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## THE LIBERATION OF G-D: HELÈNE AYLON'S JEWISH FEMINIST ART

### Abstract

*Helène Aylon (b. 1931) is among the first generation of feminist artists who identified and challenged traditional patriarchal and misogynist readings of ancient religious texts. This article analyzes the discourse and examines the reception of Aylon's work The Liberation of G-d (1990–1996) within the Jewish art world and the American Conservative Jewish community, and her contribution to these two diverse audiences. Despite the work's confrontation with tradition, some rabbis from the Conservative movement played a significant role in the acceptance of the work and its exhibition in the Jewish Museum in New York and other Jewish institutions. However, they reduced its radicalism, reframing the work as a Midrashic interpretation (a form of traditional rabbinic commentary) that operates within the framework and rules that delineate the traditional Jewish interpretive community. This article analyzes how the rabbis tamed the artist's activist and critical work. I argue that Aylon challenges the Jewish community with a radical feminist discourse that is often omitted from the dominant discourse of the traditional Jewish community. By analyzing the engagements with and reception of Aylon's work within the Jewish art world and the Jewish Conservative community, I demonstrate how the artist seeks real social engagement that reaches beyond the walls of the museum, challenging the structures of religious patriarchy while engaging in a dialogue with its representatives.*

Helène Aylon (b. 1931) is among the first generation of twentieth-century feminist artists who identified and challenged traditional patriarchal and misogynist

readings of ancient biblical texts.<sup>1</sup> Aylon's art, like that of most American feminist artists in the 1970s and the 1980s, focused on the body and the environment (eco-feminist art). During these two decades, her works were exhibited and collected by major museums in the United States such as the Whitney Museum of American Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). In the 1990s, Aylon began engaging in a radical feminist critique of the Jewish tradition. Her works from this period were displayed mainly in Jewish museums across the United States. Marking her recognition within feminist circles was the lifetime achievement award that she received in 2016 from the Women's Caucus for Art (WCA) at a ceremony that was held at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC, and that coincided with the College Art Association (CAA) annual conference.

Rather than studying the art object as if it is complete the moment it leaves the artist's studio, I will look at the history of its reception. In the art world, most reception history research is carried out by analyzing what was written about a work by various art critics.<sup>2</sup> Recently, however, art historian Nancy Troy showed how examining the reception of a work in the art world, the art market, and popular culture—three cultural spheres that are highly intertwined—is essential to understanding the processes by means of which the work's symbolic and capital value is created.<sup>3</sup> This

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Timothy J. Clark, "Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of Olympia in 1865," *Screen* 21, no. 1 (1980): 18–42; Michel Melot, "Daumier and Art History: Aesthetic Judgement/Political Judgement," *Oxford Art Journal* 11, no. 1 (1988): 3–24; Anne M.

Wagner, "Rodin's Reputation," in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 191–242; Anne Higonnet, "Imaging Gender," in *Art Criticism and its Institutions in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. Michael Orwicz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 146–161; bell hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice: Re-Membering Basquiat," in *Race-Ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History*, ed. Kymberly N. Pinder (New York: Routledge, 2002), 341–352; Ruth E. Iskin, *The Poster: Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s–1900s* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2014); and Ruth E. Iskin, "Identity and Interpretation: Receptions of Toulouse-Lautrec's *Reine de joie* Poster in the 1890s," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 8, no. 1 (2009), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring09/55-spring09/spring09article/63-identity-and-interpretation-receptions-of-toulouse-lautrecs-reine-de-joie-poster-in-the-1890s>. Accessed January 28, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy J. Troy, *The Afterlife of Piet Mondrian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 169–228.

article builds on Troy's insights and expands them by showing how the study of a work's reception within different cultural spheres clarifies the processes of meaning-making behind it. These processes of meaning-making are formative to the development of art and allow the researcher to assess the contribution of art to the social field and its intersection with other cultural fields. Since the 1990s, research into contemporary American Jewish art has developed significantly. However, the processes of reception and the forces operating in this field have not yet been addressed. By studying the reception of Aylon's work within the Conservative Jewish religious community, I will demonstrate the importance of examining the reception of Jewish art within Jewish art discourse, and I will examine the effect of such discourse on the broader Jewish religious community.

In *The Liberation of G-d*, the first and central work in a series of ten installations of Aylon known as *The G-D Project* (1996–2017), Aylon covered the Five Books of Moses with transparent paper on which she highlighted, with a pink horizontal line, the text's misogynist and nonhumanistic verses. For example, she marked in this way a verse that compels a woman's marriage to her rapist (Deuteronomy 22:29) and one that gives permission to males to possess "a beautiful woman" taken as a prisoner of war (Deuteronomy 21:10–14). Aylon also inserted vertical lines to mark the places where stories of biblical women are missing. For example, the genealogies listed in the Book of Genesis include only the names of the fathers, while the names of the mothers are excluded (Genesis 10) and thus annihilated from history. Aylon's "Proclamation," displayed next to the exhibited work, featured the artist's statement emphasizing the religious ambition that stands at the core of her project:

And I highlight over words of vengeance, deception, cruelty and misogyny, words attributed to G-d ... I do not change the text, but merely look at this dilemma ... I ask: "When will G-d be rescued from ungodly projections in order to be G-d?"

