

2008

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### Recommended Citation

Grimm, Rebecca (2008) "Re-Imaging Modern Jewish Theology: A Closer Look at Post-Holocaust Theology," *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 8 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol8/iss1/5>

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# Re-Imaging Modern Jewish Theology: A Closer Look at Post-Holocaust Theology

*Rebecca Grimm*

Melissa Raphael is a contemporary Jewish theologian with a feminist orientation. In the early- to mid-1990s her writings focused on the feminist agenda of theology, or thealogy as it is commonly referred to. Thealogy is the feminist reconstruction of God as Goddess and the remodeling of the traditional patriarchal and hierarchal theology in favor of a more inclusive and less oppressive thealogy. Raphael's later writings (2003-04) are a critique of the male-dominated responses to the Holocaust. In these works, Raphael argues that theologies offered to explain God's action (or inaction) during the time of the Holocaust represent only males' stories and do not relate to the female experience of the Holocaust. Through her book *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: a Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (2003), Raphael attempts to correct this and proposes her own reading of the divine's presence in Auschwitz. The thealogy presented in such later writings comes out of her background in Goddess worship and Goddess feminism introduced in two of her earlier books, *Introducing Thealogy: Discourse on the Goddess* (1999) and *Thealogy and Embodiment: the Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality* (1996). In applying some of the ideas presented in these two books to her assessment of the male theologies of the Holocaust, Raphael is able to construct her own interpretation of Holocaust thealogy. While her discussions on Goddess worship are generalized and applicable under all circumstances, she does not generalize her Holocaustic writings; they are in response to a very specific circumstance and so they themselves are very specific.

Recognizing that male theologians generally ignore at least half of the affected Jewish population by remaining within the traditional Jewish framework, Raphael's contribution to post-Holocaust Jewish thealogy moves completely away from this standpoint. Raphael suggests that in fact such a patriarchal image of God and the subsequent thealogy itself was disproved through the Holocaust. In contrast to most male theologians, Raphael asserts that God was very much present during the Holocaust, within the actual event itself. She rejects the idea that God was "hidden" or "in exile" and claims that God was present through the actions of people in the death camps. Writing from a female viewpoint, she

uses women's experiences in the Holocaust as a basis for her own theological responses. Raphael offers a 'theology of care' as a model for how god was present in the Holocaust; such a theology posits that god, or as she refers to it, Shekhinah, is reflected through human actions towards one another. Raphael asserts that the Holocaust makes the rejection of the traditional patriarchal model of God necessary. She says that the very occurrence of the Holocaust serves as proof that this idea of God is not a sustainable model for the Jewish god in this world. She offers the image of Shekhinah (the female image of god) as a potential substitute for the naming or model of god.

Raphael's theology forms the backbone for the argument of this paper as her writings provide one of the more appropriate post-Holocaust Jewish responses for today's world. Her theology integrates all experiences and it finds a new image and understanding of god that is better suited to explaining the Holocaust than that of traditional male theologies. While moving in the right direction, Raphael's theology can still be critiqued. Its purpose is to serve as an answer to the Holocaust specifically; as such, it is grounded in this particular context and does not address how one might apply such a theology in a different, non-holocaustic or catastrophic situation. The rest of this paper will explore Raphael's theology and then expand from it. To do this, it is necessary to know where Raphael is coming from and gain a fuller understanding of her personal context.

### Rewriting Theology as Theology

*Theology* is the term used for female *reconstructions* of 'theology.' It is not simply a reinterpretation of male-dominated theology; rather, theology works from outside the patriarchal tradition to create a new religion or spirituality. It is not, therefore, simply a branch of or reform within theological studies; it is itself a separate construction of religious ideals, requiring its own word. Theology has also been termed by some as "Goddess religion" or "Goddess feminism." The Goddess religion's most obvious break from traditional systems is that there is not a "single founder, a charismatic leadership, hierarchy, coercion, or any notions of obedience to authority."<sup>3</sup> Theology is, in general, opposed to the idea of one transcendent and controlling divine being "making decisions on behalf of everything else in the cosmos." The Goddess, on the other hand, cannot be abstracted from nature or the cosmos like this, meaning that the "pattern of the future is as undetermined as are complex living systems themselves."<sup>4</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> Raphael, *Introducing Theology*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-3.

