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“I’m a Jew, a Feminist, and a Witch.”

By RUTH MASON

(May 18)—Miriam Simon, a.k.a., Starhawk, has revived the ancient tradition of female spiritualists and healers known as Wicca.

Starhawk doesn't wear a pointy black hat or ride a broomstick, but she might just have a little magic in her wand. Born Miriam Simon in St. Paul, Minnesota, 46 years ago, Starhawk is a leader in the women's spirituality movement and a self-declared witch. She enchanted an audience of several hundred women at Israel's 13th national feminist conference last weekend.

“I'm a Jew, a feminist and a witch,” she told the full auditorium at the Ramat Efal Conference Center. “That last term probably needs the most explaining.”

Starhawk first learned about witches who practiced “the old goddess tradition” while researching an anthropology project during her first year at UCLA. That tradition stressed the sanctity of the earth, the human body and nature. “They put a name on things I had always experienced,” Starhawk told *The Jerusalem Post*.

“My own deep experiences of connection happened in nature or through and here was something that said, ‘This is sacred, this is religious, this is important.’ I said to myself, ‘That's for me.’”

In the nearly 30 years since, Starhawk has been teaching, lecturing around the world and writing about feminist spirituality. She has authored six books including *The Spiral Dance*, published by Harper in 1979 and still in print, and her latest work, *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying*, (Harper, 1997). In the goddess-oriented tradition known as “Wicca,” Starhawk said she has found more of a place for women as figures of authority and power than there is in Judaism.

According to Dr. Jenny Kien, a former neuro-biologist and follower of Starhawk who lives in Jerusalem, Wicca was a pre-Christian, Northern European nature-based religion whose central figure was a goddess instead of a god. Witches were the shamans and wise women of Wicca.

After the Inquisition, Wicca became very small and was practiced in secret. It resurfaced in England at the beginning of the 20th century, during the period of esoteric revival prior to World War I. It spread to the US and was adopted by some feminists in the 1970s. According to Kien, there are hundreds of thousands of Wiccans around the world. People who practice Wicca today call themselves witches.

Soft-spoken and articulate, Starhawk looks more like a plump, curly-haired Jewish matron than the fairy-tale or movie image of a witch. She speaks in measured tones rather than the passionate ones one might expect. Her grandparents were Orthodox and

her parents Reform Jews, and she received a Conservative Jewish education. Her new name came from a dream she had about a hawk that turned into a wise old woman.

“When you make a commitment to the goddess tradition, it’s traditional to take on a name for rituals and ceremonies. I use it for most of the writing and work that I do.”

Her work includes being active in anti-nuclear and forest preservation as well as AIDS-prevention groups.

She ties goddess-centered religion with eco-feminism, a political movement that points to a link between the tation of men over women and the tation of people over the earth.

Starhawk, who is married with four step-children and has an M.A. in psychology, said she realizes the word “witch” puts people off, but she and others believe it is an important political act to reclaim it. “Witches were the herbalists and healers of old—people who could twist fate for you,” she explained. “Their spirituality was rooted in the earth, in plants, in the cycles of life, death and rebirth. It recognized the idea that women can be powerful and sexual and that this could be a good thing.”

In the 16th century, Starhawk said, the Inquisition turned its attention to these female healers, accusing them of being in league with Satan. Starhawk pointed to political and economic factors underlying the persecution, such as the rise of a male-led medical tradition.

“In some towns in Germany, after the Inquisition passed through, no women were left alive,” she claimed. Today’s Wiccans say that contemporary images of witches are a reconstruction of the Inquisition.

Growing up in Los Angeles, Starhawk attended Hebrew High School, Camp Ramah and the University of Judaism. She considers herself both a Jew and a pagan, though she admits, “most Jews would consider me a raving heretic.”

Starhawk said that for a long time her mother thought she was “nuts, but later in her life she began to understand what I was doing and became more reconciled to it. Rabbi Laura Geller, who is a friend of hers, helped her understand me. She told my mother she should stop worrying about me—that I was making a great contribution to Judaism by doing what I was doing.”