In 1996, the work was shown at the Jewish Museum, New York, which at the time was under the auspices of the flagship institution of the Jewish Conservative movement, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS). It was shown at the museum as part of the exhibition *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities* and subsequently exhibited at some other American museums. In this exhibition, atop each of five velvet-covered lecterns, which the artist had positioned in the gallery, was one of the Five Books of Moses. On each open book, there was a small lamp and a magnifying glass that enabled the viewer to examine the highlighted verse carefully (fig. 1).

The display of the work in the museum was the result of an ongoing process of collaboration between the artist, the curator, and a rabbi. The curator, Norman Kleeblatt, visited Aylon in her studio when she had just started working on the piece. According to her statement years later, she did not show Kleeblatt the work, but he noticed it in the corner of the room and asked to see it.<sup>4</sup> At the time, Aylon still considered this work as a sort of personal Torah study and form of activism intended for the religious Jewish world and for synagogues. She was not thinking about exhibiting these works in a museological context, but Kleeblatt was persistent. In a letter dated October 15, 1992, Kleeblatt informed Aylon that the museum's curatorial staff were enthusiastic about the emerging installation and wanted to show it. He noted that they required approval from the museum's board of trustees.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Jewish Theological Seminary required the museum to display mainly art that depicted Jewish subjects, while the museum itself tended to ignore Jewish topics.<sup>5</sup> In accordance with this historical tension between the Seminary and the museum, Kleeblatt identified in Aylon's work elements that would appeal to the religious institution that the museum was operating under while justifying the museum's embrace of conceptual art. Kleeblatt wrote to Aylon:

Within the realm of conceptual art, which has to date dealt with the intersection of art with science, knowledge, data or philosophy, *The Liberation of G-d* is, to my

<sup>4</sup> From an interview I conducted with Aylon on April 24, 2015. All quotes from the artist are from this interview unless otherwise noted. For a different description of this process, see Helène Aylon, *Whatever Is Contained Must Be Released: My Jewish Orthodox Girlhood, My Life as a Feminist Artist* (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 2012), 246.

<sup>5</sup> In 1968, art historian Avram Kampf criticized exhibitions of "Jewish art" at the Jewish Museum as defining "Jewish" too

broadly and "art" too narrowly. See Avram Kampf, "The Jewish Museum: An Institution Adrift," *Judaism* 17 (1968): 282–298. See also Ruth R. Seldin, "American Jewish Museums: Trends and Issues," *American Jewish Year Book* 91 (1991): 71–117. See also Edward Rothstein, "The Problem with Jewish Museums," *Mosaic: Advancing Jewish Thought*, February 1, 2016, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2016/02/the-problem-with-jewish-museums/>. Accessed January 28, 2019.



Fig. 1. Helène Aylon, *The Liberation of G-d*, 1990–1996, The Jewish Museum, New York, installation. 54 altered versions of the Five Books of Moses, velvet panels, velvet-covered pedestals, lamps, magnifying lenses, video monitors. Dimensions variable. The Jewish Museum, New York. (Photograph by Will Brown, provided by Helène Aylon, New York).

knowledge, the first conceptual piece to deal with the intersection of art and religion. As such it is a perfect work to show here. I know it will engender the avid interest of both the art community as well as the Jewish academic field.<sup>6</sup>

Kleeblatt was aware of the explosive potential of Aylon's installation and understood that exhibiting it might be opposed by the museum's board. In 1994, when the Jewish Museum had begun to acquire works for the *Too Jewish?* exhibition, an article published in the Jewish newspaper *Forward* mentioned that there was resistance from the museum's trustees to the

planned exhibition, which was seen as sensational. In addition, Aylon's work was mentioned as being one of the most problematic works to be put on display.<sup>7</sup>

The tensions between JTS and the Jewish Museum were evident in the resistance within JTS to displaying "problematic" artworks at the Jewish Museum in the late 1970s.<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Dr. Gershon Cohen, the chancellor of JTS, opposed exhibiting David Aronson's (1923–2015) earliest works in his retrospective exhibition, which was held in the Jewish Museum in 1979. Cohen opposed showing these works because they made use of Christian iconography. In the end,

<sup>6</sup> Letter in Aylon's personal archive.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Wise, "Double Yentels Channel Kippahs and PC Torahs," *Forward*, July 1, 1994, 9–10.

<sup>8</sup> On the relationship between the Jewish Museum, New York, and JTS, see Julie Miller and Richard I. Cohen, "A Collision of Cultures: The Jewish Museum and the Jewish Theological Seminary, 1904–1971," in *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary*, vol. 2, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological

Seminary, 1997), 310–361; and Matthew Israel, "A Magnet for the With-It Kids," *Art in America* 95, no. 9 (2007): 73–83. See also Emily Bilski, "Seeing the Future through the Light of the Past: The Art of the Jewish Museum," in *The Seminary at 100: Reflections on the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the Conservative Movement*, ed. Nina Cardin (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, Jewish Theological Seminary, 1987), 143–154.

