



A Continuous Revision of Practice:

An Exploration of how ‘Religion’ and ‘Feminist Politics’ were Negotiated by the Jewish Feminist Collective ‘B’not Esh’ in its Founding Year

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Abstract

The essay explores how B’not Esh negotiated the tensions between religion and feminist politics throughout its founding year of 1981, to identify and value the existence of an attempted religious feminist practice that ultimately has the potential to have a lasting impact on Judaism and feminism. In doing so, B’not Esh revised male-dictated Jewish liturgy regarding the Kabbalat Shabbat worship to incorporate the experiences, opinions and control held as women towards their Jewish religious practice. I propose that such revisioning was justifiable within Judaism through a reconstructionist lens as the Reconstructionist movement placed importance on the aspiration towards social idealism and liturgical interpretation to align with modern lives. Whilst Jewish women were often met with criticism within the second wave of feminism in America due to their commitment to Judaism, deemed patriarchal in nature, such a continual prioritisation of the restructuring of male-dominated religious practices resulted in the destabilisation of the gendered hierarchy within Judaism, and likely challenged anti-Semitism in the second wave of feminism. Therefore, the essay demonstrates the importance of the work of B’not Esh towards the continual endeavour of equality within Judaism and the second wave of feminism.

Keywords

Religion;
Judaism;
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The following essay explores whether B’not Esh, a self-proclaimed American Jewish Feminist Spirituality Collective, were able to negotiate the tensions between religion and feminist politics throughout its founding year of 1981. Therefore, suggestions as to how such tensions may have been negotiated are proposed. Consequently, the essay provides an exploration towards whether the Reconstructionist movement, which “seeks to integrate modern ideals, foremost among them a commitment to democracy, into Jewish life” (Alpert, 2021), influenced the continual development of feminism within Judaism. This will be investigated through the consideration and analysis of B’not Esh’s feminist

approaches to the Jewish Kabbalat Shabbat worship. Religion has been viewed as oppressive when there is a conservation of a gendered hierarchy, which does not align well with the shared understanding of feminism that aspires to work towards equality within society (Zwissler, 2012). Ackelsberg (1998) argues that when feminism chooses to dismiss religion, this results in the lack of acknowledgement of the experiences of religious women. Such an argument demonstrates the necessity of a deeper academic analysis of B'not Esh, in order to identify and value the existence of an attempted feminist practice that ultimately has the potential to have a lasting impact on Judaism and feminism.

Religion along with its corresponding beliefs is defined by Gross (1996) from a feminist perspective as an answer to one's important questions in life that are of great personal concern. From this, religion can be understood as a means of providing meaning and worth to an individual through belief systems. The basis of feminist politics has been defined as the endeavour to create social change, which can improve the lives of women, through the promotion of equality in society (Avishai, 2016) resulting in a questioning of the gender divide within a patriarchal society. Faver (2000) writes that some secular feminists have chosen to abandon religion due to its traditional patriarchal dimensions. Through such an understanding that feminism often questions the internal running of societies, as a means of promoting equality and benefiting women's positionality, it is evident that feminist politics do not align well with the traditional internal power structures of religion presented by Faver. However, religion can provide women with satisfying experiences in which a woman can be empowered through support from a religious community, which influences internal positive relationship building (Ozorak, 1996). Such empowerment gained by women through engagement with religion provides an opportunity to surpass possible religious traditional patriarchal dimensions, in which women are valued as equal to men. This proves that religion can play a part in the evolution of feminism.

When likening such a discussion between feminism and religion to Jewish women's involvement in feminist politics, religious Jewish American women were active members of the women's liberation movement within the United States in the 1970s (Umansky, 1988). Standing for equal rights for women within society throughout the women's liberation movement resulted in Jewish women reflecting on their positionality within Judaism, which further led to the questioning of how they can achieve equality within private and public aspects of their life (Antler, 2020; Lerner, 1977). This resulted in the founding of feminist groups such as the B'not Esh collective in 1981, consisting of Jewish feminists, who have subsequently been meeting annually (Lilith: Independent, Jewish and Frankly Feminist, 2018). The main aim of B'not Esh is the reconsideration and consequently the alteration of Judaism and Jewish life (B'not Esh, 2020), including the revisioning of previous theology towards Judaism that is inclusive of women's history and experiences (Ackelsberg et al, 1981).

