertwined and thus view the synagogue as an appropriate context for both political debate and action. Inspired by the Torah's prescription that Jews should learn from their enslavement in the land of Egypt, Mishkan Shalom's members have a strong commitment to ameliorate the plight of the oppressed. This commitment translates into the aid of those who are poor and powerless both here in Philadelphia and as far away as Central America and the Middle East.

The members of Mishkan Shalom are also concerned with liberating the oppressed within their congregation. Like at P'nai Or, this commitment translates itself into an openness toward those Jews traditionally marginalized (women, lesbians, gays, unlearned, members of mixed marriages) Mishkan Shalom is strongly committed to not just accepting the marginalized into the traditional structure, but allowing them to reshape congregational life. Mishkan Shalom is committed to a feminist restructuring which means not just the inclusion of women in roles of leadership, but serious feminist liturgical reexamination. Much innovation has been inspired through their feminist Scholar-in-Residence program, now in its third year.

---

30 Personal communication with Rabbi Brian Walt 3/12/92. All information on Mishkan Shalom is attributable to Rabbi Walt unless otherwise indicated.
31 Personal communication with Christie Balka 3/16/92. Christie Balka is a member of Mishkan Shalom who was highly active in the writing of the synagogue's Statement of Principles.
33 Personal communication with Christie Balka 3/16/92.
As rabbi, Brian Walt takes ultimate responsibility for the planning and leading of services. Although he describes himself as liturgically quite conservative, he attempts to create a “prayer life which speaks to peoples’ souls and hearts”. At Mishkan Shalom this means interweaving political and feminist commentary (often in the form of midrash) as well as providing extensive explanations since many of Mishkan Shalom’s members are unfamiliar with the Hebrew language and traditional liturgy.

While attendance at Friday evening Shabbat services will vary depending on the program, Saturday morning Shabbat services usually draw a crowd of about 10-15 regular daveners. The number attending services increases significantly during the weeks when the Hebrew school meets on Saturday mornings. On these Saturdays, the regular daveners are joined by the parents of the eighty children currently in the Hebrew school. As evidenced by the very small percentage of members who regularly attend services, the focus of synagogue involvement is not, for the majority of members, the actual davening experience.

But unlike the minyanim, where involvement is really limited to the davening experience, Mishkan Shalom offers a wide variety of options for member involvement. In addition to the social action and the feminist Scholar-in-Residence committees, there are committees which focus on spiritual life, acts of caring, membership and education. There are also special interest groups for mixed marriage couples, men and, as of March 1992, there is a special group for women.

Special women’s groups are an integral part of the communal practice of women from all three minyanim, not only for the women of Mishkan Shalom. Just as

---

34 Personal communication with Rebecca Hirsch 3/16/92. Rebecca Hirsch is currently a student at Bryn Mawr College and is writing her senior thesis in the sociology department on Mishkan Shalom.
35 Personal communication with Ellen Steiker 3/22/92. Ellen Steiker is a member and the current Treasurer of Mishkan Shalom.
36 Personal communication with Rabbi Caryn Broitman 3/12/92. Caryn Broitman is the former coordinator of the Mishkan Shalom Hebrew School.
the prayer groups range in character, so too do the variety of women's groups.

With the exception of a women's group formed in January 1992 with the aim of fosterering closer personal connections between the women of Dorshei Derech37, the other womens' groups have, like the minyanim, had long histories marked by considerable growth and change. The dynamic nature of these groups has allowed them to accommodate the development and changing needs of the various members38.

Another women's group which meets every other week, contains seven women affiliated with a variety of prayer groups, including P'nai Or, Mishkan Shalom and several different Conservative synagogues outside of Mt. Airy39. It is primarily a discussion group in which issues of these women's personal lives are addressed. For example, one member tells that many group members currently hold positions of authority in their work lives. The group is a place in which these women can explore how they can bring their feminist and Jewish perspectives to their roles as bosses.

