

# EMERGENT LIBERAL JUDAISM AND LILY MONTAGU'S PROTO-FEMINIST PROJECT: EXPLORING THE PRECURSIVE AND CONCEPTUAL LINKS WITH SECOND AND THIRD-WAVE JEWISH FEMINIST THEOLOGIES

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Abstract: Lily Montagu was the founder of Liberal Judaism in England. Because of Montagu's groundbreaking proto-feminist efforts women in Liberal Judaism can become rabbis, be called up to read the Torah, they are equal in divorce law, they can study the sacred texts, they can form a minyan, and can assume communal and religious positions of authority over men. Montagu was an author, theologian, and social worker; she was the driving force behind the development of Liberal Judaism. However, this biographical overview does not match up with the extant historiography that has instead preferred to focus on the male leaders of the Liberal movement to the extent that Montagu's intellectual and theological contribution has been marginalized and even completely ignored. In this paper we will see through analysis of rarely seen literary material another aspect of the gendered history of fin-de-siècle Anglo-Jewry that would otherwise be forgotten; even more, we will see in Montagu's essays, monographs, and novels some of the English foundations of contemporary Jewish feminist theology. In the process, the biography and memory of Lily Montagu will be restored to its rightful place.

Lily Montagu was the founder of Anglo-Liberal Judaism, but the extant scholarship has not been forthcoming in acknowledging the extent of her role in the expansion of the movement. In fact, Montagu's part in the formation and development of Liberal Judaism into an established denomination, and her contribution to the intellectual, spiritual, and theological underpinnings of the movement, have been marginalized, downplayed, and even ignored, with analyses of her involvement even bordering on the derogatory. However, the historiographical picture does not marry up with the primary sources, including Montagu's innumerable speeches, lectures, prayers, and services to the Liberal congregation, and her countless monographs, novels, sermons, essays, letters, liturgies, and papers for *Liberal Jewish Monthly*, the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, and as part of the Papers for Jewish People series. Instead Anglo-Jewish historiography, with few exceptions, has preferred to focus on Claude Montefiore and the other male leaders of the movement. This is despite the fact that Montagu was overseer, driving force, and spiritual guide to the organization for over fifty years. Importantly, Montagu not only challenged contemporaneous Jewish stereotypes concerning the role and agency of women, she refigured the discriminatory layers of the tradition along proto-feminist lines to develop religious praxis, liturgical, and theological discursive that is more resonant of Second-Wave Jewish feminism than it is of early-twentieth-century, First-Wave feminist discourse.<sup>1</sup> This is important as the Montagu corpus

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<sup>1</sup> By First-Wave feminism I refer to the period of activism between 1792 and 1918 (other scholars will differ) that resulted in women gaining the franchise in 1918 in England. Alternatively, the locus of Second-Wave Jewish

reveals an Anglo-Jewish forerunner to the Second and Third-Waves of feminist activism. In this paper we will explore the links between the stages. Indeed, by examining the feminist elements of Montagu's own understanding of Liberal theology, particularly in the immanent experience of the divine presence, we will draw out some of the spiritual and conceptual links with contemporary Jewish feminist theology. In the process, we will see not only another element to the gendered history of Anglo-Jewish emancipation, acculturation, and religious reform at the fin-de-siècle that might otherwise have been overlooked or forgotten, but, through the analysis of rarely seen literary works by Lily Montagu, some of the precursory and theoretical foundations of current feminist exposition on the divine.<sup>2</sup>

Lily Montagu was born December 22, 1873 into the upper-class, Anglo-Jewish Montagu family. Despite the family's wealth, and their acculturation, Lily's father, Samuel Montagu, was intent that the household remain strictly Orthodox. But Lily was never convinced; although she enjoyed the observances and the festivals she was concerned that attention to ritual, or ritual for ritual's sake, was usurping spiritual intention (*kavanah*). Montagu could not relate any type of spiritual experience with these festivals; they seemed vacuous. Years later, she confessed in retrospect:

I was not conscious of any personal spiritual experience stimulated by the Sabbaths and festivals, but I could become very enthusiastic over the symbols, and if asked, should have unhesitatingly said that their preservation was required by God. . . .

I can trace my first questioning of the utility of observances if pursued as ends in themselves to experiences connected with Passover . . . I remember rushing up to my eldest brother . . . and expostulating. "I feel ashamed," I said, "at the behavior of many of the people. How dare they think they are praying? If that is religion, I hate it."<sup>3</sup>

But this is not to say that Montagu did not appreciate the importance of rituals and observances; she would later recall: "I adhered to my Liberal Jewish point of view that ceremonials which are aids to holiness, which, in fact, assist ordinary people to render ordinary life holy, were worth preserving even at the cost of personal sacrifice. Legalism, which, alas, has usurped the place of life-giving religion, I felt to be acceptable."<sup>4</sup> Montagu complained that the Orthodox services were inadequate as the prayers were in Hebrew and incomprehensible and she felt peripheral as a woman being sequestered to the gallery,

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feminism was in the United States and began in the 1970s. The multi-denominational emphasis of the loosely defined movement encompassed numerous feminist concerns with the central focus emanating from the Conservative movement. Jewish feminists were seeking women's equal access to all aspects of Jewish communal and religious life, including leadership, though specifically, Conservative feminists were seeking an end to gender inequality in family *halakhot* (laws), the removal of the *mechitza* curtain that separates the sexes in the synagogue, and the inclusion of women in the all male *minyan* (prayer group). Reform feminists complained that women were not being called up to read the Torah, while Orthodox feminists questioned the exclusion of women from the study of the sacred texts as well as the legal restrictions on women initiating divorce. With regard to theology, the Reconstructionist movement was integral, and continues to be, particularly in its rejection of classical theology, *halakhah* (law), hierarchy, and Jewish particularity, and in its humanism (Luke Devine, *Second-Wave Jewish Feminism, 1971–1991: Foundational Theology and Sacral Discourse* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 19–20). In general, the Second-Wave was a drive for gender inclusionism, in one way or another, across the Jewish denominations.

<sup>2</sup> See Luke Devine, *From Anglo-First-Wave Towards American Second-Wave Jewish Feminism: Negotiating with Jewish Feminist Theology and its Communities in the Writing of Amy Levy* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010) and Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First Wave Feminism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) to explore the conceptual links between First and Second-Wave feminisms.

<sup>3</sup> Lily Montagu, *The Faith of a Jewish Woman* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1943), 8–9.

<sup>4</sup> Lily Montagu, *My Club and I: The Story of the West Central Jewish Club* (London: Herbert Joseph Limited, 1941), 43.

among other discriminatory gender differentiations. Believing that Orthodoxy was denying both her intellectual self-expression and the development of her inner-spirituality, Montagu went into spiritual “crisis” at the age of fifteen. She was unable to negotiate the link between the authority of her father and his uncompromising Orthodoxy and the restrictions on her personal liberty.<sup>5</sup> As a young adult, Montagu was troubled by her family’s unthinking acceptance of *halakha*: “We did not rebel. We believed that we were acting as Jews must, and there was no court of appeal against the strict laws. There was no question of degree. All the regulations were part of the fence, built up to defend the Divine laws as given to Moses, and we accepted them.”<sup>6</sup> It was the Reverend Simeon Singer, the Minister of the New West End Synagogue, who Montagu credited with awakening her to the Hebrew prophets and to the importance of religion.<sup>7</sup> Singer encouraged her to ask questions that would not have been countenanced by her father. According to Montagu they discussed the prophets at length and she gradually became infused with prophetic concerns for social justice. Nellie Levy describes the sense of moral mission that became central to Montagu’s life:

A young girl dreamed and behold a vision appeared and she saw her sisters, and they lacked much that had been bestowed on her, some needed guidance and friendship, some to be lighted out of squalor and shown the light; some seemed mere children forced to become breadwinners; some ran to and fro to snatch at pleasures that were transitory and left bitterness and disillusionment; some cried “Give us opportunities denied us, we too need light, space, knowledge”; others sat and waited to enter the world of literature and art, and again, others feared to tread, for the path seemed strewn with giants, who could be overcome only by strength which they lacked, and still others groped towards those frailer than themselves and longed to hold out a helping hand but knew not how. . . . “To this vision I [Montagu] consecrate myself, and its fruition I will labor unceasingly. I will break down barriers, establish friendships and give opportunities. I will share, bind up those who are broken, and I will set before them light and good through a Faith in Judaism, so that they have strength wherewith to live.”<sup>8</sup>

Between the ages of fifteen and nineteen Montagu read up on philosophy, history, and religion. She became convinced that her role was to bring social “amelioration”; she was determined to help those less fortunate than herself, particularly in London’s socially disadvantaged East End Jewish community.<sup>9</sup> For Montagu, it was God’s will that social justice would prevail over inequality:

I was deeply shocked by the inequalities which prevailed in large cities, the terrible injustice which allowed me to have such an easy, happy, protected girlhood while there was, in some districts, a monotony of misery. But I felt convinced that God did not desire such injustice to continue. My faith in His righteousness was never affected, but I was worried by the apparent inability of God to stem the tide of injustice. I was convinced that man, with God’s help, *could* set things right if he wished to, but how was he to be made to realise his obligations?<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Eric Conrad, *Lily H. Montagu: Prophet of A Living Judaism* (New York: National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, 1953), 35–36. See *In Memory of Lily H. Montagu: Some Extracts from Her Letters and Addresses*, ed. by Conrad, Eric (Amsterdam: Polak and Van Genneep, 1967).

<sup>6</sup> Montagu, *The Faith*, 2–3.

<sup>7</sup> Conrad, *Lily H. Montagu*, 36–37.

<sup>8</sup> Nellie Levy, *The West Central Story and Its Founders the Hon. Lily H. Montagu CBE, JP, DD and the Hon. Marian Montagu: 1893–1968*, club pamphlet (London: Leeway Business Services), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Montagu, *The Faith*, 11, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Montagu, *The Faith*, 14.

A similarly pressing issue was the growing tide of secularization in the Jewish community. Montagu was concerned that Orthodoxy's inability to accommodate Anglo-Jewish modernity was the cause of the exodus. At the same time, Claude Montefiore was developing theories of Liberal Judaism that would re-inspire and reengage both immigrant and assimilated Jews with the tradition. Montagu was inspired by Montefiore, and by the Reform Judaism that had become prevalent in Germany and in the United States (Anglo-Reformism was far more conservative; a factor in the necessity of Liberal Judaism),<sup>11</sup> but she was mindful that Montefiore was too much of a scholar to initiate and lead a religious movement, though when she received encouraging replies from letters that she had sent out in early 1899 seeking support for a Liberal movement, Montefiore was inclined to join Montagu in her venture. The formal leadership of the newly established Jewish Religious Union, which held its first formal meeting in February 1902, was given to Montefiore. The movement's aim was to gather congregants in the formation of a new denomination based on the "eternal elements in Judaism."<sup>12</sup>

In the letter that Lily Montagu circulated she outlined a number of practical and religious issues that would need to be resolved by the fledgling Liberal Jewish movement in order that they be a radical, while at the same time acceptable, alternative to Orthodoxy with an authoritative basis in the tradition:

- I. What are the vital principles of the old Judaism that must be preserved in the new?
- II. If these "vital principles" do not include belief in the miraculous Divine Revelation heretofore accepted, what is the Authority on which we are to rely in judging of right and wrong?
- III. What forms and ceremonies should be retained on account of their historical or ethical or sanitary value? (Special reference to the seventh day Sabbath and to festivals commemorating alleged miraculous events.)
- IV. What is to be the special function of the Jew under the new Judaism?<sup>13</sup>

It was in 1902 that services independent of the United Synagogue were established, along with lectures, and publications to endorse the new Liberal Judaism; as Montagu noted: "The cry was no longer for changed externalities such as were secured by the Reform Synagogue already established for seventy years, but for a re-statement of Jewish doctrine in the light of scientific truth."<sup>14</sup> Montagu was only too aware that assimilated religionists had become bored with the traditional services. Moreover, modern employment conditions and the working week did not allow for regular observance and daily visits to the synagogue; instead, Montagu saw it as her mission to create an essential and "living" Judaism that was compatible with everyday life. In *The Faith of a Jewish Woman* she notes:

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<sup>11</sup> The failures of late nineteenth-century Anglo-Reformism are well documented. For Daniel Langton the movement was paralyzed by its meager response to biblical criticism (*Claude Montefiore: His Life and Thought* [London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2002], 72). Moreover, as an enclave of upper-middle-class Anglo-Jewry it held no appeal to the eastern European Jewish immigrants arriving in the 1880s, its Sabbath attendances were the lowest for all synagogues in the period, and most members attended only once a year, normally on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). Unsurprisingly a number of Reformers were dissatisfied with the movement's limitations, and by the late 1880s they began looking for alternatives (see Michael Hilton, *The Christian Effect on Jewish Life* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1994); Devine, *From Anglo-First-Wave*). More so, Reform Judaism's conservative approach to the "Woman Question" and its failure to effect proto-feminist reform became a source of alienation for Anglo-Jewish women.

<sup>12</sup> Montagu, *The Faith*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Lily Montagu, "Private Letter" (March 24, 1899), in *Lily Montagu: Sermons, Addresses, Letters, and Papers*, ed. Ellen Umansky (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), 289.

<sup>14</sup> Montagu, *The Faith*, 28.

Those people, however, who had the leisure to attend services, were unwilling to do so because they were sure of being bored. Their knowledge of Hebrew was scanty, and they needed to pray in the language in which they were accustomed to think. Certainly, Hebrew had great beauty as well as historical interest, and it was a bond between different communities that they should have the same liturgy. But the religious bond could only be of real use if it expressed a living faith. There was no use in peoples meeting in various lands and going through identical services, in order to endure identical sense of boredom. Life *was essential*, and the bond of religion must be the bond of life.<sup>15</sup>

The Jewish Religious Union offered services that were predominantly in the vernacular and at times when those with employment commitments, such as on Saturday mornings, could attend in the afternoon or evening instead. Indeed, the “letter of the law” was no longer considered important,<sup>16</sup> and services maintained little resonant of their Orthodox counterparts (the inability to provide an alternative to the traditional synagogues was a failure of Anglo-Reformism). Montagu was duly aware that modern lifestyles did not allow for meticulous attention to *halakhah* and the observance of the *mitzvot* (commandments):

There is a large body of Jews who require the construction, at any rate in outline, of a definite theory of their faith. They are anxious to realise and to transmit Judaism as a living faith, but have no time or inclination to work out the principles and deductions of such a faith for themselves. This class includes busy men and women who “have enough to do already without thinking very much about their religion.” There are others who think Judaism all right in its proper place, but do not believe it affects *them* more often, perhaps, than two or three times a year.<sup>17</sup>