these early works were shown in 1979, at the same time as the Jewish Museum retrospective exhibition, but in a separate display at the National Academy of Design, which was located just a few city blocks away. This instance, where JTS imposed its authority and overrode the professional decision of the museum's curators, was widely reported in the media and discussed in the context of a debate about censorship.<sup>9</sup> This episode, which occurred while Kleeblatt was on the staff at the museum, and more broadly, the tension between the museum and JTS, led Kleeblatt to seek collaboration with a rabbi from JTS when working with Aylon. The control of the museum by JTS, along with the reservations of several museum trustees, led Kleeblatt to enlist the assistance of Rabbi Burton Visotzky, a professor at JTS.<sup>10</sup> Visotzky met Aylon to discuss her work and then summarized his impressions in a letter. Instead of characterizing the work as a radical expression undermining tradition, Visotzky presented it as continuing the long tradition of interpretation of canonical Jewish texts, a process that is known as "Midrash." Visotzky added that traditional Midrash, like Aylon's work, does not permit the replacement of holy text but rather creates its relevance through emphasis and new interpretations. Kleeblatt used the letter as a sort of "kosher certification" for the work when presenting it to the museum's board of trustees.<sup>11</sup>

The collaboration between artist, rabbi, and curator did not end with Visotzky's letter. Kleeblatt invited Visotzky to work with him on Aylon's installation before its exhibition at the museum. Visotzky related that he concentrated on gathering reactions of contemporary Jewish thinkers on the work in order to give it a broad Jewish context. Kleeblatt and Visotzky wanted to include these reactions and interpretations as captions on the wall of the exhibition, but the artist rejected the initiative. In the end, the exhibition text panel was written by Visotzky, who presented Aylon's work as a first stage in what would be a feminist Midrash. Visotzky quoted the words of Shalom Spiegel, a scholar of Hebrew liturgical poetry and literature, who explained

that just as the pearl is formed from a foreign body that penetrates a shell, so a Midrash is formed out of the discord and disturbances that permeate the text. Thus Visotzky attempted to contain Aylon's radical critique, appropriating it to a Jewish tradition, wisely paving the way for the acceptance of the work by conservative elements in the Jewish community.

Although Visotzky placed Aylon's work within the framework of traditional Jewish biblical interpretation, let us note that the more relevant precedents for Aylon's feminist critique were in the first wave of the American feminist movement. Feminist leaders (who happened to be Christian) not only demanded social and legal changes but understood the power of the biblical tradition and Church status and thus worked for a radical change in consciousness. At the end of the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the editorial board of *The Woman's Bible* wrote a radical critique and reinterpretation of the seminal Christian holy texts—the Old Testament and the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> Aylon's work continued this tradition of radical critique that characterized the second wave of feminism, which appeared during the 1970s, and its ethos was very much in line with Mary Daly's well-known, ironic comment that "if we remove all identifying marks of patriarchy from the Bible, only a thin book will remain."<sup>13</sup>

Although Aylon's work was shown in museums throughout the United States, the artist herself originally intended for the work to be directed at the Jewish world.<sup>14</sup> She actually started marking the biblical text specifically in a synagogue. To commence the work, Aylon wanted to hold a public performance on Saturday using an actual Torah scroll at the Bnei Jeshurun synagogue, a large congregation on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, New York. She wanted to unfurl the Torah scroll from the synagogue's highest point down toward the centrally situated *bima* (the elevated platform in the middle of the synagogue from where the Torah is read), while she would stand on the *bima* with her arms outstretched ready to catch and embrace the other end of the scroll. The rabbi of Bnei Jeshurun,

<sup>9</sup> See Grace Glueck, "Museum Drops 19 Aronson Paintings from Show of Christian Themes," *New York Times*, May 25, 1979, C7.

<sup>10</sup> Aylon, *Whatever Is Contained*, 248. Kleeblatt himself later wrote about the incident and earlier cooperative ventures with rabbis and scholars from JTS. See Norman Kleeblatt, "Disobedient Images," *Images: Journal of Jewish Art & Visual Culture* 1 (2007): 5–21.

<sup>11</sup> Email correspondence between the author and Visotzky, May 20, 2015. All quotes by Visotzky are from this correspondence unless otherwise noted.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible: The Original Feminist Attack on the Bible* (1895–1898; repr., Edinburgh: Polygon Books, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Judith Plaskow, *Standing again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 14.

<sup>14</sup> Aylon, *Whatever Is Contained*, 228.



Fig. 2. Helène Aylon, Untitled, 1990, the Bnei Jeshurun synagogue, Upper West Side, Manhattan, New York, performance. Starting the ongoing highlighting and marking activity of the Five Books of Moses. Collection of the artist, New York. (Photograph provided by Helène Aylon, New York).

Rolando Matalon, refused, arguing that what Aylon had intended was sacrilegious, and agreed only that Aylon could perform in the empty synagogue on a weekday without an audience and a Torah scroll. She did so in 1990, thus initiating her ongoing marking activity in a synagogue (fig. 2).

Although Rabbi Matalon had prevented Aylon from performing publicly in the synagogue, Aylon was encouraged by her desire to continue to engage in dialogue with rabbis about her work. Whenever *The Liberation of G-d* was shown in a museum, Aylon insisted that the curator assemble a panel of rabbis to discuss it. The meetings held in various museums between the rabbis and herself were unusual, to say the least. Such a meeting between a radical artist and group of rabbis was practically unheard of at the time. One of these meetings took place in the framework of the exhibition *Too Jewish?* at the Jewish Museum of San Francisco in 1996. This meeting (and others) was conducted under the title “Four Rabbis and an Artist: A Talmudic Debate.” The text on the invitation card said that the artist intended her work to create an artistic Midrash. The invitation posed the provocative questions: “Do rabbis from the Bay Area, representing

various denominations, agree that her work is a true Midrash in the spirit of Judaism? Do You?” In a similar meeting that took place in December 2007 at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the rabbis presented Aylon’s work as a traditional Midrash. Aylon responded that traditional Midrash did not deal with the questions she was raising, which were about the place of women in the Jewish world and the symbolic violence that is perpetrated against them. She ended the meeting by saying: “I don’t have the answers yet, but I do have the painful questions.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Aylon’s work was continuously appropriated by rabbis into what to them was an acceptable tradition of Jewish debate. However, in most cases, the Conservative rabbis could not accept in full the implications of the radical feminist critique that she mounted.

