Research Article

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“Teach Your Daughters to Wail and One Another to Lament”: Jewish Prayers and Liturgical Texts for Female Victims of Sexual Assault

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Abstract: Throughout generations, various prayers have been composed to express religious and cultural experiences of the Jewish community, such as holidays life-cycle and national tragedies. However, some social issues, such as sexual assault, have been excluded from this canon. This article uncovers Jewish prayers and liturgical texts dedicated to female victims of sexual assault. Drawing on a qualitative inquiry based on content analysis and interviews with the prayers’ authors, I demonstrate how these texts (re)position sexual assault victims in Jewish liturgy by including new phrasings and references to God; by removing masculine violence related to God; by mentioning biblical female characters who experienced sexual harassment; by denouncing of patriarchal abuse; or by sanctifying the woman’s painful body, which is incorporated as an important agent in the ritual’s structure. Therefore, I suggest considering these texts a political mean to voice women’s traumas and to incorporate them into the religious sphere, thereby rectifying a long-silenced discourse.

Keywords: Judaism, sexual assault, gender, prayer, liturgy, domestic violence

1 Introduction

Since October 2017, when *The New York Times* published the Harvey Weinstein story, the hashtag #MeToo became a popular way to express solidarity with girls and women who experienced sexual assault. Little attention is paid to the fact that, ten years earlier, the activist Tarana Burke coined the term and started the movement. Since then, prominent men in media, journalism, and politics have been accused of harassment or assault. The #MeToo movement has ushered in a new kind of sexual misconduct accusation which is leveled through informal channels of communication.¹ It revealed the ways in which the law can be misused to enable and conceal harassment and demonstrated the social network as a dominant agent in this battle for female dignity.²

This study examines some of the Jewish responses to domestic violence and abuse by analyzing a pioneer type of prayers and liturgical texts that are dedicated to female victims of sexual assault. Drawing

1 Tuerkheimer, “Beyond# MeToo,” 1146.

2 Tippet, “The Legal Implications of the MeToo Movement;” and Mendoza, “The Importance of Social Network Analysis in Regards to Sexual Violence.”

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on textual analysis and interviews with the authors, I will explore how these texts express diverse aspects of women's traumatic experiences; what kinds of religious narratives and rituals are chosen in order to contextualize the personal trauma within the Jewish collective memory; what were the authors' inspirations and motivations; and how do these texts shed light on the Jewish community and tradition's role in the recovery of women's mental health. These texts address various references to God to divinity, to the victim's body, to the contemporary community as well as to the Jewish tradition. This creative endeavor might challenge not only traditional theologies, characterized by chauvinism and patriarchy, but also former and contemporary feminine theologies, which have undermined God's masculine dominance. Composing these texts declares both sexual harassment and sexual assault as issues that merit a public discussion that takes place in the synagogue, and not only during public protests or virtual spaces, such as the #MeToo campaign. It demonstrates how Jewish liturgy is dynamic, fluid, and creative, expressing new tendencies and challenges in culture and in faith.³ Jewish texts, halachic and philosophic pronouncements which were written in centuries of rabbinic literature, explicitly prohibit a man from forcing his wife to have sexual relations.⁴ In addition, today there are other options to struggle against domestic violence like sermons and rabbinical Q&A dedicated to this issue.

Despite the severity of domestic violence and abuse, not much has been written regarding this issue in the Jewish community. Domestic violence takes place in up to 20% of Jewish homes in the United States.⁵ Jewish women, particularly Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox ones, are often forced to preserve the community's image by keeping their family members together instead of escaping their traumatic lives, ultimately shouldering the shame and responsibility of this.⁶ According to Brofsky,⁷ "those who work within social services and law enforcement often express their amazement that the religious community appears to express more concern for the welfare of the abusers rather than the victims."⁸ In addition, Bilek argues that in order to be able to help Orthodox victims, it is necessary to understand these community-specific issues and to learn what resources are available within the Orthodox Jewish world that can help combat the problem of violence against women.⁹

According to Sadlon and Jewdokimow, on the one hand, there is a growing number of studies, reports, and media coverage exposing sexual abuse by the religious, while on the other, there is a normative view where men and women religious are viewed as de-sexualized individuals who inhabit religious communities where chastity is imposed and where sexuality is institutionally suppressed.¹⁰ Guthartz defines the problem of domestic violence as it relates to religious communities as patriarchal spaces, arguing that "it is only through an understanding of the uniqueness of 'Jewish' domestic violence by domestic violence and law enforcement organizations, coupled with an understanding about domestic violence within American society by rabbis and Jewish community leaders, that domestic violence in the Jewish community will be eradicated."¹¹ Jewish communities have indeed come to understand that they have a role in coping with the issue and providing services that the state is unable to provide, while emphasizing Jewish values.

³ Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*.

⁴ Mishneh Torah, Ishut 15:17; Shulchan Aruch, Even haEzer 25:2; et al. For example, Rami b. Hama said in the name of R. Assi: "It is forbidden for a man to compel his wife to fulfill the mitzvah [to have sexual relations], as it is said 'and he that hastens with his feet sins' (Proverbs 19:2)." R. Joshua b. Levi said: "Any man who compels his wife to have intercourse will have unworthy (inferior) children" (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 100b). In the Mishneh Torah, (Sefer Nashim) Maimonides included several passages relevant to the topic of wife abuse. The text reads: "And thus the sages commanded that a man should honor his wife more than he honors himself, and love her as he loves himself. And if he has money, he should increase her benefits according to his wealth. He should not intimidate her too much; he should speak with her gently, and should be neither saddened nor angry" (MT, Sefer Nashim 15:19).

⁵ Freedman, *Domestic Violence in the Baltimore Orthodox Jewish Community*, iii.

⁶ Twerski, *Shame Borne in Silence*.

⁷ Brofsky, "Discussing and Reporting Abuse – A Halachic Perspective," 60.

⁸ Berkovits, "Institutional Abuse in the Jewish Community;" and Blau, "Sexual Abuse in the Orthodox Jewish Community."

⁹ Bilek, "Violence Against Women in the Orthodox Jewish Community," 99.

¹⁰ Sadlon and Jewdokimow, "Talking About Sexuality within Catholic Consecrated Communities in Poland," 71.

¹¹ Guthartz, "Domestic Violence and the Jewish Community," 30.

Aghtaie et al. examined how justice is understood by practitioners and religious leaders from Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, who work with victims of domestic violence and abuse.¹² They found that the concept of structural spiritual abuse should be given more attention by the domestic violence and abuse literature and also by those who are working with women of faith. In addition, Naomi Graetz, in her book concerning rabbinic responses to wife beating throughout history, *Silence is Deadly: Judaism Confronts Wifebeating*, divides rabbinic attitudes into five categories: acceptance, denial, apologetics, rejection, and evasiveness.¹³

An Israeli anthropologist, Kravel-Tovi identifies how the Israeli ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) community has dealt with sexual violence over the recent years. She concludes that anti-sexual violence initiatives are creating a venue for public criticism of rabbinic accountability. She explains, “while this venue is not necessarily subversive in essence, the climate it helps foster is potentially critical, in the basic sense that these discussions expose and unpack unchallenged, taken-for-granted, unchallenged or opaque structures of rabbinic power and authority.”¹⁴ In addition, Spiegel suggests in *Spirituality for Survival: Jewish women healing themselves* that “it is not the community’s shame when an individual fails. Rather, it is the responsibility of the community to recognize the problems, to reach out to the victims and encourage those who are suffering to seek help when they are in pain and in need of healing, and to provide a safe environment for that healing to take place.”¹⁵

In January 2018, Jewish Women’s Archive (JWA) published a call to collect the #MeToo stories of Jews, both within the Jewish community and outside of it. Rosenbaum, who examined Archiving #MeToo project, argues that storytelling is a powerful tool for changing the narrative and shifting the culture. Alongside these efforts to distance, minimize, or turn the blame inwards, however, runs a powerful demand for visibility and acknowledgement that harassment and assault happen in the Jewish community.¹⁶ Rosenbaum found that for many of those who submitted stories to the collection, the clearest, most unqualified language came in response to the question: “Is it important for you to share your story in a Jewish context? Why or why not?” Again and again, the respondents declared that the Jewish community is not safe.