In addition to groups which focus on fostering personal introspection and shared intimacy through discussion, there are a number of women's groups which aim to attain these same goals through the performance of group rituals in addition to discussion. There are currently two groups which meet on the evening of Rosh Chodesh, the day marking the beginning of Jewish month. Although Rosh Chodesh has historically been a women's holiday, due to the link between the Jewish calendar's lunar cycle and the woman's menstrual cycle, it has recently been

37 Personal communication with two group members who asked to remain anonymous.
38 Personal communication with Merle Berman 3/11/92. I will merely offer a description of these women's group as they now exist. The development of the various women's groups is a fascinating topic for which I unfortunately do not have space here.
39 Personal communication with Barbara Breitman 3/13/92. Barbara Breitman is an original member of this particular women's group and a resident of Mt. Airy.

42
reclaimed and transformed by Jewish feminists. Although both groups mark the
new Jewish month by joining each month at a member’s home to discuss personal
issues and create rituals based in Jewish tradition, the groups differ in membership
as well as content and form of their meetings. The smaller of the two groups draws
ten to twelve women who remain highly consistent each month. By contrast, the
larger group draws anywhere from ten to twenty-five women each month, with little
consistency from month to month. The consistency of the first group’s membership
has allowed for the evolution of a highly consistent format. Each month a different
woman will lead the meeting based on a theme relevant to the particular Jewish
month. The theme is planned in advance so that each woman can bring items such
as stories, poems, arts and crafts materials, which pertain to the theme. Once there,
the women integrate talking and activity into a ritual which reflects the monthly
theme. For example, for Adar, the month in which Purim (a holiday for which it is
customary to dress in costume), the leader introduced the theme of maskmaking. As
they made masks together, the women took turns sharing personal feelings about the
masks they made.

Because the second group changes drastically each month, there is less
consistency in format. Some meetings are highly structured around a theme and
others are more free-flowing. The ritual tends to develop around the personal issues
which women raise during the check-in, a time in which each woman shares how
she is feeling. For example, for Kislev, the darkest month of the year, several women

---


41 Personal communication with Meryl Stemman 3/12/92. Meryl Stemman is an original member of the smaller Rosh Chodesh group and has recently joined the larger group. She is currently in her first year at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. All information on the smaller Rosh Chodesh group is attributable to Meryl Stemman.

42 Personal communication with Merle Berman 3/11/92. Merle Berman was a co-founder of the larger Rosh Chodesh group and continues to be an active member. All information of the larger Rosh Chodesh group is attributable to her unless otherwise indicated.
expressed concern over the depression they often feel during the winter months\textsuperscript{42}. At the end of the check-in, the women worked together, each offering suggestions, to create a ritual which would help them get through the coming darkness. The resulting ritual went as follows: They dimmed the lights and then sat on the floor in a circle around a tray filled with unlit candles. Each woman thought about some inspiration, or spark of light from within herself, which would give her the strength in the time of darkness to come. They took turns sharing "sparks" and as they did so, lit a candle. By the end, the previously dark circle was illuminated.

In addition to differences in membership and format, a woman who is a member of both Rosh Chodesh groups explains that there is also a difference in motivating ideology. Paradoxical though it may sound, the larger group is both more traditional and more radical than the smaller. The larger can be characterized as more traditional because the women involved are, on the whole, more knowledgeable about Jewish tradition; while many of the women in the larger group are rabbinical students and/or were raised with a strong Jewish identity, many of the women in the smaller group have just recently developed a connection to Jewish tradition. The larger group can at the same time be characterized as more radical, since the women, many of whom are informed by feminism, are on the whole more willing to be daring and innovative with Jewish tradition. For example, the meetings of the larger group customarily include the sharing of songs, written by members, which, while drawing on traditional Judaism, tend to radically re-interpret the tradition. For example, in the month of Adar, two women shared Purim songs inspired by the book of Esther which focused on the courage of the non-Jewish Vashti, the Queen who defiantly disobeyed the King’s demand that she perform

\textsuperscript{42} Personal observations of the larger Rosh Chodesh group on 12/1/91. All information on the ritual which took place at that meeting are attributable to my personal observations.
naked for his guests

This combination of feminism, informed by extensive knowledge of Jewish tradition, can be seen even more strikingly in the practices of the Covenant Group. This group of seven women (though in the past the number has been as high as fourteen) meets every other week. Together they perform rituals for members with special needs. For example, when one woman was in her last month of pregnancy, she asked the group to help her create and then perform a ritual which would celebrate the imminent birth of her child. All of the current members are professionally involved in Jewish communal activities and extremely knowledgeable in Jewish subjects. While they have the resources necessary to draw on Jewish tradition in creating their rituals and, in fact often do, the members view Jewish tradition to be in many ways limiting. In order for their rituals to be meaningful and powerful, these women look to matriarchal goddess and medieval witch texts in order to reach some of the female voices excluded in Jewish tradition. Where explicit texts are absent, these women turn to archeological evidence to help discern what their foremothers were probably doing. These women also draw on their own intuition and imagination when available texts and evidence are inadequate.

