

Nursing in Shul

God-the-Breast: Why isn't this image as familiar [and hallowed?] to us as God-the-King-of-the-Universe?

BY AURORA MENDELSON

My husband and I had just moved to Maryland and were attending our new synagogue for the first time with our nine-month-old daughter. During the service, she began to fuss; she was hungry and wanted to nurse. I looked around nervously, knowing that breastfeeding in public offends a fair number of people. Some find it a disconcerting reminder that human beings are animals; others that it is somehow an inappropriate erotic display. Our culture sees breasts first and foremost as sexual, when really their primary purpose is to nurse. I sat weighing my options: Leave the service and nurse my baby outside, or stay put and possibly offend someone whom I didn't even yet know? For me, prayer is a serious commitment. Why did I have to choose between one holy act and another?

In our previous synagogue, my *minhag* [custom] had been to take the baby into the sanctuary hallway to nurse; that way I could still hear the service. Unfortunately, the shul had set aside the library (which was upstairs and down a corridor) for nursing mothers. It was only a matter of time before somebody voiced their opinion about my breastfeeding in the more public place, while praying. I, though, had come to see nursing as a holy act, a transformative spiritual experience that had, in fact, been responsible for my re-energized engagement with Judaism. It was through the embodied acts of birthing and most particularly breastfeeding that I had powerfully come to know the meaning of the word "sacred." I knew that Judaism stresses modesty, but also views the body as created in the image of God, and thus holy. Increasingly, I came to understand that one reason breastfeeding was so moving to me was that it was a potent metaphor for God's nurturance.

The truth was, I could no longer feel at home *theologically* in a synagogue where I could not freely nurse my child, as that would mean having to shut off the part of myself that had led me to see the holiness in the world. And more powerful to me even than that, perhaps, was that nursing had brought me to see *myself* as intimately a facet of that world's holiness.

Going over all of this in my head as I sat in our new synagogue, I steeled myself for congregants' disapproval, opened my shirt, and put the baby to my breast. Soon she was sleeping, and my husband and I were able to stay and participate



fully in the Shabbat service. The words "participate fully," actually, don't begin to do justice to the experience. Holding my child, feeding her from my own body while chanting the ancient texts about the creative and nurturing power of God was a unique opportunity to actually embody those sacred words.

Breastfeeding has had an impact on me in other ways as well. Even before I became the steward of another person's body, I was committed to the many advantages of breastfeeding

over bottle-feeding. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, nursing offers protection from many diseases and disorders, not only during the time that the mother and child actually engage in it, but throughout the remainder of *both* parties'

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lives. I also saw how a mother's emotional connection to her baby evolves naturally from the biological act of nursing—from the calming hormones released in both mother and baby, and from the fact that a mother cannot go more than several hours without feeding (or pumping milk for) her child, and thus cannot be separated from him or her for more than a day.

As a feminist, I was also experiencing breastfeeding as an answer to our culture's conceptual monopoly of women's bodies, to the fact that most of us perceive our corporeal selves in relation to societal ideals of feminine beauty and sexuality, and consequently beat ourselves up for falling short. Through breastfeeding I had come to relate to my body in a new way: as a powerful and creative force. When a friend of mine spoke with great pride about her accomplishment in relation to her three-month-old son—describing how she had grown him herself from material in her own body, first in the womb and then beyond—I felt she accurately depicted my own experience.

Breastfeeding also made me feel responsible environmentally. Formula uses lots of packaging materials, and requires ecologically unfriendly fuel to manufacture it, transport it and heat it. Breast milk, on the other hand, is one of the few food

products that arrives in our homes ready-to-eat with no packaging whatsoever. Having a part of one's very self become, like manna, an ideal food product—life-giving, fresh, completely recyclable, no refrigeration necessary, and available whenever my baby called for it—could only heighten my concern for responsible, sustainable foods.