Building upon the research described above, I have chosen to focus on the textual level. My main motivation is to delve into the power of words and their ability to express and construct social perceptions and cultural phenomena. According to Ortner, since the texts are regularly used in the life cycle of the believers, they are the “key symbols,” through which the believers affirm their identity and beliefs and reconnect with the community and God.¹⁷ The power of encountering an “authoritative text,” as Stoke called it, is important in crystallizing the life of the religious community and in setting its boundaries.¹⁸ The text has an influence not only on the ceremonial–ritual structure but also on the ways in which Jewish culture is produced and the community is established as an “interpretive community.”¹⁹ Steiner sees the text as the exclusive living space of the Jews. In his opinion, after the Jewish people were exiled from their homeland, the Promised Land became a purely spiritual idea, so that the true homeland of the Jews is in the canonical religious texts.²⁰ Turning to the text, i.e., reciting it, provides an answer to a deep need that seeks to return to a solid and continuous spiritual foundation in an age of change and transformation. This study expands such conclusions and demonstrates how the Jewish liturgy is a political player in the struggle to end domestic violence.

¹² Aghtaie et al., “Defining and Enabling ‘Justice’ for Victims/Survivors of Domestic Violence and Abuse.”

¹³ Graetz, *Silence is Deadly*.

¹⁴ Kravel-Tovi, “‘They Must Join Us, There Is No Other Way’,” 68.

¹⁵ Spiegel, “Spirituality for Survival,” 137.

¹⁶ Rosenbaum, “Archiving #MeToo: Past, Present, and Future,” 255.

¹⁷ Ortner, “On Key Symbols 1.”

¹⁸ Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*.

¹⁹ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*.

²⁰ Steiner, *No Passion Spent, Essays 1978–1995*.

Rankin, Burke, and Smith argue that prayers can act as an intimate means to create a deep understanding of women's relationships with their family, friends, God, and themselves.²¹ Terese A. Hall found that women who have a history of sexual abuse in childhood suffered in three aspects of their spiritual life: their sense of being loved and accepted by God; their sense of community with others; and their trust in God's plan and purpose for the future.²² Although this study does not examine the victims' voices, it illuminates how Jewish prayers and liturgical texts are constructed as a medium for healing and recovery. My goal is to demonstrate how these unique prayers express new dynamics and relationships between God and victims. The semantic and contextual characteristics, which are embodied in the text, can encourage women to speak about the traumatic experience, even when the truth is still painful to admit, and mark the community as a safe space for grief, wailing, arguing, confusion, and healing.

A liberal Jewish response dedicated to domestic violence liberates what had been traditionally a taboo in religious communities.²³ Recognizing the existence and scope of the problem in the religious liturgy of communities would be the first step in this direction. I do not have data on the number of times these texts have been performed in communities or were in personal use. As far as I know, in some Israeli Reform congregations as well as in the United States, rabbis do use these texts to convey a message of #MeToo,²⁴ even before the public campaign was discussed. In addition, I assume that these texts would not be an option for "all" Jewish women and communities, such as Orthodox ones. However, the fact that these texts exist, that they are suggested in diverse spaces – such as the holiday family table or a communal service – and that they are offered freely over the Internet and printed in formal prayer books reflects the contemporary needs of the community and the individuals and shows how everyday life events and "silenced discourses" are embodied in the Jewish liturgy.

In the following sections, first, I will discuss Jewish theology through a gender and sexual lens, after which I will introduce the methodology. Then, I will present Jewish prayer texts for female victims of sexual assault, classifying the findings into three categories: (1) changing God [dis]positionality; (2) purifying the painful body; and (3) mentioning biblical female characters and reframing the ethno-national mythos in the texts. In summary, I will show how each one of these texts includes diverse liturgical elements in order to express the victims' trauma. Hence, this exposes how the authors view the texts as a political and cultural product used in the religious-communal space to voice women's traumatic experiences and memories.

2 Gendering Jewish liturgy: Theological challenges, changes, and tendencies

In the early 1970s, when feminists began to work for the integration of women's experiences in Christian worship traditions, efforts included calls for inclusive language, for a greater emphasis on women in the Scriptures, for women as preachers, and shared leadership. The Christian church's inability to respond, in some cases on the most minimal levels, has led, however, to an ever more thorough critique of Christian spirituality and the development of alternative ritual events, some of them in ongoing groups.²⁵

Accordingly, Jewish feminist theology (which began to emerge in the same decade) shared patterns with other theologies, as it responded to transformative events in society in order to change the status of

²¹ Rankin et al., *Women's Uncommon Prayers*.

²² Hall, "Spiritual Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse in Adult Christian Women," 133.

²³ Nason-Clark, "When Terror Strikes at Home;" and Pyles, "The Complexities of the Religious Response to Domestic Violence."

²⁴ In addition, not only Reform community created particular liturgy for this issue. For instance, Rabbinical assembly of The Masorti (Conservative) Movement in Israel suggests, only one, prayer texts, which is available at: <https://www.masorti.org.il/shavatnashim>. Also, there are some initiations among the feminist Israeli modern Orthodoxy. For example, Yael Levin (PhD) composed a prayer for female rape victims, which is available at: <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3612457,00.html>.

²⁵ Ronan, "The Liturgy of Women's Lives," 17.

women by insisting on the inclusion of feminist concerns in Jewish liturgy and life. Consequently, gender-critical thinking has become central in the field of biblical scholarship, theology, and religion.²⁶ In the introduction to Adler's book, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*, she writes, "If I were not a feminist, I would not feel entitled to make theology. Accepting feminism's premises leads me directly to the critical and ethical obligations to engender Jewish theology.²⁷ [...] the special problem for an engendered theology of Judaism is how to construct such a method in conversation with a tradition compromised by gender injustice."²⁸

Feminist theologians argue that a liturgical process that focuses on an encounter, an embodied dialogue with God, cannot be complete if females are intentionally left out of it. Traditional liturgical patterns have been shaped by patriarchal values where males are accorded power, while females are excluded.²⁹ Although some claim that theology is gender neutral, as Ruether emphasizes, any theology which can be defined without reference to feminism is a patriarchal theology.³⁰ It not only fails to mention women but also purposefully excludes their participation.

Women theologians have called for a different usage of symbols, texts, and forms in order to express women's relationship with God through the lens of inclusion and exclusion. They have identified that the problem with the traditional understanding of God is that it envisions God exclusively through an analogy with men. In response, Adler, Devine, and other feminist scholars suggested feminine imagery and a feminine naming of God.³¹ Such terms include the Kabbalistic name of God, *Shekhinah* (a feminine hypostasis in the Kabbalah) or the spiritual New Age phrase *Ruach Ha'Olam* – רוח העולם – Spirit of the World.³² For example, Falk freely used nouns of both grammatical genders as metaphors for divinity and suggested transgressively using both genders for God language.³³

The shift toward feminist and gender-inclusive Jewish liturgies created a new opportunity for addressing women-specific issues through prayer. Indeed, the need for feminist liturgies becomes particularly great when the misuse of power reaches the level of abuse.³⁴ These changes ultimately led to the development of the prayers for female victims of violence and abuse that are analyzed in this article. Nonetheless, some of the Jewish prayers and liturgical texts presented in the following section evoke the masculinity of God as an agent of redemption, caring, and compassion, while in others, God's name and masculine attributes were not included at all. In this context, Weiman-Kelman suggests taking up Max Strassfeld's call for trans-feminist religion, to explore multiple avenues of reconstructing religious practices.³⁵ Adapting blessing versions of certain prayers, based on queer/trans paradigm, that have been deemed politically objectionable gains new meanings, and tells new stories about the Jewish past and present alike.

