
HOW JEWISH WOMEN HAVE COME TO READ THE BIBLE

The Creating of Midrash

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Early during my first year at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1969, I was asked to speak at the Newman Club at Temple University in Philadelphia on a panel about the role of women in Judaism. After a Catholic and Protestant woman decried the lack of equality for women in their respective traditions, I gave my presentation. I sympathized with the problems my Christian sisters faced but said, "There really is no problem in Judaism."

It did not take me long to learn differently. After a few weeks at the seminary, I began to notice that there was a problem, a serious one. What struck me most was the absence of text, the lack of female voices, women's names, thoughts, and stories. I read of men's struggles with God: Abraham before the destruction of Sodom and on Moriah, Jacob's at Beth-El and on one side of the river Jabbok, Moses on Sinai. There was no mention of women's struggles. What I read either did not understand who I was as a woman or excluded me altogether. In 1972, the year *Ms.* magazine was first published, no one was answering my questions, not even the newly emerging feminist movement; in fact, no one was asking them.

My interest in Jewish texts had taken me on long journeys with Abraham, Moses, and Elijah up Mounts Moriah, Sinai, Nebo, and Carmel. There were steep climbs and dizzy descents. But mountains and ladders with angels coming up and down did not find a resting place in my woman's soul. I decided to listen to the voices of women and their silences. I wondered what a pilgrimage to Sarah's tent and Miriam's well might feel like, whether women's spirituality was different.

I had always imagined myself with Jacob, having sent all his wives, children, servants, and cattle across the river, struggling with God and receiving a blessing. That is where I always believed the religious life was, having rid myself of all life's distractions. But then I read an article that asked a question I had never considered before: what of Rachel and Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah on the other side of the river, in the midst of life's myriad responsibilities and distractions?¹ What of Sarah listening to Abraham's conversation with the angels telling him that he would have a son? What of Miriam being cast out of the community because she criticized Moses, while Aaron, her brother, did the same and was allowed to remain inside?

These were the places where I lived—in the midst of the clamor of daily routine that could not be pushed aside, eavesdropping on Rabbinic conversation, cast out by those who did not feel a woman belonged. I decided to reside awhile with the women on the other side of the river, in the tent. There I found a life of the spirit that had long been silent. I decided to wrestle with traditional texts and not let them go until they blessed me.

Some women were not willing to wrestle. If tradition had excluded them, then so be it. They would no longer be a part of the religious community. But I discovered other women were doing the same kind of wrestling that I was, women who were not willing to turn the meaning of Scripture over to men. As more and more women entered seminary and began to engage sacred texts in new ways, they began to raise questions of the biblical narrative that had never been asked.

What had begun as a desire to affirm the presence of Jewish women in ritual and leadership became an effort to confirm

women's ways of understanding tradition and text as worthy and authentic, to let women's experience help elucidate the text and to tell the sacred story. Women rabbis, especially those in congregations where they regularly delivered *divrei Torah*, brought their questions and perspectives to the text. They created midrashim that gave them a voice.

The desire for women to confront the inadequacy of traditional narrative seemed altogether new. But both Eastern European and Sephardic folk legend demonstrated it was an old yearning. A Yiddish folktale (1931) tells of a time when women complained that everything in the world belonged to men, including Torah. They decided they would build a tower of women, one on top of the other, until one woman could pull herself into heaven. They choose Skotsl to be that woman. All went well until the woman at the bottom of the tower could no longer bear the weight of the others. The tower collapsed and Skotsl disappeared. There was no one to talk to God. According to custom, from that time on, whenever someone comes into a house, women call out, "*Skotsl kumt*—Here comes Skotsl," in hope that someday she will really come and change things.²

A similar Turkish folktale tells of how women asked King Solomon why men were allowed to marry more than one woman but women could only marry one man. Solomon did not know the answer, so he wrote the question on a piece of parchment and tied it to the leg of a bird. He told the women that the bird was a messenger to God and would return with the answer. Unfortunately, the bird did not return and women are still waiting. Whenever a bird stands at a window, it is customary for women to say, "*Haberes buenos*—Good news," in hope that they will finally have an answer.³

An ancient longing was finally given fulfillment as women rabbis became not only receivers of Torah but narrators of our ancient stories. They began to have a conversation with the sacred narrative, and they invited others to do the same. Refusing to accept their absence from text, they became interpreters of Torah—writing commentary, creating midrash. In the process they have given voices, names, and stories

to women who had none. Like the Rabbis of old, they listened anew to the stories and filled in the blank spaces.

