Judith Plaskow is perhaps the most famous and influential Jewish feminist theologian. For the past four decades she has been a preeminent voice among Jewish feminists, contributing to the profound transformation of contemporary Judaism. With a passion for justice that took its inspiration from biblical prophets, Plaskow has substantiated the claim that Judaism is a patriarchal religion based on inequality and injustice and, in its place, has called for the creation of feminist Judaism. Plaskow was the first feminist to argue that the problem of women in Judaism is neither sociological nor political but rather theological. Because the sacred texts of the Jewish tradition have been composed, transmitted, and interpreted by men alone, they have constructed a male-centered God-language that ignored women’s experience, made maleness normative, and created a Jewish society that subordinated and marginalized women. If contemporary Judaism is to achieve the prophetic vision of justice, Jewish God-language has to change; the three pillars of Judaism—God, Torah, and Israel—have to be reinterpreted; and new religious rituals have to be composed. Plaskow’s reconstruction of Judaism in accord with feminism is truly revolutionary.

*The Feminist Vision: Methodology, Critique, and Reconstruction*

Wishing to end millennia of male dominance which has been harmful to all women, including Jewish women, Plaskow offered a radical liberation theology. It is “radical” in the original sense of the term, namely, going back to roots. Since the revelation of the Torah at Sinai is the root experience of Judaism, Plaskow has shown how Jewish men have written the experiences of women out of the tradition by simultaneously silencing women and excluding them from the process of interpretation. The only way to respond to this profound injustice is to move women from the margins to the center, making it possible for women to become equal interpreters of divine revelation whose wisdom matters. The recognition of women’s full humanity has implications for all aspects of society (e.g., law, politics, economics, religion, education, and culture), but it is most poignant in terms of human sexuality. The unequal power relation between men
and women is the mark of heterosexuality, which has become even doubly oppressive because it was posited as the only normative form of relationship. To be fully liberated from male oppression it is necessary for humanity to recognize all forms of human sexuality—lesbian, homosexual, bisexual, and transgendered—as valid and treat those who manifest nonheterosexual behavior with dignity and respect. Plaskow’s radical liberation theology is thus inseparable from her woman-centered sexual ethics and her social activism.

Although she has more recently rejected this dichotomy as overly simple, Plaskow’s critique begins with the basic feminist distinction between sex (i.e., biological differences between men and women) and gender (i.e., socially constructed roles and expectations of men and women). In patriarchal society gender and sex overlap: a given trait or mode of behavior is considered “masculine” when it relates to power, control, and prestige; conversely, traits associated with marginal social locations are considered “feminine.” Moreover, in patriarchal society “masculine” terms stand for what is human and male, while “feminine” terms connote only femaleness, as if the female is a less-worthy variant of the male standard. From a feminist perspective, the imbalance between the “masculine” and the “feminine” operates throughout culture, giving rise to unequal and unjust gender-based social practices. This aspect of patriarchy is especially pernicious when we consider religion, which expresses our ultimate concerns. If God is conceptualized in masculine terms (e.g., “lord,” “master,” “king,” “judge,” and “warrior”), we not only privilege the male over the female, we also sanction these relations of domination to be normative, since humans (especially Jewish males) are supposed to imitate God. To uproot injustice to women we must repudiate male-centered language and construct a new God-language that comes out of women’s experience, offering metaphors that facilitate nonhierarchical, egalitarian relations and that reflect an understanding of power as “power-with” rather than as domination.

Plaskow’s life, career, and academic writings demonstrate the ambiguity and complexity of the term “Jewish philosophy.” If by “Jewish philosophy” we refer to reasoned reflections about the Jewish religious beliefs, authoritative texts, rituals and practices, and historical experience, Plaskow is undoubtedly a Jewish philosopher. When she subjects Judaism to a scathing feminist critique, she weighs the relative merits of various arguments, points out the logical flaws of various claims, and generalizes about what is right, good, and true. However, if by “Jewish philosophy” we refer more narrowly to an academic activity of engaging a well-defined body of philosophical literature (by non-Jewish and Jewish philosophers), then defining Plaskow as a Jewish philosopher is more complex. Although Plaskow holds