The purpose of the new denomination was to accommodate acculturated Anglo-Jewry's busy lifestyles and the personal aspirations of religionists, but even more, the JRU was born out of necessity to prevent the perceived social absorption of the assimilated elements of Anglo-Jewry into the host culture. Indeed, in “Spiritual Possibilities of Judaism To-day” (1899) Montagu argues that “For many years self-consciousness has been growing among English Jews, and they have expressed, in whispers to one another, dissatisfaction with their spiritual state”; she concluded that the majority of Jews were “either devoted to ceremonialism at the expense of religion, or indifferent both to ceremonialism and to religion.”<sup>18</sup> The article was intended to be a call to action: “Surely we English Jews can have no excuse for continued indifference and waiting. To us the call is clear and unmistakable. For our own sakes we must revive Judaism, and having reconciled its dogma with our highest conception of truth and beauty, allow it again to bind us to the God who cares for us.”<sup>19</sup>

In the early years the JRU was not confined to single premises and services were held in rented halls. But in 1909 the JRU was rebranded as the Jewish Religious Union for the Advancement of Liberal Judaism and a synagogue was opened in Hill Street, Marylebone (London). The first minister was Israel Mattuck, a Reform rabbi from the United States. Indeed, Anglo-Liberal Judaism had its roots in classical Reform Judaism. Claude Montefiore was intent on maintaining monotheism and the moral and spiritual teaching of the prophets; even more, the focus on interpretive liberty, as in Reformism, allowed Liberal Judaism to

<sup>15</sup> Montagu, *The Faith*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Montagu, *The Faith*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Lily Montagu, *Thoughts on Judaism* (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1904), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Lily Montagu, “Spiritual Possibilities of Judaism To-Day,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 11 (1899), 216.

<sup>19</sup> Montagu, “Spiritual Possibilities,” 229.

“pick and choose” those elements of the biblical and rabbinic traditions, and the *halakhah*, considered salvageable while the discriminatory and retrogressive aspects could be marginalized or ignored. It was not Montefiore’s intention to replace or do away with the major festivals, but the critique of ritual and rabbinics central to the Christian Evangelical tradition is evident, particularly in Liberal Judaism’s focus on the individual, the necessity of inner-spirituality over and above legal and ritualistic observance, and the word of the Bible over the rabbis and the Talmud. Montefiore was concerned to develop a theology devoid of nationalistic and Zionistic (advocating return to the Holy Land) tendency that was instead universal as opposed to particularistic. Even the Torah was not considered the direct word of God and was open to subjective interpretation. In the new Liberal Judaism religionists were first and foremost citizens; merely Jews by the cultural feature of religion. Ritual, and the extent of observance, was dependent on the individual and their subjective reality, while freedom of conscience and moral conduct were central. In a shift from rabbinic theology that figures the Jewish people as a collective before the divine presence and that insists on a radical separation between the individual and the Holy One, blessed be He that can at its closest only be experienced through *Shechinah* (the presence of God in the world), Liberal theology encourages direct personal and spiritual communion with the divine. Moreover, the kosher dietary laws were no longer considered justified. Indeed, the nascent leadership, Lily Montagu included, was concerned that passages in the Bible exhibited “cruelty” and “revenge”, that certain “barbaric” laws brought humiliation on women, and that laws incompatible with human conduct had to be altered, particularly those in connection with sacrifice.<sup>20</sup> But perhaps the biggest break with the tradition was in Liberal Judaism’s equalization of the sexes and its radical approach to the “Woman Question.”<sup>21</sup> The androcentrism of the biblical and rabbinic traditions qua the “Woman Question” is well documented: women are excluded from the study and authoritative interpretation of the sacred texts; they are exempted from all positive time-bound *mitzvot* excluding *nerot*: the lighting of candles on Shabbat; *challah*: separating a portion of dough, and *niddah*: ritual immersion following menstruation; women are excluded from the *minyan*; they are inadmissible as legal witnesses, they cannot be called up to read the Torah, and they are not allowed to take communal or religious positions that place them in authority over men. As we will see, the reengagement of women with the tradition, and with the divine, was integral to Montagu’s conception of Liberal Judaism.

Short, uncritical biographies of Lily Montagu have been published by those close to her in the Liberal movement. Indeed, Nellie Levy, a member of Montagu’s West Central Jewish Girls’ Club (established in 1893) published a brief overview of Montagu’s involvement at the social club in a pamphlet, while Eric Conrad, Montagu’s nephew, published *Lily H. Montagu: Prophet of a Living Judaism*. These biographers were perhaps too close to Montagu, who was a universally popular and admired figure, to be anything but praiseworthy; nonetheless these expositions are still valuable as they tell us what club members and congregants thought of Montagu and how she is remembered. Similarly, Lawrence Rigal and Rosita Rosenberg’s more recent study of *Liberal Judaism: The First Hundred Years* (2004) equally praises Montagu’s contribution, even though Claude Montefiore’s role as philosopher and theologian is

<sup>20</sup> Conrad, *Lily H. Montagu*, 41–2.

<sup>21</sup> Luke Devine, *Lily Montagu’s Shechinah* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 60–1.

polarized with Montagu's spiritual and organizational role. Indeed, Montagu is rightly revered as central to the movement's foundation and administration, but again, Rosenberg was on the movement's professional staff and was a member of the Liberal Jewish Youth Movement, while Rigal is a youth leader and minister.<sup>22</sup> Chaim Bermant was one of the first Anglo-Jewish historians to analyse Montagu's role in the foundation of Liberal Judaism; he describes her as "less intelligent than [Claude] Montefiore . . . She played Sister Clare to his St Francis."<sup>23</sup> As we have seen, it was Montagu who initiated the movement; she recalled that it was Montefiore who agreed to help her in the pursuit of her "big adventure," and that "he was glad to help."<sup>24</sup> More recently, Geoffrey Alderman, who has written extensively on the Anglo-Jewish community, described Montagu as "excessively plain" and emotionally attached to Montefiore.<sup>25</sup> These descriptions by respected scholars are symptomatic of androcentric stereotyping that is thankfully becoming less prevalent in Anglo-Jewish historiography. We have the Jewish feminist author and theologian Ellen Umansky to thank for reviving interest in Montagu's biography and role in the foundation of Liberal Judaism. Umansky's path-breaking *Lily Montagu and the Advancement of Liberal Judaism* (1983), along with the publication of Montagu's *Sermons, Addresses, Letters, and Papers* (1985) was necessary, long overdue, and intended to reintroduce Montagu to a new generation of Jewish women. The book's conclusions, however, are perhaps surprising given Umansky's Jewish feminist background. Indeed, while she acknowledges Montagu's contribution to Liberal Judaism in England, and her central role in the organization's administration and leadership, Umansky downplays Montagu's intellectual and theological contribution; she argues:

Lily Montagu made little if any attempt to present her thoughts systematically. In most of her writings, she focused on specific topics (e.g., the relation of conduct to belief, the significance of ceremonialism, human and divine justice, the power of personality), while in others she randomly moved from one idea to the next. Her intention was not to offer clear-cut theological statements, but simply to share her faith with others.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Lawrence Rigal, *A Brief History of the West Central Liberal Synagogue* (London: West Central Synagogue, 1978); Lawrence Rigal and Rosita Rosenberg, *Liberal Judaism: The First Hundred Years* (London: Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Chaim Bermant, *The Cousinhood: The Anglo-Jewish Gentry* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971), 210. See Linda Gordon Kuzmack, *Woman's Cause: The Jewish Woman's Movement in England and the United States, 1881–1933* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990) for an overview of Montagu's activism in the wider context of Jewish women's movements and First-Wave feminism in Britain and America.