Goddess is not a traditional deity figure, in that she is not solely an *object* of faith; she is a being in whose existence one can take part. Unlike the traditional modes of worship of the patriarchal God, Goddess women do not “trust or *hope* that the Goddess exists; in some senses she *is* existence and is therefore available to immediate, self-authenticating, *present* experience.”<sup>5</sup>

Under this claim, the Goddess is imaged as nature; the being that ties all other beings together. As immanent in nature, all human actions must be made in the context of the Goddess’s being. The exact nature of her being, however, is different for different people. The shape that the Goddess takes, or the way in which she reveals herself, is different for each person. This is not to say that the goddess herself is different; the characteristics and essence of the goddess remains the same no matter how one relates to her. This is also not to make the goddess relative to each person; such a position would undermine any religion. How one accesses the goddess, the way in which the goddess becomes available to each person will differ depending on that person’s specific context, on what is salient to that person. This is positive as people need to be able to relate to the being they worship. Many places of traditional religious worship claim that god can only be found within them; people must go there in order to ‘find’ god, implying that he cannot be found elsewhere. The Goddess, contrarily, is of the world and can be found wherever one looks for her. This makes her more accessible and it also enables people to choose the way in which she is revealed to them, giving more meaning to any goddess-human relationship.

As there is no central text or creed for thealogy, “proper behavior” stems from the “deep feeling of connection to all people and to all beings in the web of life (Christ 1997: 156).”<sup>6</sup> Carol Christ says that “we act morally when we live in conscious and responsible awareness of the intrinsic value of each being with whom we share life on earth (1997: 156).”<sup>7</sup> This means that circumstances of oppression such as poverty, discrimination, and ecological degradation diminish her and ourselves as well, because “‘we cannot fulfill ourselves in a world of starvation, pollution, and hopelessness’ ([Starhawk] 1982a: 417-19).”<sup>8</sup> Living in accordance with thealogy, then, is living in opposition to these forms of oppression and working actively against them. This being said, a world in tune with thealogy would still not be perfect, because “it would be a natural one and nature is not

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

perfect. But it *would* be a global community whose organizational structures, spiritual values and material priorities would deprive patriarchal elites of their very conditions of possibility."<sup>9</sup> Theology does not lead to a utopia on earth, or in heaven; rather, it aims to attain a non-hierarchical organization of human communities living in and at peace with the rest of the cosmos, recognizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings.

### Female Sacrality

Integrally related to goddess worship is the idea of "female sacrality." Female sacrality asserts that it is female powers that "transform elements in nature"<sup>10</sup> ; that is, it is not a power that created something external from itself and left it under control of human will. Raphael says that in the traditional biblical creation stories, "God does not create the world by transforming parts of his body or pre-existent matter, but more or less *ex nihilo* by his will or reason."<sup>11</sup> This means that God is given credit for the creation of "perfect world whose imperfections are then attributable to human disordering."<sup>12</sup> Female sacrality itself derives its meaning from the natural forces of the universe, in which the Goddess continuously exists. Raphael says that patriarchy has projected "its own will to power" back onto God, claiming God's will as its own and so allowing "biblical cultures to ignore or discredit female sacral powers."<sup>13</sup> In this way, patriarchal religions have also "replaced female generative chaos with destructive chaos of free-market economics and war, drawing a flotsam of refugees, homelessness, and environmental desolation in their wake."<sup>14</sup> If God is not immanent in the world under the strictly patriarchal theology, as Raphael suggests, then humans exist outside of any obligation to care for the world or its inhabitants. If, however, God(dess) is seen as a part of the earth, existing within humans' world, then all human action should be in accordance with this – people should care for the world as they would for God(dess)'s body. This is one of the claims made by theology, "the Goddess is nature . . . the earth is the Goddess's body, or she is at least immanent (indwelling) in the 'female' energies of cosmic, natural, and social regeneration."<sup>15</sup> This greatly influences Raphael's later reaction to the Holocaust, specifically her use of Shekhinah as a model for god.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>10</sup> Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>15</sup> Raphael, *Introducing Theology*, 62.

Raphael says that the source of female sacred energy (the goddess) is “both identical with and transcendent to the self as immanent in all that is alive.”<sup>16</sup> By this she means that the divine is present in *all* things, as such she is necessarily in each person – immanence – but she is also outside of each person – transcendence. Even in this transcendence, however, the goddess is not *above* people, she is simply greater than any one person or community; she cannot be controlled. As Raphael quotes from a paper written by a group of women in a Matriarchy network:

The Goddess is not separate but is in everything. We are her and she is us. Her agency is our energy: it is in all of us at a deep personal level as a source of power and we have many choices as to how we may wish to express this power . . . We are all individual sources of energy but we are also all joined as one great pool of power, strength and creativity as are all things in the universe and beyond.<sup>17</sup>

This recognition of interconnectedness is imperative to any theology; one cannot live without a community of others, and a community cannot survive without the inclusion and active participation of all.