Amos Oz, the renowned Israeli author, has been quoted as saying, "Fundamentalists live life with an exclamation point. I prefer to live my life with a question mark." That is how women began to read biblical texts, as generations before them, with question marks. But the questions they asked were different from men's.

The creators of women's midrash focused on whose story was really being told. Who was excluded from the narrative? Who was the subject, who the other? Who was the woman before Eve, created equal to Adam? What was her name and what was her story? Who really was Eve?

Who was Lot's wife, the woman who had become the symbol of female fickleness and disobedience? Who was the wife of Noah, what was her name, and how did she survive the long days and nights on the ark? What really happened between Sarah and Hagar, and what did they feel and think? Having understood all these biblical women through the writings of men, what might it mean to see them through the perspective of women? Who was the daughter of Pharaoh, who saved Moses from the Nile and gave him his name, calling him "Moses, my son"? How were women rabbis going to tell these stories to their congregations? Through midrash they began to retell these narratives and answer those questions.

While women rabbis were more confident in their ability to reimagine the biblical text, other women were reluctant at first to write new midrash, since masculine views had been seen as normative. Women questioned the normality of their own feelings and judgment and often suppressed those feelings in deference to others. But things slowly began to change. In the first class of midrash I taught to women at my congregation, I invited the participants to add their story to the ancient narrative. One woman remarked, "I didn't know that I could do that." I responded, "You can." And she and the other women did. I recall Letty Cottin Pogrebrin once talking about the Passover seder. She said that if tradition won't give us a seat at the table, then we will set our own

table. She was describing the creation of women's seders. I responded: *That is not enough. What we are doing is not counterculture; it is Jewish culture, and women need to claim their rightful place at tradition's table.*

The path of creating new midrashim offered women a traditional way of reconstructing Judaism in light of their present reality. By listening to the silences in the Bible, they poured their souls into the ancient text and allowed the narrative to speak anew, with a fresh and compelling voice, and in the process they transformed Judaism. They held in creative tension the text, its classical interpretation, memory, and imagination.

Perhaps one of the first formal expressions of this new way of understanding Torah came in 1972 when feminist theologian Judith Plaskow, author of *Standing Again at Sinai*,⁴ wrote an article entitled "The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology."⁵ Plaskow wrote about women's midrash, "It gives us the inner life history cannot follow, building links between the stories of our foremothers and our own joy and pain."⁶

From that time on women became captivated by this eleventh-century legend that was contained in *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*. Attempting to reconcile the two accounts of Creation in Genesis, the ancient figure of Lilith was given a Jewish telling. She was the first woman created before Eve, equal to Adam, from the same dust of the earth. In this medieval retelling, Lilith became the disobedient night demon who threatened grown men and male children. But in the hands of many a feminist midrashist, she became a symbol of independence and hope.

Since the early 1970s, women's midrash has flourished, not only for adults but for children. There is barely a Jewish child who does not hear anew the story of Miriam at the Passover seder when someone at the table lifts her cup filled with water from her well. My grandsons and the children in my congregation's religious school, familiar with my book *The Story of Naamah* (1996) about Noah's unnamed wife, insist that Noah's wife's name is Naamah and that she collected two of every seed and after the Flood replanted the earth's garden.⁷ Like

the midrash of Abraham and his father's idols, they believe that story of Naamah and the plants to be long-standing stories of our tradition.