At the first B'not Esh meeting in 1981, the members conducted a traditional Kabbalat Shabbat, which involved a communal prayer that welcomed the Sabbath Queen by the use of spiritual dancing and singing (Ackelsberg, 1986). Freundel (2011) writes that when conducting a traditional Kabbalat Shabbat within a communal prayer setting, it usually consists of a key religious text that is traditionally recited by a minyan. When

acknowledging that a minyan conventionally contains ten Jewish men (Greene and Brodbar, 2010) and that B'not Esh only welcomed those who identified as women at this point (Ackelsberg et al, 1981), B'not Esh took an alternative feminist approach to Kabbalat Shabbat -actively choosing to challenge the previously gendered elements - by having the key texts read by women. Despite B'not Esh not explicitly stating what branch of Judaism the Jewish feminist collective is categorised as, the radical transformation of the Kabbalat Shabbat practice by B'not Esh is justifiable through the lens of the Reconstructionist movement. This is demonstrated by the argument proposed by the founder of the Reconstructionist movement, who wrote that Jewish individuals are able to evidence their interpretation of social idealism within Jewish public worship (Kaplan, 2010). In turn, the Jewish feminist members' social idealism towards their religious practice was prioritised so that the opinions and beliefs of women were respected and integrated into Jewish worship. Furthermore, the American secular and religious Jewish women who were at the forefront of the second wave of feminism insisted that there be equality between the sexes including equal rights for women (Umansky, 1988). By having the sacred texts read by women, B'not Esh shared this sense of equality within the second wave of feminism in the United States throughout the 1970s.

Meanwhile B'not Esh were also adhering to the spiritual recommendation outlined within the Reconstructionist movement. The Reconstructionist movement ordained women as rabbis in the 1970s to aspire towards gender equality, but conservative Judaism did not ordain female rabbis until 1985, due to the concern they would not aspire to traditional conservative expectations held of women, such as being exclusively a mother and wife (Bear, 2019). By accepting women in leadership roles, the Reconstructionist movement gave exposure to the voices of the frequently previously silenced voices of women in Judaism (Englander, 2004). Thus, as other strands of Judaism remained unequal towards Jewish women in 1981, the women of B'not Esh were one of the forerunners of equality between genders within Judaism through the adoption of leadership roles within Jewish religious practice.

Although some members enjoyed the Kabbalat Shabbat by the means previously detailed, a few members reflected on the happening negatively, feeling frustrated that all of the members had conducted the worship traditionally, by the use of the customary liturgy that is male dictated (Ackelsberg, 1986). Avishai (2008) argues that when one closely follows a religion, they are often doing it by semiconscious means that suit social and religious norms. In this regard, whilst some members of B'not Esh considered their practice as wholly feminist (B'not Esh, 2018; Ackelsberg et al, 1981), they may have been oblivious to all of the non-feminist aspects of their worship, due to the possible familiarisation of previous former non-feminist religious culture; which is understood as being heavily male-dominated (Sered, 1996). One may argue from such a happening that the attempted Jewish worship was not wholly feminist and thus was not effectively challenging the domination of Jewish women in every instance throughout such a practice. As a result of Judaism being deemed as the original cause of patriarchy (Umansky, 1988), some non-Jewish feminists within the second wave women's movement were critical of Jewish feminists' involvement, which in turn led to internal anti-Semitism (Ackelsberg, 1998). Plaskow (1991) writes of such exclusion within the women's movement in which white and often Christian feminists constructed dominant accounts of women's

experiences which excluded other religious and cultural perspectives, advocating that the progression of feminism would only be sustained if one identified themselves with such a dominant experience and to thus rid oneself of their opposing self-identification. Yet, Plaskow writes that when one would silence their Jewish heritage and/or religion to be welcomed within the women's movement that left such anti-Semitism unquestioned, likely resulting in the extended oppression experienced by Jewish women. Yet, according to Ackelsberg (1986), B'not Esh aspired to the feminist stance that the 'personal is political' by acknowledging that their actions within their lives must adhere to their feminist and spiritual standpoint, to create a world where they are respected, which aligns with the Jewish principle of tikkun olam ('repair of the world'). The feminists within Judaism were faced with some retaining male-dominated elements in religious practices, pointed out by the protesting members, therefore, it was crucial that the Kabbalat Shabbat practice be re-examined and restructured further in order to achieve their aspired feminist intentions of demanding respect and equality as Jewish women within both Judaism as well as the wider women's movement.