Because I was familiar with the challenges that classical Judaism holds for feminists, I was surprised to discover, in the course of my research, how many positive and moving references to nursing exist in traditional Jewish sources. Until fairly recently, nursing was, of course, a life-or-death issue: If you couldn't nurse, your baby simply starved, unless, that is, you could afford a wet nurse. Breasts are portrayed in the Torah, Midrash and Talmud as a gift from God, a miracle and a blessing, whose purpose is to sustain life.

In the Talmud, for example, the biblical Hannah, barren, offers God the following challenge:

Ruler of the World, among the things that you created in women, you have not made one without a purpose: eyes to see, ears to hear, a mouth to speak, legs to walk with. These breasts that you put on my heart, are they not for nursing? Give me a son, then, so that I can use them! [Berakhot 31B]

In biblical references to nursing, the act is understood as a continuation of the birthing process. After Isaac is born to a geriatric Sarah, for example, she expresses her astonishment: "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne Abraham a son in his old age!" And after we hear of the birth of Moses, the text loses very little time describing Pharaoh's daughter arranging for a wet nurse, who—because of Miriam's chutzpah—turns out to be the child's own biological mother. Yet another validation of breastfeeding comes from the prophet Hosea (9:14), who, in a fever of rhetoric, invokes upon wayward humanity one of the worst curses he can imagine: "Give them wombs that miscarry!" he cries to God, "and breasts that are dry!"

Abraham said to Sarah: "This is not a time for modesty. To hallow God's name, uncover your breast so that all may be aware of the miracles that the Holy One has begun to perform."

[Midrash, genesis Rabbah, 53:9]

The significance of nursing to our biblical ancestors is also implied by the many texts that address weaning. According to midrash, Moses is weaned at two years [Exodus Rabbah 1:31]; the Talmud gives several estimates for the period of nursing ranging from two to five years [Ketubbot 60A]; and the Apocrypha makes reference to three years [Maccabees II 7:27]. Weaning ceremonies are major occasions. Abraham, in Genesis 21:8, holds a "great feast" on the day that Isaac is weaned and invites dignitaries (Baba Metziah 87a; Genesis

Rabbah 53:9-10). Hannah turns her son Samuel (who will one day lead the Israelites as prophet and judge) over to the priesthood on the day that he is weaned (Samuel I, 1:21-24), bringing with her to Shiloh "a skin of wine, an ephah of flour" and a bull. Since then, weaning ceremonies have evolved as having two components: First, a thanksgiving to God for the fact that the child did not die in infancy (a realistic concern until quite recently); and second, some sort of ritual connoting the beginning of the child's independence.

Most powerful, though, I think, is the biblical image of God not as "King" or "Ruler of the Universe" or "Lord" (epithets that supplanted other threatening female images of divinity), but "God, the Nursing Mother." In post-biblical Jewish writings, this God is suppressed; in the Bible, She makes quite a few appearances, but still seems to go unnoticed by readers.

In Isaiah's eschatological vision, God's breasts become a source of infinite consolation, and, indeed, one of God's well-known biblical names, Shaddai, is linguistically derived from the Akkadian and northwest Semitic root that means "mountains," which evolves to mean "breasts." According to some scholars, this "God of Breasts" clearly refers to a differently attuned aspect of our ancient religious cult than the one that increasingly invoked the God we call "Yahweh" or "Adonai"—divine names that came to define classical, patriarchal Judaism. The Hebrew word "shad" means "breast." "Shaddai" (the name of God written on *mezuzot*, on *tefillin*, and in many Jewish texts) evokes the image of God with breasts or God nursing, and is literally translatable not as "Lord, Our God," or "God, My Salvation," but "God of Breasts" or "God Who Nurses."

Isaiah, 66:10-13 thrills me with its imagery of both Jerusalem and God as breastfeeding Earth Mother, and of burgeoning nations as ever-abundant breast milk:

"Be joyful with Jerusalem, all you who love her, all you who mourn over her; that you may nurse and be satisfied with her comforting breasts, that you may suck deeply and be delighted with her bountiful breast! For this is what the Lord says: 'Behold, I extend peace to her like a river; and the glory of nations like an overflowing stream. You will be suckled and carried on the hip and fondled on the knees. As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you.'"