She believes the goddess tradition actually goes back to the essence of what she was taught about the Jewish God. “I was taught that God was not male or female, but spirit. I remember when I was very small in Sunday school, one of my teachers saying God is in everything. Someone asked, ‘Even in your finger?’ She held up her pinkie with the nail painted blood-red and said, ‘Even in my little finger.’”

“In that sense, the goddess tradition is not that different from the Jewish conception of God. In the Torah, God took on a character more similar to the Babylonian war gods that were all about obedience and authority,” she said.

Starhawk referred to research that showed that early Paleolithic cultures in the fifth to seventh millennium BCE were goddess-oriented and were egalitarian and peaceful. Later, between the fourth and second centuries BCE, during times of war and invasion, these cultures gradually transformed themselves into male-led, hierarchical ones and the

image of God changed to reflect that. “I’m trying to go back to what might have been there before patriarchy,” she said.

“Women’s spirituality is unified by the insight that the way we envision or imagine or define God has a great impact on how we see ourselves and the way power is distributed in society,” she said.

She quoted author Mary Daly who wrote, “When God is a male, then the male is God.”

In the goddess-oriented religion, the earth is seen as a living, sacred organism. Starhawk and other devotees believe that modern society has lost sight of the importance of the planet on which we live, and that is at the root of many of today’s ills.

“When I spoke to a group yesterday, someone asked, ‘Why is the earth so important?’” she told her audience. “That illustrates our disconnection. How do I answer this? Do I ask, ‘What did you have for breakfast?’ ‘When did you take your last breath?’ ‘When did you last drink water?’”

She is distressed to see how little wilderness is left in Israel. “This is supposed to be the Holy Land and everyone is focused on the holy, and what I say is holy and on what you say is holy and the land has been forgotten.

“With its climate and technological ability, Israel has tremendous potential to be the world leader in using technology to solve environmental problems. These solutions exist. The problem is not that we don’t know what to do about them but that we don’t have the political will to do it.

“Just like Israel invented drip irrigation, it could be leading the world in solar energy and a truly ecological approach to development—but there seems to be very little thinking about that here. People seem to have lost their sense of connection with the land itself. They’ve forgotten that real security comes from preserving your soil as well as having lots of arms.”

Looking to nature as a sacred text can offer other lessons for this part of the world, Starhawk said. “Nature never plants forests with only one kind of tree,” she said. “There is diversity, each kind of tree has its place and if you remove one, the forest can’t function as well. If we see that everyone has a different part of the picture, we come to value diversity and we can have dialogue.

“We have to find a way to accommodate different people who have enormously strong connections to this land. We have to come to terms with the Palestinians and find a way to understand that we both have to share this place.”

Starhawk was quick to emphasize that because she doesn’t live in Israel, she can’t be telling people here what to do. “The enormous amount of fear here is based in reality. But at the same time, the Oslo accords showed us it is possible to get beyond that. When I was here two years ago, the movement toward peace was much stronger. It’s very sad to come back and feel how very tenuous it is now.”

Aynat Idan, a teacher in Jerusalem, commented after hearing Starhawk speak: “She says simple, important things and is very coherent. There is something similar between the

different realms in which power is misused—between men and women, people and nature. She sees alternatives, she provides answers.”

But not everyone was impressed. “It’s too little, too late,” said Rachel Ostrowitz, a Tel Aviv architect. “Her ideas are old and a little anachronistic. We need to talk about the nuclear filth we are forced to inhale in this country; of the destruction of our air quality by excessive automobile fumes. Starhawk’s ideas are not relevant to our lives in Israel today.”

Iris Yotvat of Pardess Hanna, who facilitates Wicca groups in Israel, explained the goddess tradition goes together with Jewish tradition. “Judaism talks about two faces of God, male and female,” she said. “The idea is to take wisdom from these [goddess-centered] sources and see what’s relevant for us today in order to empower women.”