In recent decades, the Jewish feminist liturgy has been frequently and extensively represented in Reform, Conservative and Reconstructing communities, which holds modern liberal ideology.³⁶ This view promotes radical changes in traditional liturgical texts and encourages the creation of new prayers and blessings. This is contrary to the Orthodox denomination, which is characterized by patriarchal and conservative values. In Reform Judaism, traditional Jewish law (called *halakha*) is not perceived as a strictly authoritative, but as a source of inspiration. Reform rabbis, who seek to integrate Jewish tradition with the challenges of modern life, create new prayers, change and formulate traditional ones, omit verses or words that are perceived as chauvinistic, and emphasize ethical aspects, such as gender equality.³⁷

²⁶ Jacobs, "The Work of Daphne Hampson," 233.

²⁷ Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, xv.

²⁸ Ibid., xxiii.

²⁹ Walton, *Feminist Liturgy*, 11.

³⁰ Ruether, "The Future of Feminist Theology in the Academy," 703.

³¹ Adler, "Second Hymn to Shekhinah;" and Devine, "How Shekhinah Became the God (dess) of Jewish Feminism."

³² Waskow, "The Embodiment of God in Prayer."

³³ Falk, "Notes on Composing New Blessings toward a Feminist-Jewish Reconstruction of Prayer," 534.

³⁴ Walton, *Feminist Liturgy*, 24–5.

³⁵ Weiman-Kelman, "Transing Back the Texts, Queering Jewish Prayer."

³⁶ Meyer, *Response to Modernity*.

³⁷ Ibid.; and Ben-Lulu, "Reform Israeli Female Rabbis Perform Community Leadership."

For instance, in the *Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate*, female rabbis emphasize that the intersection between their Jewish and gender identities encouraged them to create particular liturgies.³⁸ This anthology demonstrates how feminine liturgy expresses new tendencies of contemporary religious leadership which may strengthen sisterhood and gender empowerment. This current study focuses on prayer and liturgy created by feminine rabbis and leaders for female victims of sexual assault.

Following this recent research, this study illuminates new tendencies, trajectories, and challenges in the process of engendering Jewish liturgy by exploring silenced and suppressed traumatic experiences, such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, and rape. The following analysis contributes to the understanding of how the discourse regarding domestic violence affects theology through changing liturgical attitudes to God, women's bodies, prayers' texts, and the Jewish community.

3 Methods

This inquiry is based on two qualitative methods. First, I analyzed ten groundbreaking texts dedicated to female victims of sexual assault, such as special versions of familiar holiday blessings and customs. Three of these texts were published in two collections edited by the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism. The first collection is titled *Parashat Hamayim: Immersion in Water as an Opportunity for Renewal and Spiritual Growth*,³⁹ and the second is titled *Barchu: A Collection for the Renewal of Prayer in Israel*.⁴⁰ These texts are recited every November in Israeli Reform congregations during Shabbat services dedicated to the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. The texts were written in Hebrew, and translated by Leora Londy-Barash, an Israeli-American rabbinical student. Other prayers, which are found on the Reconstructing Judaism website⁴¹ and on the American Reform Jewish Movement website,⁴² were written in response to the #MeToo campaign.

In addition to these prayers, I analyzed several liturgical texts from a special Haggadah for women who have experienced domestic violence, which was published by the FaithTrust Institute, a national, multi-faith, multicultural training, and educational organization, working globally to end sexual and domestic violence.⁴³ According to the institute's team and other Jewish feminist religious activists, some Jewish families with which they interact use this Haggadah regularly. I examined metaphors, verbs, linguistic phrases, and the reclaiming or deconstructing of the traditional blessing structure. Textual analysis as a qualitative method to gather information regarding various cultures and subcultures was chosen as the most suitable for this study.⁴⁴

The second phase of the research included conducting semi-structured interviews with the authors of the aforementioned texts: four Reform rabbis (three of them female) and one Reconstructionist activist. Interviews are used to discover a person's view of an experience or phenomenon of study.⁴⁵ They can expose aspects which cannot be revealed only by looking at the texts, and they can shed light on tensions between the authors' expectations and intentions and the final product. Here my main goal was to clarify

³⁸ Edelman et al., *The Sacred Calling*.

³⁹ Lisitsa et al., *Parashat Hamayim*.

⁴⁰ Amir et al., *Barchu*.

⁴¹ Ritualwell is an initiative of Reconstructing Judaism (formerly the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and Jewish Reconstructionist Communities) in Wyncote, PA, USA. It was originally a project of Kolot: The Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies of RRC and was created in partnership with Ma'ayan, the Jewish Women's Project, which is available at <https://ritualwell.org/categories/939>.

⁴² <https://reformjudaism.org/>.

⁴³ Ben-Lulu, "Reform Israeli Female Rabbis Perform Community Leadership."

⁴⁴ McKee, "A Beginner's Guide to Textual Analysis."

⁴⁵ DeMarrais, "Qualitative Interview Studies," 52.

the authors' interpretations and focus on their motivations, sources of inspiration, and writing processes. The interviews were conducted via Skype and other video conference platforms⁴⁶ due to the Covid-19 outbreak and transatlantic restrictions.⁴⁷

I chose grounded theory because it emerged from the investigation of specific phenomena and is based on the point of view of the informants.⁴⁸ This theory "places great emphasis on conversion to the explanations of the participants themselves."⁴⁹ It is a means to discover what the interviewees say, and their explanations for what they do constitute the building blocks of the theory. During the interviews, I noticed that some informants were unaware of their theories. Consequently, the theories presented here are based more on informants' implicit knowledge and less on their explicit knowledge. During the interviews I tried to explore what the informants take for granted and connect between their personal point of view to the broader social level. The analytic process of turning latent knowledge into visible knowledge is essential for constructing a theory based on the information that the researcher has gathered from the informants.⁵⁰

Rosenbaum wonders:

If individuals are reviewing and reassessing their own experiences in light of #MeToo, how can we as scholars not do the same in regard to the existing sources? This is the second responsibility undergirding the work of Archiving #MeToo, which lies not with women as witnesses to their own experience, but with historians as witnesses, charged with reviewing the past, looking for those silences and absences that are cast in new light, suddenly apparent.⁵¹

Following her conclusion, I see the researched texts as a mediator for witnesses, a catalyst to encourage the victims to come out of the #MeToo closet.

In addition, following the requirement in qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge the researcher's own position in order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between the field and the researcher. In this case, exploring prayers which are dedicated to women who suffer from violence was a challenging research to undertake from a male point of view. I occasionally felt guilt as a representative of the oppressing side, namely as a man. On the other hand, as a gay man who has suffered from homophobic violence in his life, I felt empathy and solidarity with a minority voice. In addition, I could not leave my own experiences out of the research. In fact, the power of prayer became apparent to me when I volunteered in a battered women's shelter in the city of Haifa in Northern Israel during my high school years. I frequently visited at this shelter once a month together with other students, where Shabbat services were conducted with the women. I will never forget the women's excitement the moment we recited *Shir la-ma'alot*, which is often read as a powerful call for God's help and redemption.⁵² The women's emotional reaction suggests that the Jewish canon can be a therapeutic way for women to deal with traumatic experiences. Yet, the question remains: How may God and liturgy help female victims of sexual and domestic violence? This experience also impacted my reflexive analysis of the texts and my interpretation of the results and provided me with an opportunity to strengthen my connection with the researched subject.