In addition to prayer and women's groups which cater to the needs of Mt. Airy Jews, there are several Jewish political organizations which seek an even greater audience. These political groups which root their agenda in the Jewish tradition are part of a phenomenon now commonly referred to as the Jewish Renewal movement. The Jewish Renewal movement which began with the mystical teachings of Reb

---

44 Personal observation of the larger Rosh Chodesh group on 3/4/92.
45 Personal communication with a member of the group who wishes to remain anonymous. This member has explained that all women in the group wish to remain anonymous for fear of persecution by Jewish institutions who do not accept their practices as valid expressions of Judaism. All information on the Covenant Group is attributable to the same anonymous source.
Zalman attracted in its early years Jews who had a less extensive Jewish education. Many of these Jews were also interested in the connection between the spiritual and the political. Several Jewish Renewal political organizations now exist in Mt. Airy.

The Shalom Center, run by Arthur Waskow, was founded in 1983 with the aim of “pursuing peace and protecting the living earth” in response to a world plagued with the threat of nuclear Holocaust, global warming, ozone depletion, and poisoning of the seas⁴⁶. The Shalom Center seeks to respond to these dangers with hope and action informed by Jewish tradition. For example, the Shalom Center has sponsored a Shalom Passover Seder in the desert of Nevada in order to protest the continuation of nuclear testing. Through their outreach programs geared toward synagogues, Jewish organizations and schools, the Shalom Center reaches tens of thousands of Jews.

The Shefa Fund, founded in 1988 by Jeffrey Dekro, is a Jewish, charitable foundation⁴⁷. Informed by the Jewish mystics who taught that acts of kindness and justice fuel the Shefa—an energy force which pulsates through the universe, bringing fullness to the whole community, the Shefa Fund works to support tzedakah—(justice and charity) and kedushah (holiness through spiritual renewal). The Shefa Fund’s activities are two-fold. First, it supports innovative and often controversial organizations and projects which it judges to have transformational potential in the areas of economic and social justice, Middle East peace, feminism and gender issues, and arts and communications⁴⁸. Second, the Shefa Fund encourages Jewish foundations and individuals to be more socially responsible and then offers organizational and technical support to facilitate effective and efficient philanthropy⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ The Shalom Center pamphlet. All information on the Shalom Center is attributable to the pamphlet unless otherwise indicated.
⁴⁷ The Shefa Fund pamphlet. All information on the Shefa Fund is attributable to the pamphlet unless otherwise indicated.
⁴⁸ The Shefa Fund Mission Statement
⁴⁹ Ibid.

46
Among the organizations supported by the Shefa fund is Shomrei Adamah—"Keepers of the Earth", which is housed at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Ellen Bernstein, the founder of Shomrei Adamah, believes that Judaism provides an ecological ethic based on three thousand years of tradition. Since she believes this ethic to have lain dormant for the past several generations, it is the mission of Shomrei Adamah to inspire greater environmental awareness and practice among Jews. Shomrei Adamah develops source materials, curricula, and publications for use by individuals, congregations, and universities all over North America. By placing protection of the earth in a Jewish context, Shomrei Adamah seeks to infuse the work of Jewish environmentalists with added meaning.

In addition to the outreach programs of Jewish Renewal political organizations, National and international retreats are another way in which the ideas generated in Mt. Airy reach Jews outside of the configuration. At such retreats Mt. Airy Jews not only have influence upon but are influenced by these other Jews.

Each year the National Havurah Committee (NHC) organizes one week-long institute as well as several shorter retreats. Every year the P'ni Or Religious Fellowship organizes several holiday retreats. And every other year it organizes a week-long Kallah.