Though Raphael does not respond to the Holocaust in terms of goddess religions, it is nonetheless important to how she forms her understanding of god’s place in this world and the nature of the god-human relationship. Influences of goddess traditions, though not explicitly discussed as such, can be seen throughout her theology.

In an attempt to be as inclusive as possible, the ensuing discussion will use the term “theology” with the understanding that it does not refer only to the traditionally male study of religion. Raphael herself uses “theology” and not “thealogy” throughout *Female Face of God in Auschwitz*. “Theology” literally means the study of god; it is not inherently a term that implies hierarchy or patriarchy. Thealogy, as it was defined in direct contrast to theology, names a religious structure completely outside of traditional religions in order to differentiate its agenda. As this is not the immediate purpose of this paper, the use of thealogy would be inappropriate. Raphael’s own work and the direction of this paper are both accepting the basic tenets and understandings of Judaism and are working within this general framework to reach a different interpretation of historical events than have been previously imagined. Changing previous conceptions and understandings does not necessitate a clean break from the basic foundations of

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 266.

Judaism, as a theology would. While traditional theology has been understood to use a patriarchal model of God and theology has used a model of Goddess, the particular “study of god” presented in this paper represents god as Shekhinah, bringing elements of god and goddess together.

### Raphael’s Response to the Holocaust

The common traditional response to the Holocaust has been that God was “absent” or “hidden” during this time as a sign of his deference to human free-will and choice. It is argued that God could not intervene in human affairs while maintaining human freedom.<sup>18</sup> Raphael claims, however, that god was not absent during the Holocaust, but rather that people did not know the true name of god and they were looking for the wrong one (the patriarchal one). She argues that god, as Shekhinah, was very much present in the Holocaust, and that this presence was necessary for the survival of humanity. God cannot entirely divest him/herself of responsibility to humankind; s/he cannot withdraw his/her “providential presence,” and so during the Holocaust s/he hid itself, but s/he did not depart.<sup>19</sup> The traditional male theology arising out of the Holocaust failed to question the patriarchal model of God and focused instead on certain failures of its attributes.<sup>20</sup> Raphael’s theology corrects this by identifying the problem not as the failure of God-in-God’s self, but rather of the patriarchal model of God. Rather than being absent, Raphael says that god was concealed in Auschwitz, since her female face was yet unknown to women. This “disappearance” of god was not a betrayal; god never turned her face from suffering. She fell from view only when women did not know where or how to find her, for they did not know her name, Shekhinah.<sup>21</sup>

Raphael says that the Jewish God’s power is used to underwrite male Jewish power<sup>22</sup>; the patriarchal structure of traditional Judaism essentially allows men to use their control over theology as the method through which to derive their power on earth. In the context used by Raphael, this ‘power’ refers to the way in which one’s will is imposed upon history, the ability to which one’s will can condition history rather than have history condition it. She asserts that the traditionally Jewish, post-Holocaust free-will defense of god “negotiates the (re)distribution of power between a male god, male Jewish subjects, and Nazi Germany.”<sup>23</sup> In this way, it is primarily concerned with the agency allowed to men, and not the

<sup>18</sup> Raphael, “The Price of (Masculine) Freedom and Becoming,” 136-7.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>22</sup> Raphael, “The Price of (Masculine) Freedom and Becoming,” 139.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

consequences of this agency. This defense of God, by positing that responsibility for the Holocaust rests on the free-will of men, serves to *reward* masculine agency as it “asserts that ‘mans’s’ general freedom has prevailed over particular evils and even over God’s will that his creation should flourish.”<sup>24</sup> The claim that god was absent from the Holocaust in order to not interfere with human free-will implicitly endorses the actions of that free-will, the sufferings and deaths of the Holocaust.

Raphael’s response to the argument that god’s interference on earth would mean the eclipse of human free-will is to say that a Jewish god’s presence would not impede moral choice, but rather it would “sustain and empower it within a matrix of interdependent relationships.”<sup>25</sup> She defines Jewish becoming itself as “the narrative of a community that turns together in its historic situation and goes out with God to meet its future.”<sup>26</sup> She re-images god’s power as a more persuasive one that enables people to be aware of his presence and to work within his plan without being dominated. The people, as stated in the quotation above, must go out with god to their future; god is not a presence that forces itself upon individuals, but one that is revealed and furthered by those there, working to make the presence felt and known. Through the cleansing of others, Raphael says that women brought god into the concentration camps and they were empowered to receive back the image. An overpowering God as imagined by the patriarchal model would not allow for this same kind of human participation.