The dissonance between the rabbis’ interpretation of the work and the artist’s radical intentions was underlined in a discussion held between her and Rabbi Matalon. As mentioned above, in the early 1990s Matalon prevented Aylon from staging a public performance in the Bnei Jeshurun synagogue. Later on, however, after *The Liberation of G-d* gained

<sup>15</sup> The discussion is described in the news article published at the time. See Sally Friedman, “Four Rabbis and an Artist: ‘Too

Jewish’ Work Inspires a Lively Talmudic Debate,” *Jewish Exponent*, December 11, 1997.

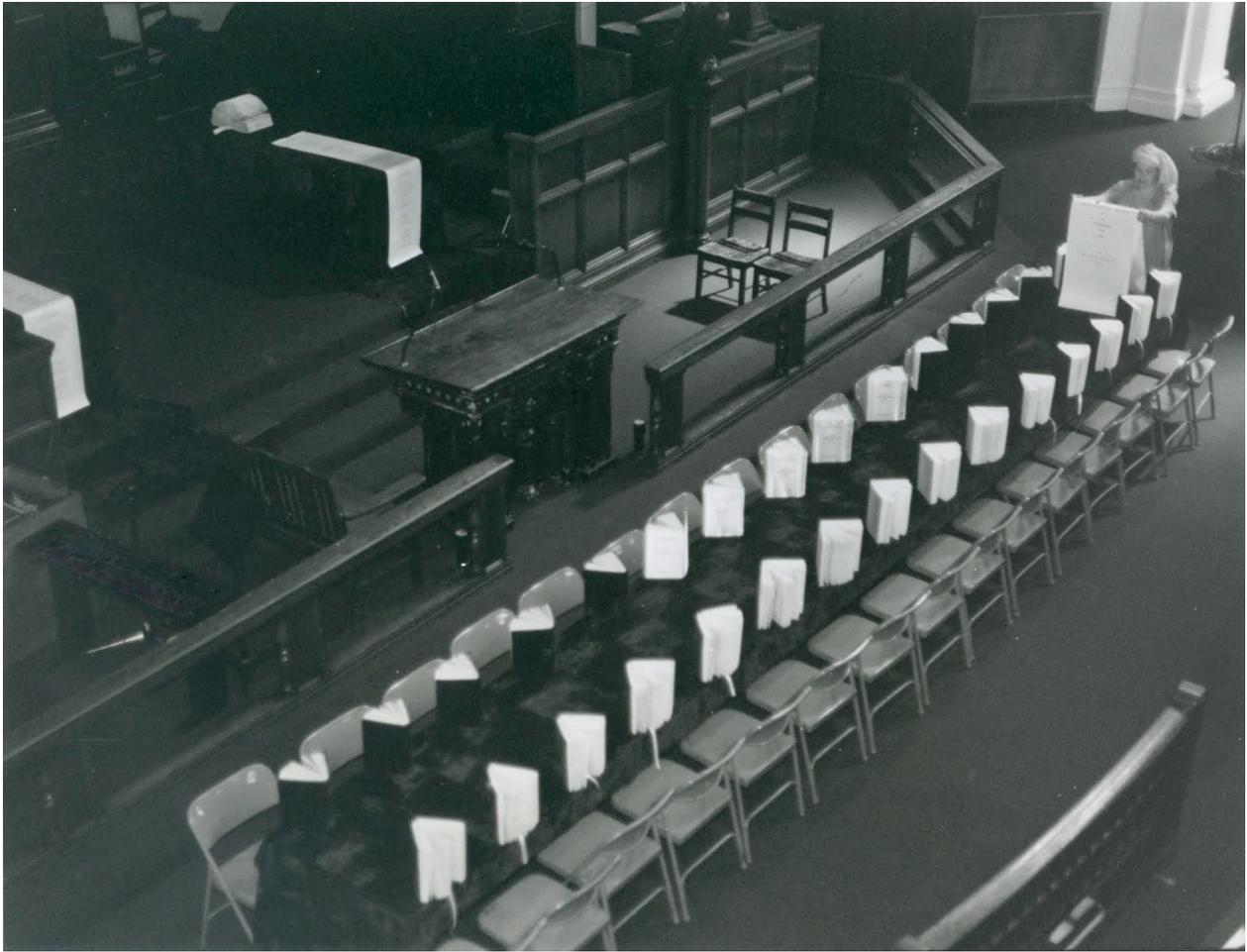


Fig. 3. Helène Aylon, *The Liberation of G-d*, 1997, the Bnei Jeshurun synagogue, Upper West Side, Manhattan, New York, performance. Collection of the artist, New York. (Photograph provided by Helène Aylon, New York).

official museum recognition and the approval of Rabbi Visotzky, Rabbi Matalon invited Aylon to show her work at the synagogue during the holiday of Shavuot, when traditionally one learns Torah all night long. In June of 1997, Aylon displayed the books on a long table, and the congregants were invited to come up to the table to see what was highlighted and to discuss their thoughts with the artist (fig. 3). In this way, the artist brought the work directly into the community, making it into an example of social activism aimed at creating real change. Thus, Aylon's patience and initial willingness to compromise paid off in the end.