<sup>24</sup> Montagu, *The Faith*, 24, 28. See Steven Bayme, "Claude Montefiore, Lily Montagu and the Origins of the Jewish Religious Union," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 27 (1982), 61–71; Edward Kessler, *An English Jew: The Life and Writings of Claude Montefiore* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1989); Langton, *Claude Montefiore*, 77.

<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Alderman, "Montagu, Lilian Helen," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 38: *Meyrick – Morande*, eds. H. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 753. For more complimentary examinations of Montagu's career see Margaret Yacobi, "Lily Montagu – A Pioneer in Religious Leadership: A Personal Appreciation," in *Hear Our Voice: Women in the British Rabbinate*, ed. Sybil Sheridan (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 9–15, and Jean Spence who focuses on Montagu's social work, "Lily Montagu: A Short Biography," *Youth and Policy* 60 (1998), 73–83. See also *A Reader of Early Liberal Judaism: The Writings of Israel Abrahams, Claude Montefiore, Lily Montagu and Israel Mattuck*, ed. by Kessler, Edward (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Ellen Umansky, *Lily Montagu and the Advancement of Liberal Judaism: From Vision to Vocation*, Studies in Women and Religion, vol. 12 (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 181. See Ellen Umansky, "Lily H. Montagu: Religious Leader, Organizer and Prophet," *Conservative Judaism* 34, no. 6 (July/August 1981), 17–27; Ellen Umansky, "The Origins of Liberal Judaism in England: The Contribution of Lily H. Montagu," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 55 (1984), 309–22.

According to Umansky “The most striking feature of Lily Montagu’s religious thought is that it never seemed to develop. Though she described Liberal Judaism as evolving from one age to the next, her own ideas remained static.”<sup>27</sup> For Umansky, Montagu was reliant on Israel Mattuck and Montefiore to the extent that she maintained exaggerated respect for them and had to write to them on a daily basis. Even more, Umansky concludes that Montagu, who was “naive,” was intellectually and emotionally dependent on them, as well as on her father.<sup>28</sup> It is therefore ironic that it was Daniel Langton, in his study of Claude Montefiore, who raised the issue that a “much needed corrective” is required to combat “the traditional downplaying of Lily Montagu’s role in the Jewish Religious Union.”<sup>29</sup> What is more, Langton argues that Montagu’s “revolutionary fervour” left her frustrated by Montefiore’s cautious approach.<sup>30</sup> It is hardly surprising then that Judith Romney Wegner in her study of women in the Mishnah should ask rhetorically that if Montagu was the founder of Liberal Judaism in England, why did nobody write about her sooner.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the picture of Montagu and the biography that is generated by the extant historiography does not match up with the personal reflections of her closest colleagues, relatives, and even Montefiore himself, as Eric Conrad reminds:

When it is said she came under his influence, the reverse is equally true. Claude Montefiore used jokingly to call her his gadfly. It is to be doubted whether he would have been spurred to leadership without her stimulus and energy. Today it is not uncommon to think of him not only as the leader but as the founder of the Liberal Jewish Movement in England. But he himself continually referred to Miss Montagu as the real founder of the Liberal Jewish Movement in his country. Claude Montefiore had all the intellectual and spiritual qualities needed for leadership, but he was too scholarly a nature to face the limelight of publicity. He did not, like Miss Montagu, feel the urge and vocation to take the initiative.<sup>32</sup>

What is revolutionary about Montagu’s role in the foundation and development of Liberal Judaism is that, at least in England, she was the first woman to minister to a synagogue and on June 15, 1918 she became the first to preach a sermon.<sup>33</sup> More so, she was the driving force behind the movement: theologian, spiritual leader, social worker; she was all these things.

Lily Montagu was adamant that the Jewish women of both her social club and religious congregation be introduced to art, culture, and educational training in order that their natural gifts could be utilized in the service of the divine. Indeed, motherhood and wifehood were an ideal, but not the only options available to single women. Certainly, for Montagu individuality was integral to women who “hold the keys of a future destiny.”<sup>34</sup> First-Wave feminists had escaped the earlier confinements of separate-spheres ideology that assumed

<sup>27</sup> Umansky, *Lily Montagu*, 191.

<sup>28</sup> Umansky, *Lily Montagu*, 189, 196. See Lily Montagu, *Samuel Montagu, First Baron Swaythling: A Character Sketch* (London: Truslove and Hansom Limited, no date of publication).

<sup>29</sup> Langton, *Claude Montefiore*, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Langton, *Claude Montefiore*, 77.

<sup>31</sup> Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 187-8. Mishnah: code of Jewish law compiled by the early rabbis (*tannaim*).

<sup>32</sup> Conrad, *Lily H. Montagu*, 46.

<sup>33</sup> Conrad, *Lily H. Montagu*, 49-50.

<sup>34</sup> Lily Montagu, “Women’s Contribution to the Spiritual Life of Humanity,” in *Lily Montagu: Sermons*, 159; Lily Montagu, “The Girl in the Background,” in *Studies of Boy Life in Our Cities*, ed. E. Urwick (1904; rpt. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1980), 247.



their natural talents for the domestic setting without having to deny the doctrine of a particularistic feminine nature that was best expressed in motherly and homely roles; rather, the cult of domesticity had been transformed into the ideal of women's moral and spiritual superiority. In biblical terms, Eve the "temptress" had become Eve the "victim." The feminization of religion in all denominations ensured that the concept of female superiority became women's mission to redeem society. The focus on religious mission and philanthropy became the drive for social reform.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the role assigned by Montagu to Jewish women, while radical in the Jewish community, was virtually the norm in Christian society. According to Montagu, therefore, gender inclusionism (in response to Christian Evangelical claims that traditional Judaism was denying women education and spiritual agency) would be the benchmark of Liberal Judaism:

From the beginning it was determined that in our Synagogue men and women must be absolutely equal in their congregational privileges. Boys and girls were confirmed together, and men and women sat together as they chose in any part of the Synagogue. There was no women's gallery, such as we find in Orthodox Synagogues. Women had, as a matter of course, their seats on the Council, and took their share as voters in the shaping of Synagogue policy and in the responsibility of maintaining and developing its religious influence.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, proto-feminist transformation was not wholesale; that would have been unrealistic in such a short space of time. Montagu and the other leaders were concerned that immediate and radical change would be a "shock to the community" that might "prove injurious to our cause."<sup>37</sup> But from the outset Liberal theology was to reflect "the divine in its inclusiveness."<sup>38</sup> The theological emphasis of the movement was on personal and immediate experience of the divine. Montagu was inspired by the prophet Isaiah and particularly Is. 55, which was her favourite biblical passage:

I have regarded [Is. 55] as my favourite [passage] throughout my life. This chapter seems to me to carry within itself the essence of pure religion. It contains a call to man to seek God, and assurance that if that search is undertaken with sincerity and faith, all other of life's activities will fit in accordingly to a correct measure of values. The chapter gives glorious assurance that God will cause goodness to triumph, and that, ruling as He does by law, we can count on His law to lead to the establishment of righteousness. Moreover, we find in these verses the wonderful comfort for all seekers after truth, who, in spite of their love and faith, must ever remain to some degree perplexed and bewildered. "God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are not our ways." We have no power to explain God. If we could, we should be God ourselves.<sup>39</sup>

It was the gender inclusivist theological aspects of Isaiah that Montagu was interested in; the feminine/maternal imagery of the divine. Quoting Is. 66:13, Montagu noted that "Throughout the Old Testament God the Ruler is also God the Father [and Mother]. 'As a father pitieth his children, so does the Lord pity them who fear Him.' God's extreme tenderness is further expressed [Is. 66:13]: 'As one who his Mother comforteth so will I comfort thee.'"<sup>40</sup> In Isaiah there are several references to female God-imagery. 42:14: "I

<sup>35</sup> Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 85-6, 90-1, 95.