⁴⁶ Throughout the last decade, Skype interviewing has become a popular qualitative method to deal with the digital turn, generating different challenges and changes in the researcher's positionality in the research (Alkhateeb, "Using Skype as a Qualitative Interview Medium within the Context of Saudi Arabia;" and Deakin and Wakefield, "Skype Interviewing.").

⁴⁷ Qu and Dumay, "The Qualitative Research Interview;" DeMarrais, "Qualitative Interview Studies," 234–44; Rabionet, "How I Learned to Design and Conduct Semi-Structured Interviews," 565; and Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing*.

⁴⁸ Strauss and Corbin, "Grounded Theory Methodology."

⁴⁹ Henwood et al., *Grounded Theory*, 76.

⁵⁰ Glaser and Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

⁵¹ Rosenbaum, "Archiving# MeToo," 259.

⁵² Psalms 121, 1–8 "*Shir la-ma'a lot Esah einai el heharim, meayin yavo ezri. Ezri me'im Hashem, Oseh shamayim va'aretz*" (translation: A Song of Ascents, I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains; from where shall my help come; My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth).

4 Changing God's [dis]positionality

Throughout Jewish history, different kinds of prayers have expressed various human emotions toward God, mostly gratitude and admiration. Yet, a relationship with God, who is traditionally expected to be an all-powerful creator and protector, is hard to maintain when one is battered. Jewish prayer texts for female victims of sexual assault contain a variety of references to God's existence and God's responsibility for the difficult situation of victims.

Rabbi Gila Caine, born and raised in Jerusalem, received her rabbinic ordination in 2011, explored these topics in her rabbinic thesis, specifically liturgical, spiritual, and ceremonial aspects of birth in Jewish tradition and contemporary practice. In her text, "Prayer for a Victim of Rape or of Sexual Assault" (Appendix I), she reclaims God's power for revenge by reciting the opening verse of Psalm 94: *El-nekamot Adonai, El nekamot hofi'a!* ("O God of vengeance, Adonai, O God of vengeance appear"). This verse opens with a call to God to avenge the enemies who are harassing the people of Israel. Thus, Rabbi Caine embraces a call to exact revenge upon the attacker:

I wanted to write a prayer that calls on the "God who avenges". If I cry, "God who avenges", I ask God to correct the tough reality of these women. Feeling revengeful and angry is natural. It is an initial emotion that we must acknowledge, especially regarding traumatized women. Unfortunately, in the Reform world, we avoid engaging in divinity – divinity as a source of evil. However, God is like that too. Instead of being afraid of it, they should harness God for these women. When I talked to women who had experienced sexual abuse, the initial feeling I had was "What do I wish for the man who did this to them?", and as a rabbi I asked myself "How do I make it a liturgy? How does prayer become a call for revenge?" The call for revenge is public. I wrote the prayer thinking that I wish it could be in a situation that someone who was hurt could stand up and call upon the community for action. I need you as a community to respond.

Rabbi Caine emphasizes the direct request to God to avenge the offender. She articulates how to make the prayer a reflective device for women's traumatic experiences. She suggests recognizing the power of God to punish the attacker. She wishes to relocate the prayer from the textual space to the ritualistic space, where the victim may feel safe to share her story with the congregation. It means that in writing the prayer, the positionality of the congregants in the ritual and their optional responses were considered. The participation of community members in the ritual recognizes the traumatic case as a public issue.

Rabbi Tamar Duvdevani has taken this one step further by excluding God's presence entirely from the text. Rabbi Duvdevani ordained at the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem in 2003 and has served as a rabbi-educator, teaching Talmud and Rabbinic literature in *Batei Midrash* (religious education centers) throughout Israel. She earned her PhD in 2018 from HUC-JIR/Cincinnati, where she wrote her dissertation on "Literary Aspects of Rabbinic Attributions in the Babylonian Talmud." In her prayer "Ritual Immersion for Renewal Following a Sexual Assault" (Appendix II), Rabbi Duvdevani suggests the object of the revenge on God, who failed to protect the women in their moments of need, rather than only calling for revenge on the attacker:

In retrospect, I think that since God is not in the prayer, it becomes relevant to many people. God is not present in their lives. Some women who have experienced domestic violence are so angry with God, they do not believe in its existence anymore. In addition, those who still believe, consider their story as God's punishment. It is not God who provides salvation, but water itself, the source of healing. God only signs the prayer at the end because it is part of the Jewish literalism. It's nothing more than a decoration.

This radical statement detaches faith and the transcendent from the structure of the ritual. One can participate in the prayer and feel connected to the prayer, even without a belief or recognition of God's existence. She claims that mentioning God is only due to Jewish semantics. God, she argues, is not the essential resource for redemption and healing.

Rabbi Na'ama Dafni-Kellen, the Co-Rabbi at Or Congregation (Haifa, Israel) expresses a balance between the aforementioned theological approaches. In her prayer, "A Prayer for Breaking the Wall of Silence"⁵³ (Appendix III), she suggests God as an inclusive and protective rescuer. Here is part of the prayer:

⁵³ Published also at the *Tefilat ha-Adam* (2020), the new prayer book of The Progressive movement in Israel (p. 401).

Blessed are You, the Renewer of goodness each day who purifies the human soul.

Blessed are You, the One who strengthens our hands in creating a society in which everyone has the right to live a life of respect and love.

Ana El Refa Na Lanu; Please, God, heal us.

In our interview she explained her decisions, emphasizing the gender impact in the textual representation of God:

On the one hand, God in the prayer does exist but in his familiar version – precisely from familiar poems of forgiveness. On the other hand, God has no body, no gender, so he is not a man or a woman. When you call the divine “Father” or “Lord”, you miss something – sometimes I want to use the term “Mother”. To say that God is limited to only one gender representation in the world is idolatry. In addition, if God is a man, then I am the “woman” who remains as the “Other”. This does not mean that I do not want to refer to God as a female – I do not deserve to produce only a female image – it is just as stupid. I think that once you create elasticity in God's image, spiritual flexibility is created also. It is more important for the healing process of women who have been sexually abused. Some domestic violence survivors find it easier to talk with men about the experience they have had, and others find it easier to talk with other women.

Rabbi Dafni-Kellen presents a compromise in her liturgical approach. She does not suggest recruiting God for the revenge campaign, but preserving God's image of knowledgeable savior, a soft and protective resource. She also includes familiar biblical verses, feminine language (in the Hebrew version), and female biblical characters, which makes her textual creation a Jewish hybrid product. She suggests that using post-gender language to refer to God expands new spiritual phases and phrases in the worship.

However, Israeli female rabbis are not the only ones who create this particular type of prayer. Kroloff points that the involvement of women in Jewish clergy effects on the male worship, participation, and leadership.⁵⁴ Rabbi David Wirtschafter, who has been serving Temple Adath Israel and the Lexington (KY) community since 2015, is a male rabbi who feels committed to this issue, and the author of “Prayer for Confronting Sexual Harassment” (Appendix IV). Like Rabbi Dafni-Kellen, he also positions God as a source of health and mental support by using liturgical rhetoric patterns, such as “God of dignity and decency,” “creator of man and woman,” and “source of wisdom.” He emphasizes that “God is positioned as a source of accountability and integrity. The source that calls us to address the rift between who we are and ought to be.”

May the #MeToo campaign of this week be blessed with the staying power to live well beyond the news cycle. May we seize the opportunity for meaningful action so that this week's mounting willingness to speak out proves to be far more than a momentary protest amidst millennia of abuse.