In addition to these retreats open to both men and women, there are several all-womens' retreats. The oldest, B'not Esh (Hebrew for "daughters of fire"), was formed thirteen years ago with the intention of creating an all-women's community in

---

50 Shomrei Adamah information packet coverletter written by Ellen Bernstein.
51 Shomrei Adamah newsletter "Voice of the Trees" vol.1, No.3. p.1
52 Shomrei Adamah information packet coverletter.
53 Ibid
54 Personal communication with Herb Levine 2/27/92.
55 P'ni Or Religious Fellowship pamphlet, p.3
which to explore Jewish feminist theology, spirituality and ritual. In addition to topics traditionally considered religious, such as prayer, liturgy, texts, holidays, among the issues explored at the B'not Esh retreat are many not traditionally viewed as religious. In the past, these have included class, sexual orientation, work, death, abuse, politics, family. As feminists, the members of the group believe that spirituality and daily life are not discrete or separable from one another. Instead, spirituality permeates all aspects of their lives and thus it is valid, in fact necessary, to address daily life in the context of spiritual exploration.

Of the thirty women attending each year, all are highly knowledgeable in Jewish tradition; among the members are many rabbis - both Reform and Reconstructionist, scholars of religion, and highly involved havurah members as well as religiously unaffiliated Jews. These women differ widely on the degree to which they consider Jewish tradition authoritative. While many have a strong commitment to traditional Judaism, others question seriously the viability of being feminist and Jewish and thus freely explore other aspects of feminist spirituality.

Achyot Or (Hebrew for "Sisters of Light"), grew out of B'not Esh. The members of B'not Esh felt strongly that because intimacy was crucial to the type of exploration they engage in, it was necessary to maintain a group of at most thirty members. At the same time, they felt it was important not to exclude women interested in feminist, Jewish exploration. In light of the dual goals of intimacy and inclusion, the members of B'not Esh decided to seed other similar groups. A few women from B'not Esh left to form Achyot Or five years ago.

This year another seed group, thus far unnamed, is forming. This group will

---

56 Personal communication with Barbara Breitman 3/13/92. Barbara Breitman has been a member of B'not Esh for over 10 years. All information on B'not Esh and Achyot Or is attributable to Barbara Breitman.

57 Personal communication with Merle Berman 3/11/92. Merle Berman is co-founder of this new group. All information on this group is attributable to Merle Berman.
differ in orientation from B'not Esh and Achyot Or, for the founders wish to address the needs of Jewish feminists whose ties to Judaism are primarily cultural. Therefore, while the group may include women who are very knowledgeable about Jewish religious tradition, it is geared to accommodate women who may have very little or no Jewish education.

One member explains that it is the hope of those who first began B'not Esh that the experience of Jewish women's community will help reshape the consciousness of the women who participate. As these women transform themselves, they will transform Judaism.

Based upon my extensive research of the Mt. Airy Jewish configuration, it has become clear to me that what is occurring there is not merely the "feminist" transformation of Judaism. Men and women alike are working to infuse Judaism with new meaning so that Judaism can, in turn, infuse their lives with meaning. I believe that it would be inaccurate to label this process the "feminist" transformation of Judaism. A man can, perhaps, accurately be labelled a "feminist" to the extent which they support a woman's "freedom to reject what she feels oppresses her and embrace what she feels empowers her". But a man cannot adopt a "feminist" approach since "personal feminist consciousness" is rooted in experiences which a man, by virtue of his gender, cannot have. I would argue that common to all of these Jews is a "personal humanist consciousness" which "supports any person's freedom to reject... etc.". But "humanist" here is not equivalent to the Humanism of the Enlightenment which implies an individual's complete control over his or her own destiny. For underlying the engagement in dialogue of any religious tradition, is the assumption of a greater Force which mitigates any human's complete control over his or her own destiny. I would argue then for the adoption of the term "quasi-

58 Julia Cohen. Two Approaches to Contemporary Judaism: The Reconstructionist and Conservative Movements. unpublished manuscript, p.2
humanist" to describe the common approach of Jewish women and men alike in Mt. Airy.
Conclusion

My research has led me to believe that what is occurring in Mt. Airy is indicative of a larger trend in contemporary Judaism. The fact that there are numerous national and international gatherings of Jews who share this “theo-humanist” approach indicates, in my opinion that there is widespread interest in transforming Judaism.