Following the display of this performance art in the synagogue, Aylon and Rabbi Matalon held a long and in-depth private discussion about her work; the

discussion was later published in the Jewish-feminist periodical *Bridges*.<sup>16</sup> Aylon's radical stance was prominently featured; she stressed the difficulty of reading verses filled with hatred, misogyny, and discrimination as part of synagogue ritual, and strongly urged the rabbi to cancel the reading of such problematic verses. Rabbi Matalon refused, giving his own conservative interpretation of her work. Like Visotzky, Matalon claimed that her work was an extension of the traditional Midrashic discourse and emphasized that she had not actually erased verses. To quote Matalon: "You yourself have kept the words intact, even though you highlight the words ... your highlighting the text frees us to preserve the text ... We love it [= the text]. But it is not G-d. It is not the ultimate."<sup>17</sup> Aylon explained her

<sup>16</sup> Rolando Matalon and Helène Aylon, "The Liberation of G-d (from Patriarchal Projections): The Torah Reading in the Synagogue: To Read or Not to Read, That Is the Question—A Conversation

between Artist Helène Aylon and Rabbi Rolando Matalon," *Bridges: A Jewish Feminist Journal* 8 (2000): 19–24.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 22.

radical position by emphasizing that her criticism was not about God but about Moses, who wrote the Torah from a patriarchal viewpoint. Matalon emphasized his own conservative interpolation of the work by pointing out that, when he had invited her to present the Torah in the synagogue, his only intention was to bring the visual Midrash to the community, not to do away with the reading of the verses. The artist corrected him and said that she had brought the Five Books of Moses to the synagogue, not the Torah. She explained that, according to her understanding, the Five Books of Moses were, in fact, the books that Moses wrote, not God. Matalon retorted: "These are the words we have."<sup>18</sup> He further explained that in his view the text is never final and that our understanding of it is always an act of interpretation. The artist strongly disagreed and said that there are verses that cannot in any way be interpreted in a manner that will exalt or purify them. As an example, she mentioned the biblical definition of homosexual relations as an abomination (Leviticus 18:22). She also reminded the rabbi that his own daughters would soon celebrate their *bat mitzvah* by being called up to read from the Torah in the synagogue. She asked him: "[...] how will you feel if one of your daughters reads that a girl can marry her rapist, if one of your daughters reads that 'the little ones' and the women are taken as 'booty' after conquest?"<sup>19</sup>

Matalon insisted on continuing the traditional reading of the full biblical text in the synagogue without eliminating the offensive, misogynistic verses, but then suggested adding a statement before the Torah reading. The statement would clarify that the community reads the biblical verses as they are to preserve the connection to previous generations, but it does not mean that it accepts the text's simple meaning. Aylon's response underscored the dissonance between the rabbi's position and the artist's intention for the work: "Our forefathers were searching for God, but they found only themselves. They tried to speak for God, but spoke for themselves."

In fact, Aylon's quest for *tikkun* (repair) is a response to Mary Daly's 1971 declaration that women cannot be part of institutionalized religion as it exists today, since "singing sexist hymns, praying to a male god breaks our spirit, makes us less than human. The crushing weight of this tradition, of this power structure, tells us that we do not even exist."<sup>20</sup> However, unlike Daly, who called on women to leave the Church and establish a post-Christian religion, Aylon intended to effect change from within. Aylon expresses her criticism in the name of the religion and culture to which she herself belongs. She thus continues a practice that is prevalent among Jewish religious feminists as well as among contemporary women artists dealing with institutional critique who voice their criticism in the name of, as opposed to against, the institutions they criticize.<sup>21</sup> It was the fact that the artist did not erase the biblical verses—marking them instead—that allowed for the fruitful discussion to take place within the rabbinical world.

As I have shown above, while Aylon challenged the community with a radical discourse, the rabbis reduced her radical voice by presenting the work as a traditional Midrashic interpretation. It is perhaps surprising that similarly to the rabbinic interpretation of Aylon's work, academic research about the work of Jewish feminist artists such as Aylon often claims that the inspiration for their critical acts originates from traditional Jewish learning.<sup>22</sup> Presenting Jewish feminist art as inspired by traditional Torah study seeks to validate it as an ongoing activity in the traditional Jewish world in a way that operates within the framework and rules that delineate this interpretive community.<sup>23</sup> What is missing from this discussion is that the debates, disputes, and questions that characterize the traditional Torah learning process take place only within the limits of this interpretive community. Traditional Torah study usually does not extend beyond those limits. In contrast, Aylon's work presents a more ambivalent complexity. On the one hand, she does not erase the text, and she does not even mark the book itself, respecting the

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Ursula King, *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise* (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan, 1989), 170.

<sup>21</sup> See Tanya Zion-Waldoks, "Politics of Devoted Resistance: Agency, Feminism, and Religion among Orthodox Agunah Activists in Israel," *Gender & Society* 29, no. 1 (2015): 73–97; and Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (2005): 278–286.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Gloria F. Orenstein, "Torah Study, Feminism and Spiritual Quest in the Work of Five American Jewish Women

Artists," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 14 (2007): 100–105; and Judy Batalion, "Helène Aylon in Conversation," *n.paradoxa* 33, no. 4 (2014): 58.