This text also includes traditional terms and references of the Jewish confession (*Ashamnu*) as well as quotes to show that God is still a resource for redemption. Presenting the prayer during the Shabbat service made the issue public and sanctified the public #MeToo campaign. The prayer thus encourages the congregants to take responsibility, to discover women's voices, and to empower them.

Reform rabbis are not the only ones to advocate for protest against sexual violence; Reconstructionist rabbis and leaders do so as well. They too have been dealing with contemporary theological challenges and changes, basing their actions on the belief that individual autonomy transcends *halakha*, while also perceiving Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people. They believe Judaism to be a cultural heritage and community that share historical memory and historical destiny.⁵⁵ In this spirit, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, Dr. Shira Berkovits, S. Bear Bergman, and Dr. Guila Benchimol composed an alternate version of the *Al Chet* prayer (confession of sins) for the #MeToo era (Appendix V). Based on the fact that in the Days of Awe, Jews repeat the confession prayers many times throughout the *Selichot*

⁵⁴ Kroloff, “The Impact of Women Rabbis on Male Rabbis.”

⁵⁵ Lieberman, “Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life.”

(penitential prayers) and *Yom Kippur* (Atonement Day), they see this moment as an ideal opportunity to convey the message.

Instead of focusing on individual confessions to God, this *Al Chet* version places the responsibility for domestic violence on the society, such as public avoidance (“For the sin we committed by not taking seriously the complaints of a colleague” or “For the sin we committed by believing that sexual victimization does not happen in the Jewish world”). Berkovits emphasizes the importance of God’s positionality in this specific prayer and recognizes God’s presence as essential for contextualizing the message as Jewish religious capital:

We need to talk about God more, not less. Social justice is important, but we are a Godly people, and our actions need to exemplify that. We need to redefine what it means to be “religious” or “observant” so that it includes not just outward displays of piety but leadership of morality and integrity ... We published the prayer at a time when people were eager for discourse on this topic, and we helped to continue to elevate the conversation of #MeToo and frame it in a timely and religious light.

Another example of a prayer text used for Yom Kippur is *Anu Ashamnu* (We Have Transgressed), which was written by Danya Ruttenberg, S. Bear Bergman, Leah Greenblum, Emily Becker, and Abby Citrin. According to Jewish tradition, this prayer is said loudly and demonstratively as part of the general confession of sins, which all Jews are required to disclose. It is as if the collective rather than the individual expresses itself in prayer through the mouth of the individual, or perhaps more accurately, effective prayer occurs when individuals submerge themselves in the collective.⁵⁶

In this particular version, instead of feeling accused by God, it calls for social responsibility. God cannot change reality, people can, and therefore God is taken out of the picture. Whereas a traditional *Ashamnu* confession only lists transgressions of a moral nature and consists of twenty-four or more words in alphabetical order (the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet being repeated three times) this new version emphasizes domestic violence:

Anu Ashamnu for #MeToo

We **Abused** our power, we did not **Believe** survivors, we were **Complicit**, we **Demeaned**. We **Echoed** the majority, we **Focused** on our own self-interest over safety, we **Gave** abusers opportunities to further harm, we **Humiliated** survivors, we **Ignored** our impact, we **Justified** inappropriate behavior. We **Kept** abusers in power, we **Laughed** at jokes that supported rape culture, we **Marginalized** narratives that weren’t easy to digest, we **Normalized** problematic behavior, we **Ostracized** victims, we **Participated** in the erasure of survivors’ voices. We **Questioned** survivors’ motivations, we **Reinforced** harmful myths, we **Silenced** voices trying to come forward, We **Trivialized**. We did not **Use** safe protocols, we **Violated** boundaries, we **Waited** too long to take an action, we **Exonerated** perpetrators who did not repent, we **Yielded** to our basest impulses; we **Zealously** defended perpetrators of harm.

The choice of powerful verbs, such as “abused,” “ignored,” or “humiliated,” illuminates the serious effects of the trauma. The confession does not replace the immoral acts that man has committed and thereby damaged the work of the Creator; instead, the text places responsibility on the community. Rather than focus on God, this text focuses on the self and on the trauma. Indeed, in the traditional version the individual recites a standardized list of offences formulated in the first-person plural; the community states its sins. In both cases God listens to the confession, but in the new version the responsibility for the sin is shared collectively among the community.

Taken together, in these texts God is positioned in various ways that differ from traditional Jewish liturgy. In the new prayer texts, God is at times an avenger, in others a healer, and in some, God is not mentioned at all.

⁵⁶ In Judaism, more often than not, the plural forms are used when addressing God.

5 Purifying the painful body

Women learn to negotiate the world and identify themselves through and with their bodies.⁵⁷ Within the context of gender-based violence, the body becomes the evidence of the traumatic experience and is a site of a painful memory.⁵⁸ Wesely, Allison, and Schneider assert that domestic violence exposes the tenuous connections between mind and body in the fragmented female identity.⁵⁹ They suggest that it is thus possible to reclaim the female self by reconnecting with the body.

Rabbi Duvdevani wrote a prayer for ritual immersion (*tevilah*) (Appendix II, p. 19). In contrast to the Jewish laws of modesty and *niddah* (the system of ritual purity and immersion), which is seen as Judaism's version of a patriarchal device across cultures,⁶⁰ in Rabbi Duvdevani's prayer, the immersion symbolizes a feminine therapeutic performance. The body, according to Rabbi Duvdevani, is considered the main agent in the prayer ritual:

The prayer is for purifying the wounded body, not just the scarred soul. Victims of sexual assault feel that their body has been desecrated. They are not pure anymore. They hate their body, reject it. So, when I wrote the prayer I thought about their body and their place in the ceremony. When it comes to physical injury, something physical needs to be cleansed, and water is the physical thing. Our body is formed in water. How much water is there at birth? Immersion is a significant rite of passage; I imagined how it allows people to experience the transition. It guided me. The water had a big impact on me.

Bless the Lord who renews my body and soul. To turn it into something prayerful, the presence of the body makes it a personal ritual rather than a communal one. In addition, the use of water allows avoidance of a masculine orientation because everything is said in the first person – the speaker has no gender. This is something that was very important to me because for men it's more difficult to talk about sexual abuse or their body.

Rabbi Duvdevani's explanation emphasizes that her vision and inspiration were derived from the view that prayer exists not only as a written space but also as a performative space. While the aforementioned rabbis aimed to create texts for use in the communal space, this prayer expresses the personal opportunity to perform an intimate ritual. In addition, this attitude embraces theological changes, such as transferring the agency of purification from God to water. Thus, the body becomes the central component of the religious work and sanctifies the women's painful experience.

Another example of a text that positions the female body as a dominant agent is a Passover Haggadah for women who have experienced domestic violence.⁶¹ It was published in 2003 by the FaithTrust Institute and joins previous Passover Haggadah which have conveyed a public message and social call for recognition and equality.⁶² The next paragraph is taken from the Introduction:

We created this Haggadah to illuminate the parallels between our people's ancient story of liberation from Egypt and the stories of courageous Jewish women who have experienced domestic violence. In the telling of both our personal and communal journeys from oppression toward freedom, we create a community that affirms our participation in the move-

⁵⁷ Orbach, *Hunger Strike*.

⁵⁸ Dasgupta, *Body Evidence*.

⁵⁹ Wesely et al., "The Lived Body Experience of Domestic Violence Survivors," 211.

⁶⁰ Hartman and Marmon, "Lived Regulations, Systemic Attributions: Menstrual Separation and Ritual Immersion in the Experience of Orthodox Jewish Women," 390.