Raphael’s main focus is developing a feminist theology of the Holocaust, but her writing can be extrapolated to apply to global circumstances outside of that particular time. The main theme of the theology she presents is that the world is sanctified through the “redemption and restoration of the divine image.”<sup>27</sup> Raphael claims that a revelation of god’s face or presence is also a revelation of the human face or presence; when humankind is truly human then god is known as god. In this way, the presence of god is also the presence of redeemed humanity. The responsibility and redemption of humanity, however, does not rest solely on a divine being, but on the mutuality of divine and human labor; the world is mended not only from above, but also from below. This also relates to the discussion of female sacrality in nature, as the need for mending from below comes from the idea that god is present in the earth. As mentioned before, humans are expected to take part in the existence or being of the goddess and it is this same idea that leads to the mutuality of care and shared responsibility between humans and god.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>27</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 134.



The questions then become, how is god revealed to the world? And what role do humans play in this revelation and in bringing about redemption? Raphael says that god is present through the actions of kindness towards others; the imitation of the holy in human communities is a signal and manifestation of the presence of god in the world. Through an ethic of care, god's presence is made possible; people are never nearer to god than when they respond in love and sympathy to the need of others. Divine presence only attains earthly fullness when individuals help one another; that is, god is present *through* the actions of people towards each other and the earth, not *in* people or nature. This understanding of how god is present reflects some of Martin Buber's influence on Raphael. Some could argue that this then makes god's immanence so complete that it undermines his/her transcendence. God's presence through the action of people, however, is just this, presence. It is only the revelation of god, it is not itself the existence of god. There is still room, and the need, for both the transcendence and immanence of god. The balance between transcendence and immanence can be more fully examined through the being of Shekhinah.

### Shekhinah

Raphael's answer to the patriarchal God that was "hidden" during the Holocaust is a god, or female image of that god, who is made more present on the earth through the actions of people. Raphael refers to Shekhinah, who in Judaism is the "traditionally female image of the indwelling presence of god,"<sup>28</sup> as this female image of god. 'Shekhinah' is only feminine grammatically and "indicates the sense of being in a sacred place. . . .The Shekhinah is a symbol of God's self-revelation and immanence in the everyday world."<sup>29</sup> In the midrashim, Shekhinah is not so much god's presence in a particular place as she is the presence of god among the exiled community of Israel; she is the "image of the female aspect of God caring for her people in exile."<sup>30</sup> She is, within Judaism, similar to the concept of the goddess as discussed earlier. Shekhinah provides for an understanding of god within the traditional faith of Judaism that is not the traditional model of God by calling upon god's more female characteristics and through an understanding of Shekhinah as immanent as well as transcendent.

Raphael says that the immanence of god breaks down the traditional, hierarchical "binary oppositions of spirit and flesh, heaven and earth, sacred and profane, where the value of one element in the duality – the transcendent – is

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

secured at the expense of the other – the immanent.”<sup>31</sup> This raises the question of whether or not she is making god too immanent, and putting too much power over god in the hands of people. Shekhinah is traditionally the mark of Judaism’s faith in god’s immanence; she is the attribute of presence. Shekhinah, as “God-present-among us” is bound by the conditions of immanence; she is the aspect of God that is present and accessible to people. As Shekhinah, god “suffers the conditions of finitude. But as God, she endures forever.”<sup>32</sup> Raphael is careful to point out, however, that Shekhinah is simply presence in the world, and that this does not make god identical with the world. Another way that Raphael says this is that god “does not dwell in the people of Israel but among or alongside them.”<sup>33</sup> In this way, god is accessible by all but controllable by none; god is still a transcendent being, and this transcendence ensures that the “divine will and purpose are unconditioned by human evil, while god’s immanence ensures that humanity can become god’s partner in bringing god’s purposes to fulfillment” on earth.<sup>34</sup> In accepting some amount of transcendence, however, one may question if Raphael also accepts a certain amount of hierarchy in theology. This is not the case: transcendence does not necessarily require hierarchy. It is necessary for god to be transcendent, so that s/he remains outside of human control. At the same time god’s immanence is just as important so that s/he remains accessible and present. Raphael essentially breaks the transcendent and immanent elements of ‘god’ into two faces of the same being: ‘Shekhinah’ and ‘god.’ It is the degree to which god is immanent and the degree to which people recognize this immanence that the traditional hierarchy of a transcendent god will weaken without weakening god’s transcendence.