Jacob Neusner argues that the Judaism of reversion is an ephemeral phenomenon with no long-term significance. He claims that there is no “...systematic exploitation, by system builders working out an original and urgent program of questions and answers....” He is, perhaps, correct in his assessment that no systematic program is being developed in this “living laboratory.” Instead, the Jews of Mt. Airy are generating a very diverse set of practices.

I would argue, however, that it is, in fact, the unsystematized nature of what is being generated that will allow it to have lasting significance outside of the Mt. Airy configuration. Because there is no “package” for others to either reject or accept wholesale, individual pieces can be embraced by Jews seeking to infuse Judaism with new meaning. For some Jews, specific practices such as the addition of the biblical matriarchs in the liturgy, the inclusion of a d'var Torah discussion, or social action in Central America, may be appealing. For other Jews, while specific practices may hold little appeal, the underlying concepts behind them, such as inclusion of women’s experience, the fostering of interconnection between daveners, or the strong connection between the spiritual and political realms, may nonetheless hold appeal. Based upon these concepts, such Jews may create the specific practices which personally compel them. And for still other Jews, while neither specific practices nor the concepts behind them may be appealing, the underlying assumption that it is both

---

worthwhile and legitimate to engage Judaism in a "theo-humanist" dialogue may be appealing. Based upon this approach, such Jews may be inspired to enter into their own personal dialogue with the tradition to create the concepts and practices which make Judaism personally meaningful.

This leaves us with the question of how potentially interested Jews might in fact learn about these "pieces." Certainly those who attend the annual retreats have access to these "pieces." Those who leave Mt. Airy for new locations each year bring these "pieces" with them. In the short time I was in Mt. Airy, one woman left the neighborhood with plans to start a minyan based on the P’nai Or model in rural Massachusetts. And, of course, each year, students and graduates of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College assume pulpit positions in synagogues all over the country.

While the activities of this neighborhood can potentially reach Jews nationally, it can be argued that the Jews actually reached are a self-selected group already engaged in similar activity. One might be correct in saying that those who choose to go on these national retreats or belong to a Reconstructionist synagogue constitute an audience of the already convinced. Moreover, this audience is not terribly sizable. Therefore, while the quality of practice of a limited number of Jews might may be highly influenced, it is unclear that a large quantity of Jews will, in fact, be reached.

While many audiences are in a way self selected, others are less so. RRC graduates have pulpits in not only Reconstructionist synagogues but Conservative and Reform ones as well. And even those who serve Reconstructionist congregations, certainly bring with them ideas which are by no means familiar to their congregants.

Though less directly than Reconstructionist rabbis, Mishkan Shalom and the

---

2 One current student now leads a congregation as far away as Florida.
3 Reconstructionists make up only two percent of American Jewry.
minyanim also function to influence non-Mt. Airy Jews. Many of their events open to the general public are appealing to Jews from mainstream synagogues as well as to many religiously non-affiliated Jews in the Philadelphia area. An example of such an event is Mishkan Shalom's Feminist Scholar-in-Residence program, which draws interested Jews of many types.

Women's groups also act as vehicle for reaching Jews of mainstream congregations as well as religiously unaffiliated (or marginally affiliated) Jews. Although all of the women's groups meet in Mt. Airy, they contain members who do not belong to any of the minyanim or Mishkan Shalom.

The two very different populations reached through special events and women's groups are important for different reasons. For the population of religiously unaffiliated Jews, exposure to the ideas and practices generated in Mt. Airy can be the first step in a process of engagement with the religious tradition. The population of mainstream congregants, already engaged in religious tradition, may be inspired to explore new ways of infusing the tradition with meaning. They may then bring such ideas back to their synagogues.

While the activities of Mt. Airy can reach Jews who are geographically and ideologically diverse of this generation, they can also reach such Jews of the next. Mishkan Shalom's Hebrew school currently has an enrollment of eighty students. Their teachers are dedicated to teaching the values which are so important to the current adult members. Many RRC students and graduates are actively involved in Hebrew school education both as teachers and curriculum developers. Given the high degree of geographic mobility which is the norm in contemporary American society, it is probable that many of these children will eventually live outside of the Philadelphia area.