⁶¹ Iser et al., *A Journey Towards Freedom*. According to Moore, "Democracy and the New Haggadah," rewriting the Haggadah practiced largely by activists in movements that aimed to modify Judaism to address changing demands of Jewish life, such as gender equality. In 1975 Esther Broner and Naomi Nimrod wrote the first Women's Haggadah (published in *Ms. magazine* in 1977 and later in Esther's book, "The Telling").

⁶² Tsur, "Pesach in the Land of Israel;" Henshke, "'The Lord Brought Us Forth from Egypt'." For example, "Pride Seders" – which incorporate secular (profane) rituals and symbols, such as rainbow-themed flags and foods and bright clothing with rainbow colors, symbolic items associated with LGBTQ celebrations, and sacred (religious) items, such as candles and a Seder plate – demonstrate ritual activities which represent a blending of identities and recognition of the importance of Jewish LGBTQ pride (Greenfields et al., *Pride Seder*, 3).

ment toward the Promised Lands. In this celebration of spiritual strength, hope, and community, healing becomes possible.⁶³

In this Haggadah, some traditional customs are used with new interpretations to contextualize women's experiences. For example, *Urchatz* (יְרַחֵץ) – a hand-washing ritual – is performed at the beginning of the Seder to cleanse before eating. In the new version, the custom allows women to symbolically wash away their disturbing memories and traumatic past.

Urchatz

Being in Egypt means spending our hours and days enslaved by the demands of everyone else. Tonight, we recognize our own needs and desires. We allow ourselves to give and receive blessing. We wash away the past by pouring water over each other's hands, purifying ourselves by receiving from one another.

Yahatz (יָחַץ), breaking the middle *Matzah* (Appendix VI), symbolically positions the body as a political agent in the new interpretation of the ritual. The comparison between the female body and the broken *Matzah* performatively demonstrates the fragility of the painful body. Additionally, the *Afikoman* – a piece of the broken *Matzah* which is actually hidden – invites the participants to reflect and wonder what is hidden and what is discovered, which subjects are silenced and why.

6 Mentioning biblical female characters and reframing the ethno-national mythos

Since the establishment of Reform Judaism, Jewish Reform prayer books have regularly included the names of the matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Bilha, and Zilpa) to those of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). In addition to the inclusion of ancient female precedents, some prayer books have innovatively adapted existing rituals to the female experience in order to address significant life events.⁶⁴

In several prayers, I found references to biblical female characters who suffered from sexual violence. For example, Rabbi Wirtschafter includes the biblical Mothers in the prayer and positions them as perennial figures, as he says, “since they led difficult lives with limited choices, they call us to be courageous and use our privilege to make progress.” Rabbi Caine also argues that it was important for her to include both the narratives of Dina and Tamar, because they are both victims of rape in the Bible.⁶⁵ Through mentioning their names, she framed contemporary anonymous Jewish women as a social problem across times, spaces, and cultures:

Dina, Jacob's daughter, who was brutally raped by Shechem; Tamar, who was raped by Amnon. The daughters' fathers did not respond to these acts of violence and both girls disappear afterwards. A correction needs to be made in everything that goes on there – not just for the idea of rape but also for the response to it. When I write a prayer, I try to think what is the story that comes to mind. To write a prayer is to tell a second-person myth – to tell someone it's a myth. When I think about this prayer, I want to bring these biblical women to the prayer text; it is like reviving them, giving them power. I want to turn the story from one of sexually abused women into a story that has social, religious and historical significance. This is a social story, not just a private one. They are not alone; brave and important biblical women are with them.

Another example is demonstrated by Rabbi Dafni-Kellen's decision to mention biblical verses which describe and portray sorrow among females, such as “Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one” (Songs of Solomon 5:2); “Lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid” (Isaiah

⁶³ Iser et al., *A Journey Towards Freedom*, iii.

⁶⁴ Ben-Lulu, “Reform Israeli Female Rabbis Perform Community Leadership;” Ben-Lulu, “Let Us Bless the Twilight;” Marx, “Empowerment, Not Police,” 127; and Goldstein, *New Jewish Feminism*.

⁶⁵ Blyth, *The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34*.

40:9); “Raise your voice, with power ... Raise it, have no fear, for there is a reward for your labor” (Jeremiah 31:16); “Shed tears like a sobbing river” (Lamentations 2:18); “I have heard your prayer and seen your tears” (Isaiah 38:5); and “Our sister, our sister, our sister. May you become prosperous to thousands of myriads” (Genesis 24:60). These verses refer to Rebecca or Jerusalem, which is personified as the woman *Bat Zion* (Daughter of Zion). Thus, the struggle against sexual harassment is infused with biblical feminine figures and sacred images. Rabbi Dafni-Kellen says:

This prayer tells them – “You are our sister, you are not alone, we are responsible for you, and you can make it”; here, it is written in our Bible, not in some women’s forum on the internet. Jewish tradition tells you that if you go through violence and are silent; remember, there is always a way out. That is why it is called prayer, a “Prayer for Breaking the Walls of Silence”. You do not have to remain in silence; we will believe you. Silencing is devastating, eliminating the solution and the support. Prayer, by language, image and reference, is a force for personal and social change. Many synagogues use it, even translating it into Arabic and English. On the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women, the communities read it.

Rabbi Dafni-Kellen’s purpose is to evoke a phenomenological healing experience. In this, her liturgical voyage exposes a hermeneutic attitude to the biblical text.⁶⁶ She sees the liturgical textual space, particularly the inclusion of feminine characters and references, as a device to encourage victims to share their personal stories that are often concealed. In addition, some texts also refer to a national trauma, such as Jewish slavery in Egypt. In the aforementioned text “A Journey Towards Freedom – Passover Haggadah,” the authors provide new interpretations of the narrative of the children of Israel who were enslaved by the Egyptians. For example, before the “Kadesh” (the prayer for the first cup of wine), a reflection is attached in order to invite women to confess their past and express appreciation for their new life:

Kadesh

In Egypt, we experience abuse. We do not have to live this way. In Egypt, we experience emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Someone tries to control us, to keep us broken and enslaved. God calls out to us, “I am Adonai: I will bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt” We hear, we do not have to live this way. In order to survive, I did what I was told. I did whatever I thought I needed to do, said whatever I thought I needed to say, to get through the night without being hurt. As we raise the first cup, we acknowledge that we have been abused; we see that we are not alone in this, we sanctify this day and our experience... Let us invite the source of hope into our midst as we embrace this moment in our journey at this time in our lives.

During the Passover Seder ritual, one of the performances which symbolize the memory of the ten plagues that God brought upon the Egyptians is to remove a drop of wine from the participants’ glasses to express that the current joy is diminished when others suffer. In this alternative Haggadah, the ten plagues are changed to ten oppressive social-cultural attitudes, such as ableism, ageism, antisemitism, classism, heterosexism, homophobia, imperialism, racism, sexism, and xenophobia:

Passover Seder ritual

Tonight, we name ten types of oppression that plague our society, causing all of us to suffer, keeping us in Egypt. We know that domestic violence does not exist in a vacuum. It exists in a world where power and privilege are misused by individuals and societal institutions. We live in a world where injustice is accepted. This perpetuates domestic violence, poisoning society and threatening the welfare of our community. Recognizing the power in naming oppressions, we reclaim our power by naming aloud, affirming that they exist, proclaiming that they are wrong. As we spill a drop of juice for each, we acknowledge that the existence of these oppressions diminishes all of our lives: Ableism, Ageism, Antisemitism, Classism, Heterosexism, Homophobia, Imperialism, Racism, Sexism, Xenophobia. By sanctifying the humanity of all, we free ourselves.

