Idoloclasm: The First Task of Second Wave Liberal Jewish Feminism


Abstract

This article suggests that Second Wave liberal Jewish feminism combined secular feminist criticism of the ideological roots of social injustice with traditional criticism of idolatry. Together, these closely related discourses allowed Jewish feminists to argue, with Christian feminists of the time, that the monosexual God who demands that idols be broken is himself an idol: a primary ideational and linguistic projection whose masculine character obstructs the political and existential becoming of women. Liberal Jewish feminists such as Judith Plaskow, in dispute with early Orthodox Jewish feminism, therefore insisted that Jewish feminism must begin with a counter-idolatrous reform of the theological concepts that underpin the relationship between God, self, and world, not with making permissible alterations to halakhah. However, while liberal Jewish feminists reclaimed some of the female aspects of the Jewish God (notably the Shekhinah), the point of reforming a tradition is to be faithful to it. They did not join their more radical Jewish sisters in a more or less pagan break with ethical monotheism, not least because the latter's criticism of idolatry funded their own prophetic drive to the liberation of both women and God from captivity to their patriarchal idea.

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