---

4 Christie Balka, "In Search of the Ideal Shul," Lilith Magazine, Fall 1991, pp. 10-12, 23
Not only is Neusner skeptical about the future of reversionism, he also questions its very origins. He argues that the Judaism of reversion is discontinuous with that which has come before it and, as such, is not legitimate Judaism. His allegations of discontinuity rest on the assertion that while the Judaism of reversion is "...one of persistent and highly self-conscious experimentation with received forms..." the "...principal definitive trait..." of the traditional Judaism of the dual Torah is "...is giveness...." Few scholars of Jewish history would argue with Neusner that reversionary Judaism is markedly different from dual Torah Judaism. At the same time, few would agree that this difference constitutes a discontinuity. Zacharias Frankel, founder of the "positive historical school" of Judaism, which later developed into the Conservative movement, justified the legitimacy of change within Judaism, saying that "...traditional Judaism throughout the ages was not static and unchanging, but, on the contrary, the product of historical development." Moreover, Jewish historians generally agree that Jewish history has undergone at least three distinct phases. The first, the biblical period, began with the giving of the Torah at Sinai and was characterized by Temple sacrifice and worship led by the Priests. The second, the Rabbinic period, began with the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. and was, by contrast, characterized by prayer and study of the dual Torah led by the rabbis. The third, the Modern (Enlightenment) period began with Napoleon's Emancipation Proclamation to the Jews of France in 1789 and is characterized by a more scientific and rational approach to Jewish history. Each of these Judaisms was drastically different from that which preceded it, yet the Judaism of each era was, nonetheless experienced by Jews as continuous with the past and legitimate because

5 Neusner, p. 317
6 The dual Torah refers to the combination of the Torah and the Talmud.
7 Neusner, p. 317
each drew its most important symbols and rituals from a centuries-old chain of Jewish tradition.

While many agree that the shift from "giveness" to "self-consciousness and experimentation" does not constitute a discontinuity, other Jewish historians would argue that none of the Judaic systems of the past have been characterized by the absolute "giveness" which Neusner ascribes to dual Torah Judaism. Reconstructionism teaches that Judaism is an "evolving religious civilization" that undergoes remolding in each generation as Jews voluntarily retain its practices. When a "traditional" Jewish practice ceases to have compelling meaning for a large number of Jews, the practice is ultimately abandoned. According to this understanding of Jewish history, nothing has ever been absolutely given. It is not "giveness" but, as Frankel describes, "a gradual organic growth" based upon a "positive attitude of reverence toward traditional Judaism (which is) essential."

I would argue that such is the case with the "theo-humanism" we see in microcosm in Mt. Airy. The Jews who are working to form a new Judaism are building it upon the very foundations of the "Judaisms" of the past. God, Torah, halachah, traditional liturgy, are the building blocks for many of the Mt. Airy Jews. Some of the ideas and rituals practices of Mt. Airy's Jews are discontinuous because their links to Jewish tradition are weak at best. But I would simply argue that they will not endure and that only those which are deeply resonant for Jewish people will stand the test of time. But we are not now in a position to judge what will stand and it is fruitless, even detrimental to try. Judith Plaskow writes that "To try to decide in advance which will be authentic is to confine our creativity and resources; it is to divert energy needed to

---

shape the kind of Jewish community in which we want to live."^{11}

Reb Zalman Schachter Shalomi, a long-time participant in the Mt. Airy configuration, has suggested that contemporary Judaism may be in the midst of a profound "paradigm shift" from which will emerge a new formative era. Just as it is too early to judge whether the new Jewish creativity in Mt. Airy will stand the test of time, so it is impossible to yet determine whether his assessment is correct or not. Only time will tell what the shape of Judaism into the twenty-first century and beyond will be. All that is certain now, is that the prospects are exciting.

---

Appendix

Interview questions

I. Personal History

a) Please tell me briefly about yourself.
b) Please describe your Jewish upbringing.
c) When and why did you move to Mt. Airy?

II. Jewish Practice

a) Please describe your current Jewish practices including prayer, women's group involvement and any other activity you consider to be an expression of your Judaism.

III. Philosophy Motivating Jewish Practice

a) Which specific elements of Jewish, religious tradition are necessary to make practice meaningful to you?
b) In addition to specific elements of the tradition, is the notion of connection to the tradition important to you? Why or why not?
c) Which innovations are necessary to make practice meaningful to you?