<sup>36</sup> Montagu, *The Faith*, 38; Devine, *Lily Montagu's Shekhinah*, 111-12.

<sup>37</sup> Montagu, *The Faith*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Lily Montagu, "Kinship with God," in *Lily Montagu: Sermons*, 115.

<sup>39</sup> Montagu, *The Faith*, 41.

<sup>40</sup> Montagu, "Kinship with God," 116.

have long time holden my peace; I have been still, and refrained myself; now will I cry like a travailing woman,” and in 55:1 God is also a provider of water: “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, there are theological allusions and metaphors, such as to thrones and robes, which are associated with the *Shechinah*, the grammatically feminine attribute of divine presence in the world: “I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up, and his train filled the Temple” (6:1). Certainly, these references to the maternal intimacy of the divine were central to Montagu’s understanding of theology.<sup>42</sup> This is not to say that Montagu envisaged God, who is supposed to transcend gender, as either male or female, or both; instead, the divine is merely imaged in masculine/feminine and maternal/paternal terms that are accessible to a diverse range of religionists. For Montagu it is this subjective immanence that is vital: “I feel the reality of God. Believing in God as the God of Love, I believe that His presence in our midst gives us the power to love, which is of supreme importance in every individual life.”<sup>43</sup>

If we consider then the central and sustaining elements of Lily Montagu’s theology: first, *subjectivity* is vital as everyone experiences the divine in a different way, even the early rabbis were aware of this plurality, although in the rabbinic tradition God is experienced through the presence of *Shechinah*; retrospectively then, there were rabbis who assumed that even in the Bible it is not the unknowable Holy One, blessed be He who is experienced, but the immanent *Shechinah*. This is how the rabbis explained God’s aloofness. Montagu’s concept of direct communion with God, which was the very foundation of her religion; in fact, according to Eric Conrad, “She had a fervent desire for personal communion with God and an irrepressible urge to impart a similar desire to others,<sup>44</sup> was inspired by Isaiah, and the other prophets, experiencing of the divine. The quest for immanence was present throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Indeed, in Reform Judaism it is incumbent on the individual to “construct” their own theology.<sup>45</sup> What is more, Montagu’s novel, *Naomi’s Exodus*, which was published in 1901, provides some of the best evidence of her understanding of divine immanence.<sup>46</sup> The book is semi-autobiographical and tells the story of Naomi Saul who is a young Jewish girl alienated by the traditional ritual experienced in the home of her staunchly Orthodox aunt. Indicative of the Evangelical cult of true womanhood that invests women with spiritual and redemptive qualities,<sup>47</sup> Naomi is a moral exemplar; more so, she is

<sup>41</sup> Lily Montagu, “Club Letter No. 3,” in *Lily Montagu: Sermons*, 51.

<sup>42</sup> Devine, *Lily Montagu’s Shechinah*, 131–3.

<sup>43</sup> Montagu, *The Faith*, 64.

<sup>44</sup> Conrad, *Lily H. Montagu*, 37, 42.

<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Romain, *Reform Judaism and Modernity: A Reader* (London: SCM, 2004), 145. There is not the space or the necessity to study the classical Jewish theologians in this paper; see Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1971); Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man* (New York: Horizon Press, 1958).

<sup>46</sup> It is perhaps surprising that Montagu did not engage with earlier and contemporaneous Anglo-Jewish women novelists. Indeed, there is no evidence that she ever read, for example, Grace Aguilar, Charlotte Montefiore, or Amy Levy. According to Ellen Umansky the only Jewish novelist Montagu ever discussed was Edna Ferber (*Lily Montagu*, 62), although Montagu was affiliated with Emily Harris through her social work. See Emily Harris, *Estelle*, 2 vols. (London: George Bell, 1878); *Benedictus*, 2 vols. (London: George Bell, 1887).

<sup>47</sup> The cult of true womanhood was based on the eighteenth-century Evangelical theology of Christian femininity outlined by William Wilberforce. The cult developed in tune with the concept of separate spheres: men were deemed the stronger and harder sex, less emotional, and ordained with the physical ability to survive the ruthless world of the market-place. Alternatively, women required the protective walls of the home. They possessed maternal qualities and superior moral purity making them the ethical inspiration for their husbands and the moral guardians of children. Thus, the cult of domesticity became the ideal of female superiority that invested women with the spiritual qualities to redeem wider society (Banks, *Faces of Feminism*, 86, 90).

regenerative. In the novel, Naomi embarks on a spiritual journey and in the process learns of the nature of universal religion. In response to her aunt's charge that she has become a convert to Christianity Naomi is furious, though she is equally impassioned by her spiritual connection with the ancestral faith and the bonds of inherited memory:

Naomi had behind her the racial pride of her ancestors. The persistent, dogged tenacity with which they [Jews] had clung to their religious inheritance, even deifying its casings in their passionate zeal; the fiery jealousy with which they had cherished their isolation among all the peoples of the earth; these seemed suddenly to make their influence felt on the girl. She had been born a Jewess, and no spiritual yearnings, no discontent, no remorse could rob her of this birthright. Even though she had no understanding of the ancient religion, in spite of all her recent self-questionings and misgivings, a passionate devotion to Judaism was indelibly stamped in her blood. It only required her aunt's question, expressed as it was with suspicion and apprehension, to fill her heart with intense anger that her loyalty had been challenged. Yet mingled with this anger was a feeling of acute pain, for Naomi had suddenly become conscious that in this home, which was so dear to her, she could never again be happy.<sup>48</sup>

Having gone into self-imposed exile as a result of her aunt's accusation, and as a product of her spiritual alienation, Naomi leaves home and within several months of independence, and through friendship with a Christian religionist, learns about social justice and the nature of "true" faith. She later returns to the house of her staunchly Orthodox aunt and is able once again to join in and appreciate the Shabbat celebrations. One of the moral parables of the story is that the legalistic, unthinking nature of contemporaneous religion requires invigorating with renewed spiritual impetus. Indeed, Naomi, through communion with God, is imbued with fresh understanding and appreciation of her faith and its application for daily living. It is in *Naomi's Exodus* that we catch glimpses of Montagu's own experience of the divine presence.<sup>49</sup> Naomi, in the midst of a spiritual crisis, is resolved to develop an immanent and personally immediate relationship with the divine. The communing begins with her calling out to the divine:

"Oh God, what shall I do? Oh, God, help me!"

That was the first prayer Naomi Saul had ever made.

Almost immediately her troubled spirit seemed somewhat soothed. The tension on her feelings was relieved as she gave herself up to the Power not herself of which she was becoming conscious. She lay for a whole hour, half waking, half-sleeping, in communion with her God.<sup>50</sup>

Naomi is not used to the idea of personal and private prayer; this is a direct address to the deity and a call on the divine for assistance in the form of engaged communion. Later in the novel, Naomi makes the plea again, begging the Almighty for advice:

After a time her head leaned up against the iron leg of the bedstead, and her lips murmured, "God! God! What shall I do – God?"

The prayer was spoken in utter exhaustion of spirit; the soul realized its weakness, and could no longer find rest within itself. It threw itself on the God without for help in its sore need. And the help was given. Naomi was much too tired to know how she reasoned, or whether she reasoned at

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<sup>48</sup> Lily Montagu, *Naomi's Exodus* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1901), 40–1. Montagu's only other novel was *Broken Stalks* (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1902). See also Lily Montagu, *A Little Book of Comfort: For Jewish People in Times of Sorrow* (London: Wightman and Co, 1948); Lily Montagu, *Letters to Anne and Peter* (London: Mamelok Press, 1944); Lily Montagu, *What Can A Mother Do? And Other Stories* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1926).