Throughout the book of Genesis, the name Shaddai is also connected with blessings of fertility. When Jacob blesses his son Joseph, for example (Genesis 49:25), he says, "Shaddai will bless you with blessings of the heavens above, of the deep that lies below, blessings of the breast and womb." [Genesis 49:25.]

The image of God as a nursing mother provides breastfeeding women with an image of ourselves as God, and an understanding of our baby's utter dependence upon us as the extrapolated condition of all humankind. When we as parents relieve our newborns from their helplessness and their inability to exert control over their circumstances, we identify with our babies' worldview. Indeed, hunger, cold, discomfort and the threat of endless loneliness present themselves...at least until the All-Powerful One appears and instantly provides food and shelter, warmth and love, and a seeming ability to mind-read

What's this about God being female? With breasts and all? How'd this happen?

RABBI SUSAN SCHNUR IN CONVERSATION WITH SUSAN WEIDMAN SCHNEIDER

The relationship between the Jewish God and the Israelite people is often described in the Bible metaphorically as a heterosexual “marriage,” so that when the Israelites stray into worshipping “other Gods,” the biblical God becomes a cuckold, and the Hebrews get characterized as “adulterers.” But unlike pagan Gods of the ancient world, whose sexual capers with mortals got splashed across cuneiform tabloids far and wide, the biblical God kept His relationship with us companionate...except, that is, for one weird fling described in Genesis 6:1-4: “The divine Elohim saw how beautiful female mortals were, and took whomever was pleasing...and they bore children.” If you’ve ever wondered why Jews are so smart, this could be your answer.

But if our biblical He-God (this flukey verse aside) didn’t have sex with our forebears, He still enjoyed the occasional *menage a trois*. How do we know this? Because the Matriarchs in Genesis—every one except Leah—get cast in our holy scripts as “barren women”—a plot device, frankly, that strains credulity, but that positions our Uber-God to intervene as figurative “Divine Stud.” When the women conceive (which, of course, they ultimately do), it’s not *literally* “divine impregnation,” but it’s certainly related.

But there’s also another God in Hebrew Scriptures—mentioned 48 times—called, variously, “Shaddai” or “El Shaddai,” to whom readers, over the centuries, have paid scant attention. She is something else. When Jacob, in Genesis 49:25, for example, blesses his youngest son with “the blessings of the breasts and womb,” the deity he appeals to is “Shaddai,” whose name, perhaps, is a play on words; “*shad*” means “breast” in Hebrew. We know for a fact that there was another Shaddai in the ancient Near East who went by the same moniker, but this diety was clearly not the “God of Breasts” or the “God Who Suckles Us” or anything related. This “Shaddai,”

Akkadian in origin, was rather the “God of the Mountains,” or “Steppes,” or “Plains”—confusing, because they are very different land masses. If we were to worship this Shaddai today, the most accurate rendering of Him/Her would probably be “God of Undeveloped Real Estate Parcels,” because that was the understanding of this Shaddai’s territory—everything “out there,” beyond our clotheslines and chaff winnowers and potter’s wheels. It was this God, in all likelihood, who morphed over time into “God Our Breast” or “God Our Nursing Mother,” on account of the bilingual word-play of “Shaddai” and “*shad*.”

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David Biale, in *Eros and the Jews*, points out that the biblical He-God, interestingly, never gets described as having a penis or beard or hairy back, whereas the She-God definitely gets breasts and a uterus. Furthermore, if we want to make sense of Genesis 1:27 (“God created man in His image...male and female He [sic] created them”)—rather than glossing over this as we’ve done for centuries—what we see is “God the Hermaphrodite,” one of the weirder walk-on parts occasioned by the awkward invention of monotheism. Examples of the She-God-Who-Gives-Birth-to-the-Israelite-Nation can be found in Deut. 32:18 (“You forgot the God who birthed you”), in Deutero-Isaiah 46:3-4 (“Harken to me, all who come from my uterus. When you turn gray, I will still be carrying you. I have made, and I will bear, I will carry and I will deliver”), and in Isaiah 42:14 (“Now I will scream like a woman in labor, I will pant and I will gasp”—which I love.)