IV. Forging the balance

8) Please describe your process of balancing tradition with innovation, whether it is systematic or not?
9) How are differences of opinion resolved in your minyan/synagogue?

IV. Are there any important issues about your work with Jewish religious tradition which my questions have failed to address? If so, please elaborate.
Bibliography


Greenberg, Julie. "We the People: Egalitarian Jewish Education." unpublished manuscript


Neusner, Jacob. *The Death and Birth of Judaism: The Impact of Christianity,*


Articles


Printed Statements and Pamphlets

Mishkan Shalom Statement of Principles-Mishkan Shalom. P.O. Box 1398, Media, Pa., 19063

P'nai Or Religious Fellowship (printed statement). 7318 Germantown Ave., Philadelphia, Pa., 19119-1793

The Shalom Center (printed pamphlet). 7318 Germantown Ave., Philadelphia, Pa., 19119

The Shefa Fund-Mission Statement. 7318 Germantown Ave., Philadelphia, Pa.,


The Voice of the Trees-Newsletter of Shomrei Adamah -vol. 1, No. 3, Winter 1991 Church Road and Greenwood Ave., Wyncote, PA 19095
The Feminist Transformation of Judaism:  
Mt. Airy as a "Living Laboratory"

Abstract

Since the 1960's, many young Jews have sought to enrich their lives by making Judaism more central to their lives. Wholehearted embracement of Judaism, in its existing forms, has, however, proven problematic for many Jewish women. Such women feel that traditional Judaism and feminism are often mutually exclusive, forcing them to make a choice between two important aspects of their identity. Many Jewish women, however, are unwilling to make this choice; they are instead committed to transforming Judaism to accommodate their feminist sensibilities.

The meaningful feminist transformation of Judaism is not, however, a speedy or straightforward task. It must take the form of an ongoing feminist "dialogue" with tradition which requires a long process of experimentation with and trial of both old and new forms. Mt. Airy, located in the Northwest of Philadelphia, is a neighborhood conducive to this type of experimentation. Due to the presence of three minyanim (prayer groups), at least five Jewish women's groups, several progressive Jewish political organizations as well as the close proximity of a rabbinical college and a synagogue, Mt. Airy has been labelled a "living laboratory" for the transformation of Judaism.

Based upon my research, which included four months of observant/participation in the Jewish activities of Mt. Airy as well as numerous in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Mt. Airy Jews, it has become clear that the feminist transformation of Judaism is by no means a monolithic project. Each woman has her own unique feminist vision. Though their specific visions differ, these women share what I have labelled a "personal feminist consciousness", which simply means a sense that "they have the right to reject what they feel oppresses them and embrace
what they feel empowers them". Motivated by this sense, the ten Jewish women of Mt. Airy whom I interviewed have collectively created a set of visions which are diverse and sometimes contradictory.

What is exciting about Mt. Airy's wide variety of feminist visions is that they do not merely remain the subject of personal pontification. Instead, they become the subject of communal discussion. Thus each woman interviewed is engaged in a feminist dialogue with Judaism containing two distinct, though intertwining, strands. The first strand is the dialogue between the individual woman and the Jewish, religious tradition. The second strand is the dialogue between the individual woman and the other Mt. Airy Jews, each engaged in her or his own personal dialogue with tradition. These simultaneous dialogues have inspired the formation of creative, Jewish communal structures of meaning.

While my research has shown that the feminist transformation of Judaism is not simple, it has also shown that what is occurring in Mt. Airy is not simply the feminist transformation of Judaism. The Jewish men of Mt. Airy, equipped with their own personal visions, are also engaged in the transformation of Judaism. What these Jewish women and men share in common is not a feminist approach, but what I call a "theo-humanistic" approach. Those who adopt this approach, while recognizing the power of tradition, feel themselves empowered to face tradition on their own terms. While this approach may be indicative of a new trend in contemporary Judaism, it is too early to predict what form this trend will take into the twenty-first century. All that can be said with certainty is that the prospects are exciting.
1. You claim that the move toward a renewed Judaism, which has continued into the 1980s, parallels the trend towards increased women's empowerment. Yet in the 1980s the numbers of those women who identified themselves as feminists decreased. Is it possible that your thesis could be reversed: the majority of Jewish women becoming members of the new orthodoxy parallels the rejection of feminist concerns rather than their embrace?