<sup>49</sup> Devine, *Lily Montagu's Shekinah*, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Montagu, *Naomi's Exodus*, 26.

all. It seemed as if she snatched from the inmost depths of her being the love, faith and hope which she had planted there for Clement, and with that cry to God threw them at His feet. And He accepted them.<sup>51</sup>

Naomi is upset at the breakdown of her relationship with Clement Marks: “She dared to love this great clever man, and since his indifference could not stifle her feeling, it should, at least, not disgrace him.”<sup>52</sup> But it is “the God of love Who gave this girl the power of loving, even while He withdrew the human object of her love, came into her heart and gave her courage.”<sup>53</sup> As we can see, Montagu’s theological understanding is necessarily *immediate*; it is a type of human-divine dialogue. Moreover, in *Naomi’s Exodus* we can see the influence of Christian Evangelicalism, particularly in the theology of divine immanence, the spiritual vitalization of ritual, and in Montagu’s reverence for the Hebrew Bible.<sup>54</sup> Naomi is redemptive and regenerative, morally and spiritually superior, though at the same time she is dutiful; she heeds the (Evangelical) call to service and becomes a nurse.<sup>55</sup>

For Lily Montagu it was necessary that religionists speak to God in the synagogue and in the home.<sup>56</sup> This relationship is not intended to be hierarchical. Indeed, Montagu was concerned that the idea of God instilling fear rather than love could be transmitted through the reading of the traditional liturgy.<sup>57</sup> According to Montagu: “God must become so real so that we can live under His guidance, working for Him and with Him, and trusting that this kinship is for ever.”<sup>58</sup> Montagu was convinced that through Judaism “a religious man must seek and discover God for himself. I believe that in Judaism will be found the methods by which God can be most surely approached, and that these methods are certainly ultimately to prevail universally.”<sup>59</sup> The relationship with God is essentially about “kinship.” The divine is omnipresent to the extent that personal loneliness need never be experienced.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, God is not “other” in the traditional sense of “holiness” (*kedushah*) which implies separation. David Blumenthal argues that in the sacred texts God has personality and talks, walks, laughs, feels anger, joy, and conveys “moral judgment”: “God is what God is.” But the divine is also a source of awe, the numinous, and otherness. “Wholly otherness,” or holiness, is comprehensible in moments, texts, and places. Indeed, it is through the concept of holiness that God is somehow near yet at the same time distant. According to Blumenthal holiness is our experience of the sacred. Thus, God possesses two characteristic attributes: “personality and holiness”; they are “relation and relatedness”. The “theology of image” is central to the Jewish tradition; knowledge of humanity, God, piety, and redemption stems from this source.

<sup>51</sup> Montagu, *Naomi’s Exodus*, 162.

<sup>52</sup> Montagu, *Naomi’s Exodus*, 189. It is possible that Clement Marks is based on Claude Montefiore.

<sup>53</sup> Montagu, *Naomi’s Exodus*, 165.

<sup>54</sup> Naomi Saul is probably based on Naomi of the biblical book of Ruth.

<sup>55</sup> Devine, *Lily Montagu’s Shekinah*, 103–04. According to David Bebbington, Evangelicalism is based on four themes: “conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what might be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism” (*Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2–3).

<sup>56</sup> Montagu, *My Club and I*, 47.

<sup>57</sup> Conrad, *Lily H. Montagu*, 42. Montagu’s *Prayers for Jewish Working Girls* (London: Wertheimer, Lea & Co., 1895) was the first Liberal Jewish prayer book.

<sup>58</sup> Montagu, *My Club and I*, 50.

<sup>59</sup> Montagu, “Spiritual Possibilities,” 231.

<sup>60</sup> Montagu, “Kinship with God,” 117.

In this theological process there is dialogue, empathy, demand, and claim. God's image is reflected both individually and collectively in humanity. To do traditional theology, Blumenthal argues, is to understand and muse over the image of the divine. The attributes of holiness and personality visualize the image of deity and embody the otherness of God.<sup>61</sup> Certainly, "holiness" is an integral component of God in the tradition. For Blumenthal:

HOLINESS IS A QUALITY. One senses it in objects, in moments, in texts, and in certain people. It is not a feeling like joy and anger. It is not a commitment like love or loyalty. It is not a state of mind like happiness or gloom. It is not a thought or concept. It is an awareness of the sacred, a consciousness of the spiritual. It is an experience of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a contact with the numinous. It is a perception of otherness, an intimation of the beyond.<sup>62</sup>

Blumenthal suggests that there are two aspects of holiness: *hierarchical*: the "mystical quality of certain objects, days and persons"; and *non-hierarchical*: personal acts of will through which one declares an object consecrated to the divine. Holiness is a product of *kavanah*; it is the experience of numinous otherness in the "mundane".<sup>63</sup> Montagu's theology of immanence then, and the idea of communion, is a departure from the traditional concept of holiness; but for that matter, the universal underpinnings of Liberal theology are equally a departure from the particularistic emphasis on the Jewish people inherent to the rabbinic/Orthodox tradition. Claude Montefiore's theology of Liberal Judaism that Montagu appropriated in her own work was centred on the relationship between the religionist and the divine. Both he and Montagu frequently quoted from non-Jewish sources, even the New Testament. The radical separation of the individual and the divine is, for Montefiore, unsustainable. He rejected the traditional notion that God is so mysterious and unapproachable that men and woman cannot communicate/commune with the deity. Instead, Montefiore argued that "the communion of man with God, and the action of influence of God upon man, are essential elements of true religion." Indeed, communion is possible because of the kinship between humankind and God.<sup>64</sup>

The Liberal theology that is evident throughout the Lily Montagu corpus, and in her many sermons and addresses, is characterized by its pluralistic subjectivity, immediacy, non-hierarchical nature, universality, and rejection of the traditional concept of holiness. These elements of Liberal theology have become standard to Second and Third-Wave liberal Jewish feminist spiritualities/theologies. Of course, Jewish feminist theology has gone further and has marginalized and even abandoned the central theological components that have been present since Genesis including not only the concepts of transcendence, revelation, and supernaturalism, but the eschatological aspects such as Jewish destiny, messianic redemption, afterlife, the Davidic line, and chosenness. It is only Judith Plaskow, Rachel Adler, Melissa Raphael, and Tamar Ross who have so far published full-length feminist theologies. Indeed, Judith Plaskow's classic *Standing Again At Sinai* (1990) develops a feminist theology of community that is expressed through historiography, prayer, ritual, and midrash around the central categories of Torah, Israel, and God, speculating what these concepts

<sup>61</sup> David Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (London: John Knox Press, 1993), 6–8, 23. See T. Drorah Setel, "Feminist Reflections on Separation and Unity in Jewish Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (Spring 1986), 113–18.

<sup>62</sup> Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*, 23.

<sup>63</sup> Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*, 25–6; Devine, *Second-Wave Jewish Feminism*, 55–6.

