March 30, 1981

BEYOND HALACHA: JEWISH FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

Dear Friend,

Three of the courses offered at the 1980 National Havurah Summer Institute last August provided the opportunity for a number of women to come together and explore sources for Jewish women's spirituality, Jewish women's history, and feminist theology. The enthusiastic response to the readings and the intensity of the class discussions convinced several of us who attended the Institute that the quest for an authentic Jewish women's identity has just begun.

While acknowledging the gains made over the past ten years (since the founding of Ezrat Nashim in 1971), we moved on to re/discover the depth of our shared experiences, and the pain -- and ambivalence -- of confronting Judaism as feminists, and feminism as Jews. Our conversations were far-ranging, but all seemed to return to the shared sense of longing (that was, in turn, urgent and wistful) for a Judaism -- and a Jewish community -- which reflects and informs our sense of ourselves as heirs to and shapers of a tradition that celebrates both human and divine femaleness, and encourages exploration of the implications of such cosmic re/visioning for our relationships to one another, and our relationship to God.

Several of us have been considering ways in which we might continue and expand the discussions begun in August. We are proposing a 5-day retreat to explore these issues further. We want to gather together a small number of Jewish women who are literate in the areas of feminist spirituality, women's history, and Jewish studies to begin to work through, what may challenge modern Jewish thought and practice as significantly as the deliberations at Yevneh challenged, and ultimately transformed, Biblical Judaism. Feminism requires (and inspires) re/vision, and we want to begin to re/vision Judaism using the insights of feminist theology and our experiences as Jewish feminists.

We plan to meet in a secluded retreat, the Grail, in Cornwall-on-Hudson, from Wednesday, May 27 through Sunday, May 31. Accommodations will be simple; the setting should be conducive to thought and conversation (there are 50 acres with woods and walk, and there is a lake in a forest nearby). They will provide food (vegetarian and fish) and sleeping and meeting quarters for 24 people at a per diem cost of $20 ($80 total per person for the five days). As we believe that the process is integrally bound to context, we will strive to become a community. By preparing for and celebrating Shabbat together, we will begin a new kind of tikun, beckoning Nashith to join our songs.

This is to be a conference of all of us; we do not presume to try to plan it all ourselves without significant input from you. We have enclosed a form on which you can indicate the areas you are most interested in planning. We need women who will arrange:
1. Daily programming - text study, Jewish/feminist theory and practice, Jewish women's theology, etc.
2. Daily tefillah
3. Shabbat - preparation, celebration, resolution
4. Retreat evaluation - Sunday morning: where do we go from here?

These areas provide a general framework for the activities of the retreat. We urge you, therefore, to add your own ideas to, and to suggest changes in, this general outline. In order to be a success, this retreat must be a cooperative venture in conception, design, and realization.

A few other thoughts. (1) Early deliberations about childcare have led us to conclude that the intensity of such a gathering would be undermined by the presence of young ones, and that others should share nurturing. What is your response to such a proposal? (2) About money. We are investigating possible sources of funds to help defray the cost of attendance. If anyone has suggestions or ideas about that, we would appreciate hearing from you as soon as possible. Even in the absence of outside funds, however, we could set up a kind of "travel kitty," in which those who are coming from nearby could contribute some money toward the transportation of others, and those coming from farther away (and incurring greater expense) could then be partially reimbursed. Again, we would appreciate responses to these ideas.

As mentioned above, room and board for the retreat will cost $50. In addition, we have begun to incur operating expenses, e.g. sending you this letter. In order to cover these and future costs, we must assess an additional $10 per person fee. Total retreat costs (excluding travel) therefore, come to $60. To reserve a place, please send a check for ten dollars made out to Myra Rosenhaus, 922 Maxwell Terrace, Bloomington, IN 47401, no later than April 17.

We look forward to hearing from you with suggestions, wishes, even your caveats. Finally, Myra Rosenhaus at Indiana University has agreed to serve as coordinator of the retreat. Questions, suggestions, etc. should be directed to her. We hope to hear from you soon.

B'shalom,
Martha Ackelsberg
Sue Elwell
Judith Plaskow
Myra Rosenhaus
T. Erna Betel