2. What are the older forms of Judaism rejected by young Jewish feminists? How are these forms related to the American types of Judaism in which these women were raised? Might it be that the new orthodox actually reject American secularized Judaism but, because they cannot articulate what specifically bothered them about this system, place the blame on a form of Judaism in which very few of them had direct familiarity? In turn, might these practices, labelled by some misogynistic or marginalized, be recuperated by a feminist hermeneutic?

3. Elaborate please on the "ancient goddess traditions" you describe as practiced in the Ancient Near East. Since you mention these traditions without commentary, one can only assume that you accept the claims made by individuals such as Starhawk and Christ. As Annette Daum's article in *Lilith* 7 questions: Did the Jews Kill the Goddess? And, was there a mother-goddess/egalitarian sisterhood that existed in the first place, such that it could be killed? Finally, might Tikva Frymer-Kensky be correct in asserting that pre-Hellenistic Judaism embraced much of the goddess tradition, that the goddess was actually killed by those nasty Greeks?

4. On the "radical reinterpretation of tradition" you speak of Purim songs dealing with Queen Vashti, who refused to dance naked before the king (pp. 44-45). Where does this interpretation come from? Is its locus the source of other material that women might reclaim?

5. While preserving the anonymity of the members of the "Covenant group" explain please the reasons for their fear. Who is likely to "persecute" (a very strong word) them?

   Taking their positions more generally, should they—with their matriarchal goddess traditions—be considered members of the Jewish community? How far can Judaism be extended without becoming a meaningless conglomeration of traditions? For example, should material from the gospels -- which more clearly
than the various goddesses represents "Jewish tradition" in that Jesus was Jewish -- be incorporated into the daily liturgy?

6. Jacob Neusner is not alone in arguing that certain contemporary religious movements are discontinuous with past trends within a religious tradition. In what way(s) might it be illuminating to interpret the Judaism you describe as a "post-modern" form of the tradition, significantly different from the three preceding historical phases (Torah-Temple; Rabbinic-dual Torah; modern-rational)?

7. Your description of your field work in Mt. Airy was fascinating; especially so was the picture of you sitting on your living room floor, organizing all of your data on newsprint. As you pointed out, you decided you could not and did not want to do a "complete" picture of feminist Judaism in Mt. Airy. This realization involved making decisions regarding what to include and what to exclude. What did you leave out of your analysis that might have altered your story?

8. One might argue that the "feminist transformation of Judaism" you describe is not unique to Mt. Airy or to American Judaism; indeed, what you describe in your thesis is part of a larger picture of the "feminist transformation of religion." Is there any merit in such a claim? If so, does it trivialize the historical particularity of different religious traditions?

9. A companion method to your ethnographic approach is interpretive anthropology of religion as deployed, e.g., by Mary Douglas. Douglas contends that all religio-ethical standards--including Jewish halachah and ritual--maintain order in a community by arbitrarily codifying the differences between the sacred and the profane. Religion, in short, is an elaborate network of differences. Using this model, how do some Jewish women in Mt. Airy create order and meaning in their lives through maintaining their order of differences?

10. One often hears today the formulas "women and men are equal but their roles are different" or "women and men should perform distinct, but complementary roles" as the rationale for gender divisions among the religiously orthodox, Jewish and non-Jewish. Do you think these formulations express the nuances of Jewish feminism as you describe it? Moreover, and constructively, do you think these catch-phrases best express your own vision of Jewish feminism?

11. Please make some general comments linking your discussion in one chapter of the "variety of feminist visions of the transformation of Judaism" with your discussion in the next chapter of the communal structures of Mt. Airy Jews. How did the women you talked with in the interviews choose their worship contexts? Your discussions of Madeline and Laura (p. 26), e.g., suggest a variety of different priorities in choosing a worship community. Please elaborate.

12. How would you guide someone who wanted to continue the process you have started here by initiating another similar study somewhere else? What
words of advice would you offer to shape this person's project? Would you recommend a study exactly parallel to yours? Would you make changes? Why? What observations would you like to see considered in an ongoing way?

13. The Department of Religion sees a senior paper or thesis as an essential part of the religion major. How did this required project contribute to your understanding of the field of religious studies? What arguments would you make for a major in religion as part of a liberal arts degree program at Swarthmore College.