<sup>23</sup> On interpretive communities, see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). For a discussion on the differences between traditional Midrash and contemporary interpretation, see David Stern, "Midrash and Indeterminacy," *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 1 (1998): 133; and Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Midrash as Law and Literature," *Journal of Religion* 74, no. 3 (1994): 343.

dictum of the religious community that ascribes holiness to the text. On the other hand, Aylon expands beyond the religious-conservative-interpretive-community and challenges it to remove problematic verses from the synagogue Torah reading. In the same way, when Aylon highlights the places where the mention of women is excluded in the Bible, she is emphasizing the voices of women that the interpretive community of the traditional Jewish world erases and thus annihilates from history.

What enabled the fruitful discussions regarding Aylon's work was the fact that they were conducted within the main arena of American Judaism, which is the non-Orthodox liberal arena. The bases of the conversations she held with the rabbis from the Jewish Conservative movement were the common elements of the mainstream perception of non-Orthodox Judaism. In the discussion between Aylon and the rabbis, both parties shared the premise that the verses of the Torah are not necessarily the only expression of divine "revelation," and that not everything that appears in the Torah is necessarily holy. This is a widespread assumption in non-Orthodox Judaism. Louis Jacobs, an esteemed theologian of the Jewish Conservative movement, explains that Conservative rabbis believe that in the Torah there is a human element and a divine element, but this does not mean that we can identify and mark those passages in the Bible that appear to us as divine as opposed to those that appear to us to be of human making. Jacobs argues that, since the entire Torah is, after all, a human creation, it contains the lofty and the base, error and truth, and the despicable as well as the noble.<sup>24</sup> The Union of Conservative Rabbis in the United States agrees upon this theological approach, which is termed "cumulative revelation."<sup>25</sup>

Aylon's marking of the text in pink color serves to address the rabbinical debate around her artistic expression. In the discussions that she conducted with the rabbis, all were in agreement that the traditional text should serve mainly as a basis for something new. This critical point is given clear expression in the pink vertical marking in the work. This marking emphasizes the places where women's input has been omitted from the text. This dash has appeared in many of Aylon's

works as a sign of the absence of women from Jewish discourse over generations. She acutely made the dash as a work itself.<sup>26</sup> At the center of her installation *My Eternal Light: The Illuminated Pink Dash* (2011) is the pattern of an illuminated pink dash that she compares to the *ner tamid* (eternal flame) in the synagogue (fig. 4). The *ner tamid*, Aylon says, completes her long-standing critical preoccupation with the exclusion of women from the Jewish world and the call to bring them back into the Jewish discourse.<sup>27</sup> Aylon says:

The pink dash is what's missing. That's what's off balance. How could we have a religion without women in it? We love our Jewish culture, but we have to analyze what from the culture includes women and what doesn't, and what from the culture was indeed originated by women.<sup>28</sup>

Aylon continued to act in the narrative space, emphasizing the exclusion of women from Jewish history and demanding the retelling of their stories. This point is reflected in a powerful way in Aylon's work *My Notebooks* (1998/2012), which continues to deal with the challenge that was mounted in *The Liberation of G-d*. The criticism leveled against this work in Israel might illustrate the disconnect between the dominant non-Orthodox religious discourse in the United States and that of the Orthodox world that dominates Israeli religious culture, and the influence of these different discourses on the reading of Aylon's work. *My Notebooks* is an installation comprising fifty-four blank notebooks accompanied by text written in chalk on a blackboard. The work, created in 1998, was exhibited in a number of museums in the United States. In 2012, Aylon created a new version of the work on the occasion of the exhibition *Matronita: Jewish Feminist Art* (curators: Dvora Liss and David Sperber) at Mishkan Le'Omanut, Museum of Art, Ein Harod, Israel (figs. 5a and 5b). The text that Aylon wrote in chalk on the blackboard in the installation is about exclusion and invisibility. Aylon imagines a lost Torah, one that was never written or handed down to us from our foremothers. She wrote on the blackboard:

I begin turning in my notebooks on the fifty-four chapters of the Five Books of Moses searching for any notes I could have taken in my school days at the Shulamith School for

<sup>24</sup> Louis Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999), 50–51.

<sup>25</sup> See *Emet ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism* (1988; repr., The Jewish Theological Seminary of America; The Rabbinical Assembly United Synagogue of America; Women's League for Conservative Judaism; Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs,

1990), 19, <https://masortiolami.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Emet-VEemunah-Statement-of-Principles-of-Conservative-Judaism.pdf>. Accessed January 28, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Aylon, *Whatever Is Contained*, 279–283.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>28</sup> Batalion, *Helène Aylon in Conversation*, 64.