<sup>64</sup> Claude Montefiore, *Liberal Judaism: An Essay* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1903), 25–7.

will look like in an inclusivist Judaism.<sup>65</sup> Adler, who was originally Orthodox but turned to Reform Judaism, is perhaps most notable for her groundbreaking article, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There,” that helped launch Second-Wave Jewish feminism in America, along with Trude Weiss-Rosmarin’s “The Unfreedom of Jewish Women.” In *Engendering Judaism* (1998) Adler examines gender issues relating to *halakhah*, prayer, textual interpretation, sexual imagery, and marriage to visualize an engendered Judaism through which the gender exclusionary and patriarchal values of the tradition and its sacred texts are not regarded as intrinsic.<sup>66</sup> Alternatively, Raphael’s *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz* (2003) is not intended to be a prescriptive theology; rather, Raphael, who is an Anglo-Jewish theologian, asks the question “Who was God in Auschwitz”? She is concerned with restoring women’s voices to our understanding of the Holocaust and reclaiming the feminine *Shechinah* as a maternal presence amid the horrors of Auschwitz.<sup>67</sup> Ross’ *Expanding the Palace of Torah* is not a feminist theology per se; rather, she develops ideas of cumulative revelation that draw on the influence Abraham Isaac Kook. Orthodox Israeli feminist Ross develops a process of accumulating beyond the Sinaitic foundations of the tradition that allows feminist interpreters to build upon extant revelation while accepting that Judaism’s patriarchal foundations, although incompatible with contemporary feminist values, were necessary at the time.<sup>68</sup> The Second-Wave of Jewish feminism, which arguably began in the 1970s and continued until the early 1990s, inevitably focused on the key issues at the time, including the exclusion of women from ritual, liturgy, legal processes, and in the synagogue; the focus was on praxis rather than theology. This was evidently vital to religious and communal reform, if at the expense of practical, prescriptive, and normative theology. In the Third-Wave of Jewish feminism (if it is even possible to apply such a label) that followed Plaskow’s *Standing Again at Sinai*, on the other hand, Jewish feminists have become their own authorities often in the absence of traditional Judaism.<sup>69</sup> The daughters of the Second-Wave have grown up with a “full range of opportunities” in communal and religious life and have been offered more or less equal chances for study, employment, and meaningful spiritual existence.<sup>70</sup> But the Third-Wave has not identified any single issue or unified cause, manifesto, or underlying goal as indicative of its aims.<sup>71</sup> Donna Berman, looking back on the last forty years of feminist activism, argues that:

There has been very little, if any, experimentation with expanding the canon or introducing new texts that specifically reflect the experiences of women and lesbians. Feminism, to a large extent,

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<sup>65</sup> Judith Plaskow, “Calling All Theologians,” in *New Jewish Feminism: Probing the Past, Forging the Future*, ed. Elyse Goldstein (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009), 4; Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (1990; rpt. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991).

<sup>66</sup> See Rachel Adler, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman,” *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review* (1971; rpt. Summer 1973), 77–82; Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, “The Unfreedom of Jewish Women,” *Jewish Spectator* (October 1970), 2–6; Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1998).

<sup>67</sup> See Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>68</sup> For Kook, God is not an-other being as the Almighty transcends all anthropomorphisms. See Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2004).

<sup>69</sup> Susannah Heschel, “Foreword: It’s Not About Equality – It’s About Who’s in Charge,” in *Yentl’s Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*, ed. Danya Ruttenberg (New York: Seal Press, 2001), xvi–xvii.

<sup>70</sup> Susannah Heschel, preface to *On Being A Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, ed. Susannah Heschel (1983; rpt. New York: Schocken Books, 1995), xxiii.

<sup>71</sup> Devine, *Second-Wave Jewish Feminism*, 47, 210.

remains something that is “tacked on” to Judaism. It is still on the margins, still too often relegated to a specific Shabbat or a special adult education session or Women’s History Month. Feminist theology and feminist discourse generally have not made their way into the center.<sup>72</sup>

The “problem,” if that is the right word, is with the feminist propensity, which has become a feature of Third-Wave Jewish feminism, to discourse on subjective, personal, and immediate experience over and above the tradition.<sup>73</sup> This form of self-projection might have little to do with the tradition and is regarded as *Jewish* simply because the interpreter is Jewish.

The potential abyss between “women’s experience” and “authentic” Judaism has been an impediment to Jewish women doing theology.<sup>74</sup> According to Melissa Raphael Jewish feminists, whether partially or wholly alienated by the tradition, have focused, more or less, on the historical Jewish woman who can through her personal experience and immediate context image alternative theological models and unconditioned interpretations of the sacred texts. The postmodernist refusal of normativity, Raphael argues, has rendered a prescriptive, or normative, Jewish feminist theology “impossible.” Historically, Raphael notes, feminist theology is a post-Holocaust exercise that assumes, given Auschwitz, that Judaism can no longer be justified through traditional faith in the Holy One, blessed be He. What is more, the tradition cannot be sustained by the Reform assumption that Judaism underpins the ethical and moral structures of Western civilization. For Raphael, Jewish feminist theology can only justify Judaism to women on the basis of its prophetic concerns, its being a connector between the generations of the movement, and its ritual and imaginal focus for communal identity. This is endemic, however, given that generally all types of Jewish feminism have taken on the “quest of liberal modernity” and have centered on securing women’s religious liberation, equality of access, and their ability to orientate the tradition toward the conditions and experiences of their own immediate context. In sum, Raphael suggests that the problem is that “Jewish feminist theology’s origin in modern egalitarianism and the postmodern pluralization of truth, together with its focus upon the immediacies of women’s experience . . . has left women religio-intellectually marginalized, and experience of the heteronomous, nonordinary dimension of Jewish revelation has been all but precluded.”<sup>75</sup>

Contemporary liberal Jewish feminism, the Third-Wave and beyond,<sup>76</sup> is characterized by its rejection of hierarchy in all its forms. According to Judith Plaskow the concept of chosenness in traditional Judaism is a statement of hierarchical privilege in relation to those who are denied this right. Feminists have been troubled by the idea of chosenness that seems to be in contrast with the drive for civic equality. The assumption of a unique and separate destiny assigned to the Jewish people is in “tension” with the history of emancipation that

<sup>72</sup> Donna Berman, “Major Trends in Jewish Feminist Theology,” in *New Jewish Feminism*, 21.

<sup>73</sup> Melissa Raphael, “Standing at a Demythologized Sinai? Reading Jewish Feminist Theology Through the Critical Lens of Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Interpreting the Postmodern: Responses to “Radical Orthodoxy,”* eds. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marion Grau (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 209–10 n.39.

<sup>74</sup> The categories are taken from Adler’s *Engendering Judaism*, xix.

<sup>75</sup> Raphael, “Standing at a Demythologized Sinai,” 198–201, 207 n27, 209–10, 214.