The ancient Canaanites, we need to remember, lived intimately alongside Israelites, and archeological digs have unearthed many Barbie-breasted figurines of the Goddesses Asherah and Anat. These fertility Goddesses had husbands—the Gods El and Baal. Indeed, there are ancient inscriptions that pair Yahweh (a.k.a. YHWH or Jehovah) up with His wife Asherah!—the latter being so culturally central to the region that She was even worshipped in the Temple. Biale points out a Canaanite text that gives these Goddesses the epithet “Wet Nurses of the Gods,” and another that mentions “the divine breasts of Asherah and Raham”—the latter name looking suspiciously, Biale notes, like “the blessings of the breasts and womb” [in Hebrew, “*rehem*”] with which Jacob blesses Joseph.

So how did Shaddai get slipped into the Bible, anyhow? When certain redactors of the texts—whose agenda, in the 7th century B.C..E., was heavy-duty monotheism—took their editorial pencils to the lines, they decided that rather than trying to beat the local dieties (a tactic which had proven worthless before), they would conjoin them. The God El gets folded, therefore, into the God Yahweh; El’s consort Asherah becomes Shaddai; and “El Shaddai”—once two gods, male and female—becomes “androgynously monotheized,” in Biale’s words, into one God that the Bible calls “El Shaddai.”

So can women validly reclaim Shaddai as God the Mother, or Our Nursing Goddess, or God Our Nurturer, or God Our Breast, if there is cultural but not philological connection? Professor Diane M. Sharon from the Jewish Theological Seminary says, “unequivocally yes. It’s essential that women integrate this imagery spiritually into our lives—otherwise, the images die. I’d say it’s our midrashic responsibility to reuse these images, to infuse them with new and meaningful life.” ■



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ones most profound needs and wishes.

When my husband is unable to console our daughter he passes her to me, jokingly calling me "god." Indeed, breastfeeding has given me a powerful new theology. It is both exhilarating and terrifying to have a human being completely dependent on you. My responsibilities have given me a taste of the sacred, of God's role in relation to comforting humanity, of what it means to be the one in charge, the *axis mundi*, the 'idealized object'—the grownup, the parent.

Our experience of the divine starts with our images of our parents: In the face of our terrifying helplessness, they seem omnipotent, beneficent and omniscient. As adults, the image of God as our nurturing parent still resonates emotionally for us from the prayer book, even as it may trouble some of us intellectually. The nursing mother is the ultimate icon for this nurturing force that is the bedrock upon which we build our concept of God.

This image is relevant and evocative in a way that God the King, or God the Warrior, or God the Ruler of the Universe is not. Through my own breasts—my own *shadayim*—I made a profound Jewish connection to God the Nursing Mother, to the God who extends peace to us like a river of milk, who assures us of overflowing streams when our lives depend on it, who carries us on Her hip and keeps us alive with Her nurturant breast. As I try to do for my child.

Mothers should be able to nurse in synagogues everywhere, and be celebrated for doing what's an inherently religious—indeed, Jewish—act. Religious texts that validate—rather than suppress—the powerful image of God the Nursing Mother need to be publicized so that congregants can begin to conceive of breastfeeding as sacred and miraculous. Genesis Rabbah 53:9, for example, reads:

"Our mother Sarah was exceedingly modest, so that our father Abraham had to say to her, 'This is not a time for modesty. To hallow God's name, uncover your breast, so that all may be aware of the miracles that the Holy One has begun to perform.' Sarah uncovered her breast, and her nipples poured out milk like jets of water!"

Nursing mothers will understand Sarah's modesty as their own; fathers will have religious precedent for providing support to their breastfeeding wives: Abraham here clearly argues that, in nursing, holiness and the connection to the divine trump modesty.

We need to appeal to this aspect of Jewish tradition when barriers to nursing are raised, to challenge our synagogues and boardrooms to actively welcome nursing mothers. Let our voices be heard as Jews in advocating for the full support of nursing families in the workplace and in the larger society. After all, nursing mothers in our midst make manifest God's presence in our world. ■

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