

Newly orthodox
women vs judith
plaskow: feminism
moving in opposite
directions



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Judith Plaskow is one of the leading scholars of feminist theology. Her book, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, was the first book of Jewish feminist theology ever written.[1] She has also written an additional book, a collection of essays, has co-edited three books, and published numerous articles in edited volumes and journals.[2] Plaskow believes that the Torah must be “reclaimed”, as it has been written by and in the language of the patriarchy in such a way that marginalizes women.[3] Ultimately, Plaskow’s goal is to redefine the Torah’s content to include material relating to women’s experiences, on this topic she writes, “We must render visible the presence, experience, and deeds of women erased in traditional sources. We must tell the stories of women’s encounters with God and capture the texture of their religious experience.”[4] Plaskow’s views on feminism within Judaism are new, transformative, and ultimately push the conventional traditions and values within the religion. Standing in stark contrast to Plaskow is Orthodox Judaism, which continues to embrace the traditional roles of women within religion. However, Debra Renee Kaufman’s article, *Patriarchal Women: A Case Study of Newly Orthodox Women*, reveals women moving in the opposite direction as Plaskow, but with a similar objective, to redefine Judaism in ways that empower them.

While Plaskow often uses the alteration of God-language and the creation of myths to reinterpret the Torah, the converted Jewish Orthodox women cited in Kaufman’s article take a related approach, however, in much more restrained ways. An example of Plaskow’s unconventional methods of reinterpreting the Torah lies in the namesake of her book of essays, *The Coming of Lilith*. Plaskow wrote a new myth, known as *Midrash*, based on the

story of Lilith, demon of the night, who was Adam's first wife according to rabbinic legend.[5] Plaskow writes, " Through her story, we could express not only our new image of ourselves, but our relation to certain of the elements of our religious traditions... We try to express through our myth the process of our coming to do theology together. Lilith in exile can do nothing. The real heroine of our story is sisterhood, and sisterhood is powerful." [6] Plaskow's Midrash transformed Lilith, once a demon, into a wife who refused to be commanded by her husband and so flew away.[7] Although it is true that Orthodox Jewish women still do not have the right to divorce their husbands in the way Lilith left Adam, they have still found ways to work within their religion to reinterpret texts once deemed misogynistic.

While the newly Orthodox women in Kaufman's article do not take such drastic measures to find their feminist identities within the Torah, they have reinterpreted the parts of Jewish law that have often been considered the most sexist, and have found empowerment within them. For example, all of the women had an alternative of interpretation of " nidda", commonly defined as, " family purity laws governing the separation of husband and wife during and for 10 days following the woman's menstruation," a time when the woman is often considered " unclean". [8] Many of the women explained that impure was a better translation because it places menstruation within a more sacred context.[9] Furthermore, one woman argued, " Blood is the symbol of both birth and death. This is recognized in the balance between " nidda" and " mikva"; the first is the mourning of our temporarily lost capacity to give life, the other a celebration of our capacity to give life." [10] While the Jewish purity laws upheld by the Orthodox

community are often considered one of the most misogynistic elements of the religion, these women were able to interpret “ nidda” in a way that made their womanhood more valuable, rather than less. This tactic is very similar to Plaskow’s approach as she transforms the Lilith, the “ demon of the night”, into an empowering new feminist myth.

Another common thread that runs through both Plaskow and Kaufman’s texts is the connection between Jewish women and community. Plaskow writes, “ The feminist experience is one of finding in community both a sense of personal identity and power and the power and knowledge of God.”[11] In their transition to the Orthodox community, all of the women in Kaufman’s case study find their identities as women within the Orthodox community to not only be vital, but empowering. On the subject of community, Kaufman writes, “ By idealizing the feminine and emphasizing gender differences already present in this sex-aggregated community, these women develop powerful images of themselves and their activities.”[12] One woman’s words on this subject were particularly eloquent, “ There is no doubt that what I love about it is the way in which women are understood. The intensity of women’s relationship to God is overwhelming. I think women are the collective unconscious way of safeguarding prayer in Judaism.”[13] While these women have chosen to enter a community that believes in segregation between man and woman, they have been able to find significance within this separation. All that Orthodox Judaism is has fostered a strong sense of personal identity and connection to God among this particular group of 75 women that Kaufman chose to interview. While surely Plaskow would not agree with the seclusion of women in Orthodoxy, these women have reached

Plaskow's goals of finding their feminist identities within their communities nonetheless.

While Judith Plaskow's work is fascinating, transformative, and crucial to the study of feminism within religion, Debra Renee Kaufman's article Patriarchal Women: A Case Study of Newly Orthodox Jewish Women, raises questions about what can truly be considered feminism within Judaism. Kaufman performed in-depth interviews with 75 women who had converted to Orthodox Judaism, many of whom had very little previous experience with religion. Kaufman's study melded together the study of both feminism and Orthodoxy with astonishing results. While the outside world often considers Jewish Orthodoxy to be unacceptably misogynistic, Kaufman revealed that these women had found empowerment and belonging within their community, despite what many consider to be a second-class status. While Plaskow tends towards liberalism, and the Orthodox women towards conservatism, both ultimately followed very similar patterns by using reinterpretation of the Torah and connection with community to promote feminism. Kaufman sums up the reality of women in Judaism nicely as she concludes, "As 'minded' social actors, women are capable of constructing their own systems of meaning and of negotiating their social reality; they are not simply or necessarily 'robots,' 'victims,' or 'fools.'" [14]

[1] "Judith Plaskow," Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/plaskow-judith>.

[2] Ibid. [3] Judith Plaskow, "Standing again at Sinai: Judaism from a feminist perspective," San Francisco 123 (1990): 127 [4] Ibid. [5] Judith Plaskow, *The Coming of Lilith: essays on feminism, Judaism, and sexual ethics, 1972-2003*, Beacon Press, 2015. [6] <https://assignbuster.com/newly-orthodox-women-vs-judith-plaskow-feminism-moving-in-opposite-directions/>

Ibid. [7] Ibid. [8] Debra Renee Kaufman, “ Patriarchal women: A case study of newly orthodox Jewish women,” *Symbolic Interaction* 12, no. 2 (1989): 299-314 [9] Ibid. [10] Ibid. [11] Judith Plaskow, *The Coming of Lilith: essays on feminism, Judaism, and sexual ethics, 1972-2003*, Beacon Press, 2015. [12] Debra Renee Kaufman, “ Patriarchal women: A case study of newly orthodox Jewish women,” *Symbolic Interaction* 12, no. 2 (1989): 299-314 [13] Ibid. [14] Ibid.