In the traditional patriarchal model of Judaism, Shekhinah (the immanent aspect of god) is “exiled from the world and from God-self.”<sup>35</sup> She is “veiled to the point of disappearance under a welter of patriarchal names that, whatever their intrinsic merit, obscure her female face from women’s religious thought and experience.”<sup>36</sup> Raphael has taken upon herself the task of revealing Shekhinah to us. Whereas most male theologians asked why God did not protect us from the Holocaust, Raphael says that the more meaningful question is how can we protect god’s presence, since it is this which makes it possible to know god in the

<sup>31</sup> Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*, 23-4.

<sup>32</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 125.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 180 n66.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

other and for god to know god-self in creation.<sup>37</sup> To claim that god was present in Auschwitz as Shekhinah has nothing to do with the traditional doctrines of patriarchal theology; Shekhinah's power is one of "transformation contingent upon mutuality and responsibility and is therefore dependent upon the presence and absence of conditions on earth that invite or repel the divine."<sup>38</sup> This "mutuality and responsibility" are what form the foundation for Raphael's theology of care, for god "cannot be known where there is no one who will turn their face to hers."<sup>39</sup> With this understanding of god as immanent in Shekhinah, we can move into a discussion of Raphael's specific theology and it will become clear how this re-imagining of the Judaic deity and religion is not only a positive step forward, but a necessary one.

### Theology of Care

Raphael defines 'holy' as "that which God wishes to be set apart from harm."<sup>40</sup> Something that has been protected from harm has been "washed and re-covered from its exposure to destructive forces,"<sup>41</sup> that is, it has been cleaned. Cleanness, therefore, becomes a "signifier of the moral and spiritual health on which the blessings of peace and stability in the home, the House of Israel, the world, and the cosmos depend."<sup>42</sup> Relating this to the human (and in particular the female) experience in death camps, acts of cleaning oneself or another took on a more significant meaning than simply bodily restoration; in death camps, women's very humanity was completed through the restoration of god's image in their own face.<sup>43</sup> Such acts of care "restored in one another that profaned spark of the divine which rendered them a reflection of God" and it also enabled them to restore god to god.<sup>44</sup> Both women and god, then, gained redemption from patriarchy as they together "fell into the holocaustal pit."<sup>45</sup> It is this "mutual knowing that both God and humanity will come to experience the blessings consequent upon the reconciliation within self and world" that is traditionally described as *tikkun* ("repair") in the Jewish tradition.<sup>46</sup> Relations between people created a redemptive moment of human presence, a "*staying there* against erasure." This "*staying there*" reveals the "liberation of God from the demonic attempt to remove or disappear

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

the human(e) and the divine."<sup>47</sup>

Raphael refers to the "women of Block 25" as "untouchables;" food and water were withheld from them for days on end and they were kept waiting, without sanitation or proper ventilation, to be gassed. These women, who were in both "physical and emotional extremis," were taken "beyond the sphere of sanctifying touch. Neither they nor God could be redeemed from the abyss of impurity into which the divine spark had been cast."<sup>48</sup> In Auschwitz, god was both imprisoned and exiled from the world; women's acts of restoration therefore served to return god to Auschwitz and to liberate her from Auschwitz. To be able to call god back into the world, women had to know her name(s), but they had "almost no words of their own with which to call God,"<sup>49</sup> having lived with the patriarchal model of God for so long. Experiences in the death camps, then, became ways for women to find Shekhinah and learn her name; when a woman saw the "face of the other and went out to meet her she can also be said to have gone out to meet God. Auschwitz was a mirror onto the suffering face of God; God was seen and authoritative in the face of the suffering other."<sup>50</sup>

In addressing the question of appropriate power, this theology of care gives power back to the powerless. The "overpowering" God of the male experience left the powerful rather powerless; in concentration camps, men could not find their idea of God to fall back on because there was no overpowering moment. At the same time that they lost this particular model of God, they were unable to find any other way of bringing God into their experience. Through their relationships with other people, however, women were able to restore the face of god in Auschwitz; this enabled them to bring god and god's hope back into their lives and find some redemptive value in their situation.

On the whole, Raphael presents a reasonable start to breaking apart patriarchal, hierarchical theologies. She re-images god as a being more accessible to more people and reworks the ways in which god is revealed and what it means to do god's work. It is helpful to keep in mind Raphael's understanding of the goddess in our world as this relates to the model of god she presents in Shekhinah and the appropriate human-god relationship.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

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