<sup>76</sup> The Third-Wave is characterized by its efforts to challenge the essentialist assumptions of the Second-Wave, the notion of universal women’s experience, and the focus on white upper-middle-class women’s experience. The Third-Wave appropriates theories of anti-racism, transgender, queer theory, and eco-feminism, and is about self-definition and the broadening of biological and cultural identities through alternative lifestyles (Devine, *From Anglo-First-Wave*, 199–200).

made Jews into citizens. Thus, Plaskow notes, Jewish thinkers for nearly two-hundred years have sought to refashion the notion of chosenness in order to either discard it completely or to retain it. Indeed, chosenness has been reinterpreted through the language of universality and “mission to the nations”; Jewish superiority has even been rejected outright. For Plaskow, however, the implication of chosenness and its sense of privilege is yet to be eliminated. Jewish feminism, therefore, is in a position to rethink not only the concept of election in relation to wider non-Jewish society, but also to refigure the hierarchical differentiations present in the Jewish community. Plaskow argues that God’s dominance and power means that the relationship between the deity and humankind is “asymmetrical”. God’s maleness denotes power that is infinite and Other over human authority. Indeed, this God who is totally Other is over and against the world in such a way that “inhibits human growth and responsibility”. For Plaskow, God enforces obedience through punishments, benevolence, and domination, which discourages human activity. This dominating Other is intrinsic to the biblical texts, particularly in images of God as “holy warrior.” Moreover, prophetic demands for social justice are in direct contrast with the impending threat of divine punishment and destruction. Plaskow suggests that:

Metaphors of sovereignty, lordship, kingship, and judicial and military power evoke images of arbitrary and autocratic rule that have been rejected in the human political sphere at the same time they live on in religious language. If the image of god as male provides religious support for male dominance in society, the image of God as supreme Other would seem to legitimate dominance of any kind. God as ruler and king of the universe is the pinnacle of a vast hierarchy that extends from God “himself” to angels/men/women/children/animals and finally the earth. As hierarchical ruler, God is a model for the many schemes of dominance that human beings create for themselves.<sup>77</sup>

Plaskow contends that the images of God’s dominance that have become the symbols and ways that Jews have used to discuss the divine have helped perpetuate and even justify the evils that we hope God will redeem us from. The theological image of “dominating Other” acts as an “authorizing symbol” in an entire system of hierarchical dualisms that includes the relationship between Israel and other peoples and the male God-language of the androcentric tradition.<sup>78</sup> As we have seen, Lily Montagu, along with the Liberal Jewish leadership, was concerned not only with the alienating image of a domineering and aloof deity (she instead preferred to visualize the immanent God of “love”), but also with the concepts of Jewish particularly, messianism, and national identity (Zionism) that were an impediment to wholesale emancipation, assimilation, and acceptance for religious Anglo-Jews in wider Christian society. Certainly, Liberal Judaism’s aim was to counter the secularizing and estranging aspects of the tradition and to assimilate societal norms that would allow Jews to accommodate their Anglicized lifestyles to the Liberal Synagogue without having to exile themselves from the community for all time. But while the legacy of Anglo-Liberal Judaism in relation to the “Woman Question” is that women can lead the services and become rabbis, be called up, hold positions of religious and communal leadership over men, study and interpret the sacred texts, have a Bat Mitzvah, and are equal in divorce law, what are the long term consequences for Jewish feminist theology?

<sup>77</sup> Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 100–1, 130–2.

<sup>78</sup> Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 132.



In Lily Montagu's theology of Liberal Judaism it is the personal and immediate nature of experiencing the divine which will be necessarily reduced to the individual and social context, and the subjectivity of this moment that is integral to, along with the non-hierarchical and non-dominating imagery of deity in contrast to traditional eschatological and theological notions of holiness, particularity, and hierarchical otherness. But as we have seen, it is this legacy that began with Reform Judaism and was continued with the progressive underpinnings of Liberal Judaism that has been taken on by contemporary Jewish feminism. What began as an impetus in Reform Judaism for individuals to construct theology, and was extenuated by the failure of Anglo-Reformism to develop any type of uniquely Reformist theology of its own, became in Liberal Judaism's subjective and personal communing with the divine, and then in the Second-Wave of Jewish feminism, "theology" rooted in the individual experience of the religionist and based on their personal aspirations. The focus on personal spirituality, which can have little, if anything, to do with God, was at the expense of the eschatological (the area of theology that deals with *last things*) elements of traditional Judaism including divine judgment, Messianic redemption, belief in the Messianic Age, afterlife, resurrection, anticipation of the Coming Age, the continuation of the Davidic line, the restoration and deliverance of Israel, holiness, and Jewish destiny in general, as well as the theological elements present in the biblical and rabbinic traditions, including concepts of supernaturalism, transcendence, hierarchy, and numinous otherness. Thus, the development of any prescriptive or normative Jewish feminist theology is made impossible by the diversity, non-sacral, and pluralistic nature of contemporary (Third-Wave) Jewish feminism.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, even Judith Plaskow admits that:

I had hoped that Jewish feminists would give the lie to the notion that theology is not a Jewish mode of expression by eagerly embracing it and producing a wide range of theologies that would open up new conversations within the Jewish community. But it turns out that most Jewish feminists haven't done formal theology either, and that if there is going to be a blossoming of Jewish feminist theologies, it belongs to the future.<sup>80</sup>

This is not to devalue the extant theological discourse; Jewish feminism is still only forty-years old and is continually redefining itself and responding to contemporary challenges and trends. But at some point or another, as Orthodox feminist theorists and theologians continue to point out, there will have to be reengagement with the tradition and its theological elements.<sup>81</sup>

By the time of her passing in 1963, Lily Montagu, through her role in the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues (formerly the JRU), and her presidency of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, had spread the Liberal Jewish message throughout the world.<sup>82</sup> Montagu's legacy is one of gender equalization in the Liberal Jewish community in England and beyond. But she is also a foremother of Second-Wave Jewish feminism.<sup>83</sup> Contemporary liberal Jewish feminist theology has its basis in the *Haskalah* (Jewish

<sup>79</sup> See Devine, *Second-Wave Jewish Feminism*; Raphael, "Standing at a Demythologized Sinai."

<sup>80</sup> Plaskow, "Calling All theologians," 3.

<sup>81</sup> See Tova Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation* (New England: UPNE, 2007); Tamar Ross, "Modern Orthodoxy and the Challenge of Feminism," in *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy*, Studies in Contemporary Jewry, ed. Jonathan Frankel (Oxford: Oxford University, 2001), 3–38.

<sup>82</sup> See Lily Montagu, *The World Union for Progressive Judaism: The Story of its First 25 Years – 1926 until 1951* (World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1951).

<sup>83</sup> See Devine, *Lily Montagu's Shekhinah*, 147–8.

Enlightenment), in Reform Judaism, in the age of emancipation and secularization, and in Montagu's efforts to reengage and accommodate modern Jewish women, and their employment commitments, busy lifestyles, and their boredom with the Orthodox services, with the tradition. But in the process of countering secularization and reversing the gender alienation of acculturated Anglo-Jewish women, the complex and estranging aspects of traditional theology were jettisoned. The impact of the Reformers, and the progressive Liberalizers, has been that in the post-Holocaust period, Second and Third-Wave Jewish feminisms have displayed only limited interest in classical theology, and there has been little will towards creating anything prescriptive, so far.<sup>84</sup> The contemporary importance of Montagu's work then, is that while she was able to instigate and develop far reaching reforms, particularly with regard to the "Woman Question," in contrast to contemporary post-Holocaust feminist theology, she was also able to maintain a dialogue with the theological tradition: the fundamental theology, radical monotheism, was essentially unchanged; it was just that the Anglo-Liberal reformers believed the ability to commune with the divine would encourage those alienated by the tradition to reengage. The aim was to allow religionists too busy to attend services the chance to explore the human-divine relationship. Indeed, in liberal Jewish feminism also, the tradition has given way to the individual feminist and her ability to pick and choose those elements that are relevant, empowering, and egalitarian, and that speak to her own experience; this process began in late-Victorian England when a young girl of fifteen – Lily Montagu – emerged from a spiritual crisis determined to orientate the tradition towards the practical needs and necessities of everyday life. Current Jewish feminist theologians might well revere this past, as well as its engagement with classical theology.

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<sup>84</sup> Contemporary Jewish feminists have been little interested in theology; see Danya Ruttenberg, *Yentl's Revenge*. Even *New Jewish Feminism* (2010) is only able to review, and re-review, the few feminist theological expositions of the Second-Wave. Of course, theology can take a variety of forms, including through midrash (imaginative biblical exegesis) and personal spiritual reflections.

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