Another text suggests a new interpretation for the known *Midrash* of “the four sons”: one is wise, one is wicked, one is simple, and one does not know how to ask. According to the Jewish tradition, the four sons represent the four strata of the people of Israel. The first three ask, each in their own way, for an

⁶⁶ Guzman-Carmeli and Rubin, “Tikkun (Divine Repair) and Healing in a Kabbalistic Yeshiva.”

Figure 1: Cover page of *A Journey Towards Freedom: A Haggadah for Women Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence*, edited by Alison Iser et al. (FaithTrust Institute, Seattle 2003). Cover art by Daya Bonnie Rao.

interpretation of Passover's customs, and the fourth represents the people who are not educated and know nothing about the holiday *mitzvah* (commandment). For this reason, the Torah commands "Tell Your Son" (Exodus 13:8), namely, properly explain to him the traditional meaning of the holiday.

In this alternative version, the sons are transformed into community members who present different responses to the presence of the victim's trauma. Thus, the sharing of the domestic violence story is positioned as a commandment. The familiar traditional patterns, symbols, and narratives are reclaimed to deal with domestic violence and sexual assault. The Passover Seder becomes a political performance conveying a message in the framework of the family during a ritual that is dedicated to the transmission of traditions and the healing of past wounds, no less than any other popular act, such as a post on Facebook or protestation in the urban space. A holiday tale based on ritual and storytelling supplies a framework to voice these women's painful stories.⁶⁷ Therefore, this alternative version promotes the creation of a reflexive dialogue among individuals and the community for exposing ranges of responses that reflect solidarity, empathy, self-compassion, and social mercy. The ethno-national Passover narrative is transformed to reflect women's experiences and the significance of the interaction between the individual and the community. Hence, the new versions maintain the importance of Jewish collective memory, not only of the national slavery trauma but also the personal trauma of domestic violence.

The Wise community member asks: "How can we, as individuals and as a community, address domestic violence?" This community member accepts personal and community responsibility, recognizing that when one is oppressed, we are all oppressed. To this community member you can explain that "the social institutions, laws, and norms within our society, as well as the attitudes and behavior within our interpersonal relationships, perpetuate domestic violence. You can discuss ways to create change within your life and community."

The Wicked community member asks: "Why don't they (the women) just leave?" This community member adds to the shame and isolation of those experiencing abuse by blaming them for the abusive behavior of other people. To this community member you can respond by saying "why is it that you don't ask why people batter? You must hold those who batter accountable for their actions while creating safety and autonomy for those who experience abuse."

⁶⁷ Myerhoff, "Ritual and Storytelling."

The Simple community member asks: “What is domestic violence?” To this community member you can say, “domestic violence occurs when a person uses a pattern of coercive behaviors to gain and maintain control over an intimate partner. These behaviors hurt us all.”

The community member Who Does Not Know how to ask, can be told: “Silence is part of the problem; it benefits those who batter. Domestic violence exists in every community. Freedom requires the end of violence in all of our relationships and institutions.”

7 Conclusion

Prayers and liturgical texts for female victims of sexual assault examined in this study renew connections between current traumatic experiences of women and past experiences of women in the national myths. Some of the texts emphasize the active presence of God, which may, at times feel like God’s absence. Others express women’s anger toward God, avoiding any transcendent mention, or even calling for God to be an avenger. Furthermore, the texts also refer to familiar biblical female characters who validate the traumatic experiences and prove that domestic violence has been a social problem through history. The biblical heroines and the familiar national myth turned into representatives of the painful lives of contemporary women. The mentioning of historical figures, traditional texts, historical myths, and traumatic stories reveals Jewish tradition as relevant to explaining the lives of contemporary women. Reframing the ethno-national myths also contributes to the contextualization of the victims’ personal stories within the collective memory of traumatic events. The new texts, such as the version for *Midrash* from Passover Haggadah, demonstrate the connection between the past and the present, and between the individual and the community.

By including plural pronouns and verbs in the texts, both in English and Hebrew versions, it is possible to notice the authors’ endeavor to emphasize the role of the community in providing recognition and empathy, rather than the nation or God. Still, the explicit or implicit presence of God in the text, along with the inclusion of community members, provides validity and significance to the prayer. It gives a sociological conceptualization of trauma to a personal, phenomenological experience of women, thereby emphasizing the importance of society in the process of rehabilitation.⁶⁸ Thus, community members can “teach their daughters to wail and one another to lament,” as the biblical verse urges. The written texts and those with the potential to be performed in the communal space provide legitimacy to women’s silenced voices and connects their past experiences and present time. They help to affirm the community as a safe space for those women. The issue is framed as a collective endeavor and a political–social problem. This liturgy contributes to challenge the historical neglective treatment toward sexual violence and breaks the perception which viewed the women cases as a forgotten private story;⁶⁹ it constructs a direct connection between biblical time and contemporary reality, and between personal and social.

In addition to the use of references to God and festive blessings in these prayer texts, women’s bodies are incorporated as an important agent to empower the victims. More than a symbolic interpretation of marking the purifying of the painful body and soul, the body is positioned as a real player. For example, in the specific textual prayer for immersion, which expresses the conjunction between the liturgical text and the performance itself. By perceiving the body as the source of empowerment and pride and not shame and concealment, the authors try to raise public consciousness regarding violence against women and its destructive effects.⁷⁰

Expanding on Molloy’s view,⁷¹ by placing the pained female body as the primary subject matter of the texts, the authors are bringing women’s physical reality to the attention of a culture that has systematically ignored and denigrated the female body. This liturgical act supports current feminist criticism, which

⁶⁸ Meštrović, “A Sociological Conceptualization of Trauma;” and Thoits, “Sociological Approaches to Mental Illness.”

⁶⁹ Pandey and Mishra, “Dalit Women’s Narratives on Sexual Violence.”

⁷⁰ Villar-Argáiz, “The Female Body in Pain.”

⁷¹ Molloy, *Gethsemane Day*.

has frequently analyzed the visibility and invisibility of the female body and of female experience.⁷² Accordingly, this liturgy may be accepted as a source of healing, confirmation, and therapy. Moreover, these texts can also be used as political means to advance the struggle of women against domestic violence. They confirm that the tradition can be renewed through a dynamic process of creation⁷³ and can demonstrate how women reinterpret sacred texts and biblical narratives to apply different life experiences.

Paralleling Mosala, who claims that “in order for black theology to become an effective weapon of struggle for the majority of the oppressed black people, it must be rooted in the working-class history and culture of these people,”⁷⁴ I suggest that a Jewish liturgical view of domestic violence and sexual harassment should present religious traditional narratives and symbols as a means of gender empowerment and rehabilitation. These particular prayers have been supported by the shift in biblical hermeneutics that considers the role of the readers in assigning meaning to the biblical text, and furthermore, they have continued this shift. The authors invite the female victims, who supposedly read these texts, to bring themselves, their memories, their bodies, and their secrets to the text and conduct an open dialogue with Jewish heritage.⁷⁵

Future research may focus on the women themselves, showing how these texts are experienced by female victims of sexual assault as a source of healing, confirmation, and redemption. Perhaps, these texts not only reflect their experiences but also shape their religiosity. Meanwhile, these special prayers shine a light on an oft-ignored problem in religious communities and provide a space for women’s traumatic experiences, particularly domestic abuse and rape, to be recognized and validated. Moreover, several texts invoke the power of God and ritual to set the women and community on a path toward healing. This innovation by Reform and Reconstructing Jewish rabbis and activists exposes how liberal religious denominations create a political call to affirm a discourse that has been traditionally silenced in the patriarchal realm.⁷⁶ This reveals how these communities may be considered as supportive sites in the contemporary feminist revolution.

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⁷² Lawson and Shakinovsky, *Marked Body*, 2.

⁷³ Sagi and Sagi, *Tradition vs Traditionalism*.

⁷⁴ Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, 7.