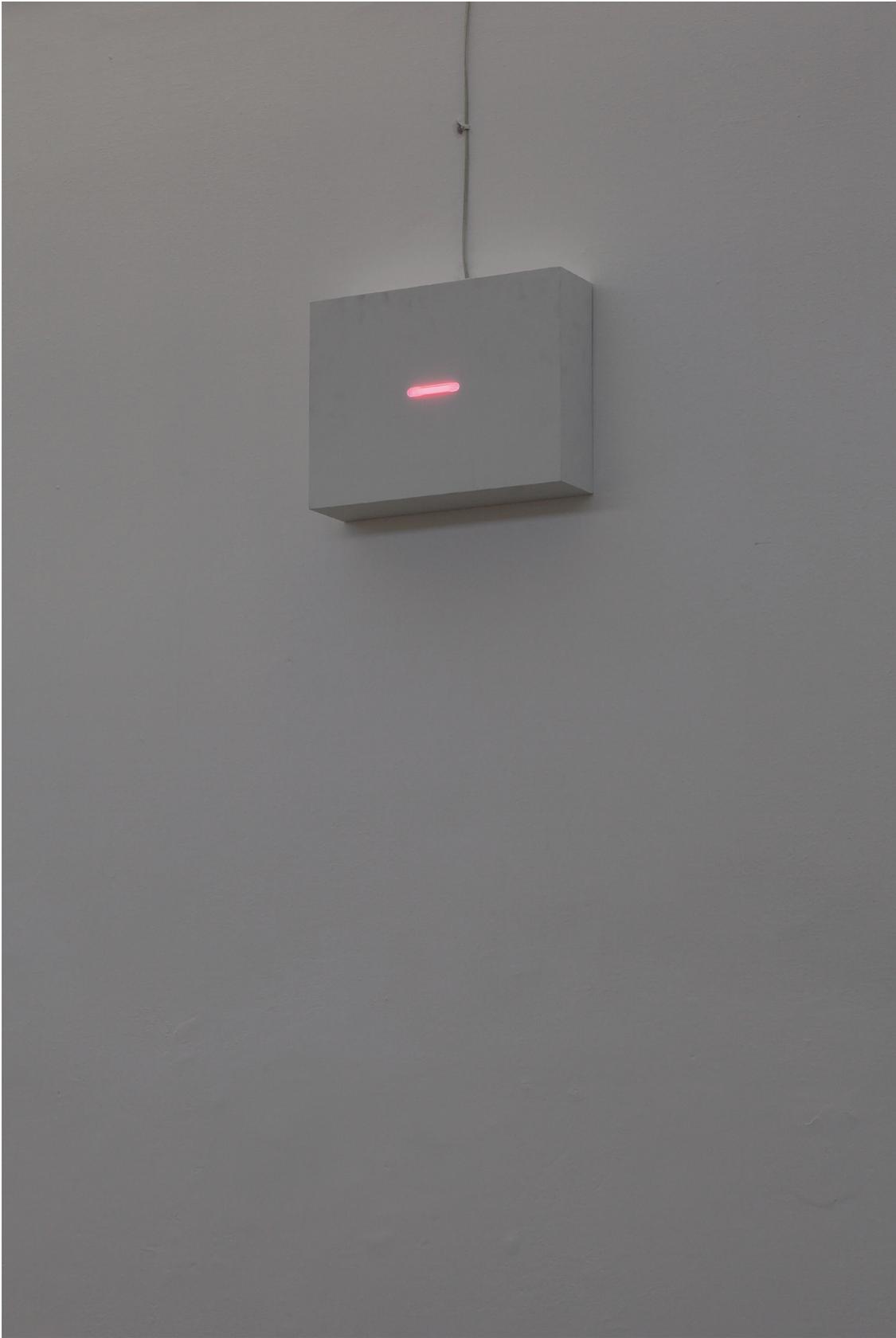


Fig. 4. Helène Aylon, *My Eternal Light: The Illuminated Pink Dash*, 2011, Mishkan Le'Omanut, Museum of Art, Ein Harod, Israel, pink neon in a white Sintra box. 11.4 × 14.5 × 3.9 in. (29 × 37 × 10 cm). Collection of the artist, New York. (Photograph by Elad Sarig, provided by Mishkan Le'Omanut, Museum of Art, Ein Harod, Israel).



Fig. 5. Helène Aylon, *My Notebooks*, 1998/2011, Mishkan Le'Omanut, Museum of Art, Ein Harod, Israel, installation. 54 Israeli school notebooks (*machbarot*), Masonite panel, Velcro, and chalk on blackboard. Dimensions variable. Collection of the artist, New York. (Photograph by Elad Sarig, provided by Mishkan Le'Omanut, Museum of Art, Ein Harod, Israel).

Girls in Boro Park and the Midrasha High School in Boro Park—notes on the words of my foremothers and their daughters.... But in lesson after lesson on the fifty-four chapters there was no woman's commentary for me to write down, no woman's principle, or benediction, for me to memorize. I turn my head from side to side; I turn the pages from side to side ... all that legacy that never made it to the blackboards for me to copy in my notebooks.<sup>29</sup>

Aylon dedicated the installation to the women who were excluded from Jewish history with the following text displayed alongside the work: "Dedicated to Mrs. Rashi and Mrs. Maimonides, for surely they had something to say."

While the exhibition *Matronita* was on view, a few of the students in the Art Department of Emunah College, a national religious institution for women in Jerusalem, asked the administration to organize a visit to Ein Harod to see it. In response to the students' request, the head of the department, Anat Chen, wrote to the students that it was absurd that an institution like Emunah College would take its students to an exhibition of this kind. Chen characterized the exhibition as one that perpetuated the stereotype of the religious woman as "someone without any spiritual or cultural world of her own." As an example for her claim, Chen described Aylon's work as "empty notebooks on the wall. Why empty? Because the world of the Jewish woman is empty. She has no story to tell." In an article that Chen published later in the departmental journal, she further developed her criticism, focusing specifically on the work *My Notebooks*.<sup>30</sup> Under the title "Empty Notebooks, Full Pages," Chen argued that Aylon's work was limited to a focus on the exclusion of women from the Jewish discourse, with the result being a discourse on victimization, rather than one that offers a positive statement and that tries to fill the Jewish world with the writing and actions of women. Chen writes: "Aylon's beautiful notebooks, arranged like a fan, are stationery lumps, static bodies that force themselves on the museum's walls."<sup>31</sup> Chen's stance,