Sered (1996) reconfirms the notion outlined by the protesting members of B'not Esh by highlighting that the Jewish liturgy is male-oriented and thus it often prioritises the spiritual needs of men, which Montagu (1899) argues is the need for the determination and struggle to reach God, seeking the gracious experience in God's presence. Such a notion presents a gendered inequality within Judaism that B'not Esh were yet to challenge. Given that the aspirations of B'not Esh are that their "spiritual concerns be taken seriously within the Jewish community" (Ackelsberg, 1986, p.109) whilst also having a strong bond with the divine (B'not Esh, 2020), it could be argued that B'not Esh were suitably interpreting religious texts to suit their feminist ethics while aspiring to reach the presence of God by reconsidering and reconstructing Kabbalat Shabbat. Likewise, Millgram (1971) states that followers can modify prayers to align with their modern lives, as the prayers within the Reconstructionist prayer book have interpretive versions. Moreover, the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation (1945) emphasises that "As for the congregation, its men and women should strive to create a common emotional mood by participating in the service to the maximum degree" (p.XXIX). Thus, I would argue that the protesting members of B'not Esh were referring to the modern Jewish movement when interpreting that women's full control over Kabbalat Shabbat - the traditional Jewish practice - as a modern obligation to Judaism rather than a threat posed via the radical transformation of the traditional liturgy. Antler (2018) writes that in the early 1980s some Jewish women who had originally rejected Judaism due to its patriarchal nature later once again categorised themselves as Jewish because simply being a woman was not their sole identity, in an attempt to combat discrimination towards themselves, seeing other feminists' prejudice as more of a threat than patriarchy. Such identity politics enabled women to acknowledge their previous historical marginalisation as a means of questioning and understanding their exclusion within the women's movement, which highlighted the large variety of women that made up the movement itself (Hausman, 1991). Through a continual transformation of the Kabbalat Shabbat practice, B'not Esh were challenging the rejection of Jewish women into the wider women's movement by acknowledging and valuing the narratives of Jewish women who did not categorise themselves as white and Christian and whose experiences differed from the dominant

understanding of oppressed women's lives, resulting in a more inclusive women's movement.

After the acknowledgement of the protesting members' concerns, B'not Esh chose to completely transform the Kabbalat Shabbat by permitting the inclusion of any non-sacred text that each member deemed necessary, to attempt to make the worship more inclusive (Ackelsberg, 1986). In turn, B'not Esh were adhering to the occurrence outlined by Sered (1996) in which women find ways that Judaism can sacralise their experiences as feminist Jewish women, whilst surpassing old-fashioned outlined expectations of women, such as the stereotype that all women have children and thus should be excused from davening (Lebovits, 2016). As traditional liturgy remained within the Kabbalat Shabbat practice conducted by B'not Esh up to this point, I would argue that a further revision of the Kabbalat Shabbat worship through the sole inclusion of alternative texts proposed by any member would have ensured that B'not Esh had questioned the necessity of the inclusion of traditionally male-dictated liturgy. In doing so, I would argue that B'not Esh would lead a practice in which each element is included out of choice for the longevity of a religious feminist collective, rather than to condone and prolong the traditions of male-dominated Judaism. Given that feminist activism can be achieved by challenging the existing patriarchy of unequal power structures (West and Blumberg, 1990), it is evident that B'not Esh were furthering the feminist political activism within Judaism by actively attempting to advance the revisioning of the traditional male-dictated liturgy. Thus, a Jewish feminism was realised as B'not Esh proved the significance of feminism within religion, in which restructuring traditional practices rather than simply rejecting them because of its patriarchal implication granted women the ability to actively participate in religious practices without adding to the oppression of women.

In conclusion, I argue that B'not Esh were able to negotiate the tensions between religion and feminist politics through a repeated reconsideration of traditional liturgy and the transformation of the Kabbalat Shabbat worship in its founding year of 1981. In doing so, male-dictated Jewish liturgy was revised to incorporate the experiences, opinions and control held as women towards their Jewish religious practice. I propose that such revisioning was justifiable within Judaism through a reconstructionist lens, because the Reconstructionist movement placed importance on the aspiration towards social idealism and liturgical interpretation to align with modern lives. Jewish women were often met with criticism within the second wave of feminism in America due to their commitment to Judaism, deemed patriarchal in nature. I argue that the continual prioritisation of the restructuring of male-dominated religious practices in Judaism not only destabilised its patriarchal structure, but also challenged anti-Semitism in second-wave feminism. Such revisioning likely contributed to the feminist knowledge within Judaism, that other Jewish feminists can adopt as a means of conducting a feminist practice. Therefore, the essay demonstrates the importance of the work of B'not Esh towards the continual endeavour of equality within Judaism and the second wave of feminism.

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