⁷⁵ West, “Reading the Bible as Queer Americans,” 28.

⁷⁶ Ben-Lulu, “Who will say Kaddish for me?”

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Appendix I

“A Prayer for a Victim of Rape or of Sexual Assault” / Rabbi Gila Caine

Adonai, open up my lips
 So, my mouth will call;
 God of vengeance shine forth!
 I _____ daughter/son of _____ and _____
 Call upon you,
 God of Dina and God of Tamar -
 My spirit is enclosed
 And I am in a cave -
 A Prayer

Goddess - Adonai
 You rescued my soul from death,
 Please, Yah (Eternal One), revive me.

Goddess - Adonai
 You saved my body from suffering,
 Please, Yah (Eternal One), heal me.

Goddess - Adonai
 You extricated my spirit from shattering,
 Please, Yah (Eternal One), strengthen me.

Goddess- Eloha-Yah
 Grant me the power to go out in the sunlight,
 And the power to set out in the light of the moon.

Appendix II

“Ritual Immersion for Renewal Following a Sexual Assault” / Rabbi Tamar Duvdevani

(Before Immersion):
 Water, have mercy on me.
 Let me calm down in your gentle caress.
 Your soothing tones will quiet the guilt and revulsion.

Water, have mercy on me.
 Let my emptiness be filled with your clarity
 Cleanse the wounds that haven't healed.

Water, have mercy on me.
 Let my organs be strengthen by your flow.
 Renew in me lost purity.

(After Rising from the Water): Blessed are you God, Renewer of my body and spirit.

Appendix III

“A Prayer for Breaking the Wall of Silence” / Rabbi Na’ama Dafni-Kellen

Our God and God of our Ancestors, our fathers and our mothers,

Help us strengthen the broken voices, the silent cries, of those for whom the walls of their family home have become prison walls; those who pray that we will recognize their suffering, those who call out: “Add my tears as well into your bottle of water.” Let us hear the sound of the price that our brothers and sisters cry out, and remember that we were all created in Your image, as it was said, “I heard a murmur, a voice.”

Allow us to find in ourselves the true will to help them start anew; to find the mighty courage to cry out and not to hide. The hope to grow towards a better future. Grant us the privilege of assisting them in discovering their mental strength and the choices open before them.

And to those who suffer from familial violence, we call out to them with all our heart:

“Let me in, my own sister”, “Raise your voice, with power...Raise it, have no fear, for there is a reward for your labor.” “Shed tears like a sobbing river...I have seen your tears”

“Our sister, our sister, our sister. May you become prosperous to thousands of myriads.”

May it be your will, God in the Heavens, that the meager cries will be heard and redeemed; create a new soul in them and in us, and endow in us redemption and life.

Blessed are You, the Renewer of goodness each day who purifies the human soul.

Blessed are You, the One who strengthens our hands in creating a society in which everyone has the right to live a life of respect and love.

Ana El Refa Na Lanu

Please, God, heal us.

Appendix IV

“A prayer for confronting sexual harassment”/ Rabbi David Wirtschafter

God of dignity and decency, Creator of man and woman, Source of Wisdom Who calls on us to demonstrate respect and practice restraint...

Many of us come to you this Sabbath full of embarrassment, shame, humiliation, guilt, outrage, anxiety, and disgust.

Too many men have spoken basely and behaved horribly.

Too many women have been subjected to sexual harassment, abuse, and assault.

May the “Me Too” campaign of this week be blessed with the staying power to live well beyond the news cycle.

May we seize the opportunity for meaningful action so that this week’s mounting willingness to speak out proves to be far more than a momentary protest amidst millennia of abuse.

May men resolve to neither participate in these vile acts nor perpetuate the circumstances that allow them to continue.

Whether the harasser is a family member or a friend, an admired colleague, or a total stranger, give us the courage to call out both the behavior and those who participate in it.

Whether the victim is a family member or a friend, an admired colleague or total stranger, give us the empathy to support them in making their voices heard and their grievances known.

Ashamnu. We have sinned. We are not immune. Jews are both victims and victimizers in this disturbing realm of behavior. All too often we have been complicit and complacent when what was called for was compassion and courage.

Let us strive to make our homes, our congregations, our board rooms, staff rooms and classrooms places where no one can degrade anyone.

Ufros Aleinu Sukkat Shelomecha, Source of Peace, spread over us your shelter of peace so that all us can practice what Hillel preached: “What is hateful to you don’t do to anyone.”

May this be our blessing, and let us say: Amen.

<https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2017/10/19/prayer-confronting-sexual-harassment>

Appendix V

Al Chet prayer (confession of sins) for the #MeToo era

For the sin we committed through inappropriate use of power.

For the sin we committed by inappropriate sexual advances.

For the sin we committed by putting people in power without oversight.

For the sin we committed by not taking seriously the complaints of a colleague.

For the sin we committed by not believing victims when they spoke up.

For the sin we committed by not being aware of our own power or privilege when making an advance.

For the sin we committed by pushing forward when we should have waited and listened.

For the sin we committed by believing that sexual victimization does not happen in the Jewish world.

For all of these sins, God, help us rectify the evil we have brought about, help us to restore justice through the hard work of repentance. Only then, God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

For the sin we committed in choosing to think a person who is appropriate with us is appropriate with everyone.

For the sin we committed by choosing our own comfort over the safety of others.

For the sin we committed by focusing on our intent rather than our impact.

For the sin we committed by prioritizing reputations and money over safety.

For the sin we committed by ignoring sexual victimization as a problem until #MeToo .

For the sin we committed by performative wokeness.

For the sin we committed by failing to acknowledge our ignorance about sexual victimization.

For the sin we committed by waiting to stand against a perpetrator until we saw others doing so.

For the sin we committed by making light of victims' suffering.

For the sin we committed by contributing to rape culture.

For all of these sins, God, help us rectify the evil we have brought about, help us to restore justice through the hard work of repentance. Only then, God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

For the sin we committed by causing survivors to doubt their truth.

For the sin we committed by misusing Jewish texts to promote silence.

For the sin we committed by not supporting survivors.

For the sin we committed by gaslighting victims and victim advocates.

For the sin we committed by cutting corners in best practice protocols.

For the sin we committed by talking more than listening.

For the sin we committed by prioritizing nuance over moral clarity.

For the sin we committed by urging those who have been victimized to forgive, especially before their perpetrator did the hard work of repentance.

For the sin we committed by prioritizing some victims' voices over others.

For the sin we committed by requiring vulnerable people to depend on me, rather than investing in the development of healthy, decentralized systems that empower the entire community, and hold us accountable.

For all of these sins, God, help us rectify the evil we have brought about, help us to restore justice through the hard work of repentance. Only then, God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

Appendix VI

Yahatz יָחַץ (breaking the middle Matzah)

There is no one among us whose body or soul is not permeated by cracks, some wide, some narrow, some deep, others shallow. At times, so many of us feel fragile, fractured, wanting only to gather up the shattered pieces. If only we could put them back together, to be smooth, unblemished once more. But our journey is not back into the past, but forward, into a future where we transform our pieces into a whole that is both strong and weathered. As we break the middle matzah in a two, the larger of the broken halves becomes the afikomen. It is hidden away and must be found and shared at the conclusion of the meal in order to complete the seder...we all have qualities that are gifts to share. Let us each take a slip of paper and write one strength that we might offer as a blessing to someone else, our own personal afikomen. We hide these away, offering them as gifts when the afikomen is eaten. As the remaining *matzoth* are raised for all to see, let us sing together. This is the bread of affiliation our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry in body and spirit join with us and eat. Let all who are in need of comfort and support come to share our Passover. This year we are here, next year in Israel. Today we are bound. Tomorrow may we be free.