which opposes that of the reformist women, appreciates the spirit of Orthodox women's works that do not undermine Jewish religious structures and strictures.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Aylon's work is positioned at a remove from the one that Chen suggests. Aylon laments the legacies of women that were erased and is defiant in relation to the mechanisms of repression, exclusion, and erasure. However, examining the text that appears in the work and decoding the work within the sequence of her other works and of the *G-D Project* series can lead one to a conclusion that is different from Chen's. In fact, the work calls for revealing all the teachings of women that were excluded from the patriarchal discourse with the intent of inviting the writing of new "women's" narratives.<sup>33</sup> While it is true that Aylon is addressing the absences of women's perspectives when she writes "I turn my head from side to side; I turn the pages from side to side. My head blank, the pages blank, I say well let there be white!" on the blackboard, she is equally engaging with calls by feminists such as Hélène Cixous for a new women's writing. In her landmark essay "Le Rire de la Méduse" ("The Laugh of the Medusa") published in 1974, Cixous called feminine writing "white ink."<sup>34</sup> She claimed that "white ink" writing creates a feminine language that describes and analyzes women's issues. When Aylon marks with a vertical line those places from which the presence of women has been excluded, although she is mourning the loss of Jewish women's history and aims to point out that which is absent and cannot be restored, she equally intends to argue for a new writing of women's Torah and women's narratives, both of which had been omitted from Jewish religious tradition for so long.

In the non-Orthodox religious discourse in the United States and the Jewish world there, Aylon's works indeed are interpreted as a call for *tikkun* (repair), for the creation of new narratives and the revelation of women's exclusion from the Jewish world in the past. In this context, works like hers are read in the framework of a discourse that finds a religious

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Dvora Liss, "Tzena Ure'ena," in *Matronita: Jewish Feminist Art*, ed. Daphna Raz (Ein Harod: Museum of Art, 2012), 187–186, (in Hebrew and English, reverse pagination).

<sup>30</sup> Anat Chen, "Empty Notebooks, Full Pages: A Critical Reading Concerning Discourse Prompted by the Exhibition, *Matronita: Jewish Feminist Art*," *Zipporah: A Journal for Education, Thought, and Contemporary Art and Design* 1 (2012): 14–20, (in Hebrew).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> On Orthodox women's works that do not undermine Jewish religious structures, see Orit Avishai, "Imagining 'the Orthodox'"

in Emuna Elon's *Heaven Rejoices: Voyeuristic, Reformist and Pedagogical Orthodox Artistic Expression*, *Israel Studies* 12, no. 2 (2007): 49–73.

<sup>33</sup> The notion of creating new narratives has a theological foundation in American Jewish feminist thought, especially in the thinking of Rachel Adler. See Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 21–59.

<sup>34</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–893.

value in criticism—a framework very much like that of Visotzky and Matalon.<sup>35</sup> However, what is understood in the non-Orthodox Conservative world in the United States as a challenging religious discourse is understood in the Orthodox world in Israel as a degrading discourse of victimhood.

While the Jewish Museum made Aylon's work public and contributed to its legitimacy as art, her art also aimed to impact rabbis and members of religious communities. Aylon's acts should be seen in the context of the social turn in art and the development of institutional critique.<sup>36</sup> Many contemporary artists act as social activists, engaging in what the American art critic Gregory Sholette and others have termed "dialogical aesthetics."<sup>37</sup> Sholette explains that this type of artist makes use of the privilege and symbolic capital that society gives artists in order to produce changes in social reality. In addition, these artists are engaging in institutional critique in its most recent incarnation, which, according to recent scholarship, is critique that is made outside (instead of exclusively inside) the institution.<sup>38</sup> Aylon has used her position as an artist to challenge Jewish religious authority. She has sought an engagement with rabbis and has succeeded in involving them in discussions about her

work, and she fostered a productive dialogue within the Conservative movement about the patriarchal dimensions of the Jewish world. Within the Conservative Jewish community and among its rabbis, her art has operated—and continues to operate—as socially engaged art, which employs a dialogic-aesthetic strategy and an institutional critique that reach beyond the walls of the museum, challenging the structures of religious patriarchy but at the same time engaging in a dialogue with its representatives.

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<sup>35</sup> On the value of criticism from a feminist religious perspective, see Daphne Hampson, *After Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 119–168; Plaskow, *Standing again at Sinai*, 25–74; and Ronit Irshai, "Religion and Morality: Akedah Theology and Cumulative Revelation as Contradictory Theologies in Jewish Modern-Orthodox Feminism," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 16, no. 2 (2017): 219–235.

<sup>36</sup> On the social turn in art, see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 11–40. On institutional critique, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, "A Curriculum for Institutional Critique, or the Professionalization of Conceptual Art," in *New Institutionalism*, ed. Jonas Ekeberg (Oslo: Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2003), 89–109.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 169. See also Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 67–95, 155–211.

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Alberro, "Institution Critique and Institutional Critique," in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 15. On Jewish-feminist artists' institutional critique, see Paula J. Birnbaum, "Modern Orthodox Feminism: Art, Jewish Law, and the Quest for Equality," in *Contemporary Israel: New Insights and Scholarship*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 131–165.