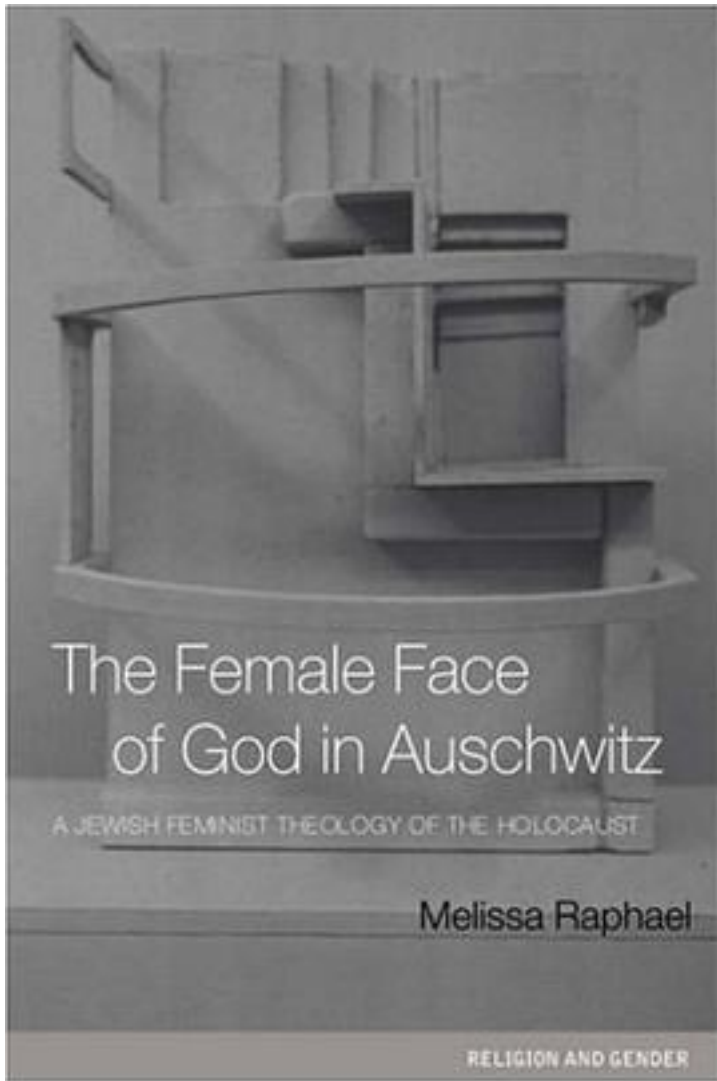


The Female Face of God in Auschwitz



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' Comfort, oh comfort My people, Says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem..' Is. 40:1
How can memoirs of the women's camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau suggest a feminist theology of divine and human redemption? The dominant theme of post-Holocaust Jewish theology has been that of the temporary hiddenness of God, interpreted either as a divine mystery or, more commonly, as God's deferral to human freedom. But the traditional Judaic obligations of female presence, together with the traditional image of the Shekhinah , as a figure of God's divine presence accompanying Israel into exile, counters such theologies of absence. The Female Face of God in Auschwitz, the first full-length feminist theology of the Holocaust, argues that the masculinist bias of post-Holocaust theology becomes fully apparent only when considered in the light of both feminist perceptions of God and women's holocaustal experiences and priorities. Building upon the published testimonies of women imprisoned at Auschwitz-Birkenau, including Olga Lengyel, Lucie Adelsberger, Bertha Ferderber-Salz and Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, Melissa Raphael interprets relationships of care between women as an act of sacralization of Auschwitz: an invitation to God's presence into that place on earth which would most repel it. God's face, as that of the exiled Shekhinah was not, says Raphael, hidden in Auschwitz, but revealed in the female face turned as an act of resistance to that of the assaulted other as a refractive image of God. For women's attempts to wash themselves and others, and to see, touch and cover the bodies of the suffering were not only the kindnesses to Jewish covenantal obligations of sanctification. Women's restoration of the human, and therefore the divine, from holocaustal erasure opposes not only recent theories of divine absence, but also patriarchal theologies that accommodate absolute violence in the economies of the divine plan. Engaging with Berkovits, Fackenheim, Levinas and other post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers, The Female Face of God in Auschwitz is a subtle meditation upon God's role and meaning in the world. Questioning the true nature of the Jewish God present in Auschwitz, and arguing for God's participation in its extremities of suffering and grace, it powerfully resists interpretations of the Holocaust as evidence of divine indifference or neglect.

作者介绍:

目录:

[The Female Face of God in Auschwitz_下载链接1](#)

标签

评论

[The Female Face of God in Auschwitz_ 下载链接1_](#)

书评

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