Stories have tremendous power, sacred stories even more so. The stories that are told about our past shape our present and future reality. When the new ways of telling sacred narrative become a part of a community's collective memory, they are tradition. Alternative ways of looking at the world begin with alternative stories. Women's midrash helped the Jewish community to see itself in a new way.

I remember once being asked to write a midrash on a biblical woman and to base my retelling on classical midrashim. I chose Lot's wife. There was very little that had been written about her in Rabbinic texts. Visiting the Dead Sea region of Israel, I had bought a postcard of one of the salt formations in the region. On the other side of the card was a written description of the picture on the front. It said, "Lot's Wife." There she was, an eternal symbol of women's disobedience and inability to listen.

Rabbinic text gave her a name and a part of a story. She was called Idit, from the Hebrew word meaning "witness." One commentator suggested that she turned out of compassion to see her daughters who were following her. That was all I needed to feed my imagination.

I wrote a new midrash about Idit, the only witness to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. No one else looked back; no one saw with her eyes the holocaust taking place. Lot was up ahead. He never turned around. Then came Idit and following were her daughters. Hearing the cataclysm behind her, she could no longer follow Lot without question. She did what any mother would do: she turned to check on the safety of her children. Seeing the devastation of the cities she had once called home, she wept. The pillar of salt is her tears.⁸

Women's midrash has helped us to hear Sarah's outcry as she learned of Abraham's decision to take their son Isaac up a mountain to sacrifice him. It has enabled us to feel the loving arms of a stranger, Pharaoh's daughter, Bityah, "daughter of God," who defies her father's decrees and saves Moses from the Nile. It has introduced us to Serach,

the daughter of Asher, who held the memory of our people in her stories. It has told of Zelophehad's daughters and their efforts and partial success in changing inheritance law in the Land of Israel. Women's midrash has enabled us to know women's names, to hear their voices and their stories, and in the process, women came to better understand themselves and Torah.⁹

The creation of midrash that envisions women as subjects, as actors in a sacred drama, continues the tradition of our ancestors. Through midrash, women were claiming: In the name of all those who came before us, and in the name of all those generations yet to come, we preserve and create. We marvel at how much remains the same in our cycles of time, what ancient words still move us, how different we are, what silences must still be broken. What really matters is not just that we are descendants, but that we are ancestors who bequeath our spiritual quest to the next generation.

Women's collections of midrash and women's Torah commentaries have proliferated over the last decades. From *Miriam's Well* by Drs. Alice Bach and J. Cheryl Exum in 1991, to *Biblical Women Unbound* by Norma Rosen and *The Five Books of Miriam* by Dr. Ellen Frankel in 1996, to *Sisters at Sinai* by Rabbi Jill Hammer in 2001, to *The Women's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions* by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein in 2000, to *The Women's Haftarah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Haftarah Portions, the 5 Megillot and Special Shabbatot* by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein in 2004, and to *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* edited by Dr. Tamara Eskenazi and Rabbi Andrea Weiss in 2008, women have reshaped the way we read Scripture.¹⁰

Those women (and now also men) who have participated in this creative process to fashion new stories recognize it as an awe-filled responsibility and approach it with deep sense of humility. After all, who are we, tied as we are to our own time and place, to fashion the sacred words and create the holy drama to carry us through the passages of our years? We accept this responsibility with a strong sense of duty. After all, who are we, bearers of the image of God, not to pour

our souls into the crucible of time, to affix our name to the holy narrative of our people?

When Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, z"l, marked the seventieth anniversary of her bat mitzvah, I wrote the following poem:

Must we always go up to some mountain
 With Abraham, with Isaac to Moriah?
 The air is so thin up there,
 And it's hard to breathe.

Must we always go up to some mountain
 With Moses to Sinai?
 It's so far from the earth,
 And what's below appears so small
 You can forget it's real.

Must we always go up to some mountain
 With Moses to Nebo?
 Climbing—there's only one way
 And loneliness.

Must we always go up to some mountain
 With Elijah to Carmel?
 The ascent is not hard.
 It's the descending
 Too easy to slip with no one to catch your fall.

I'm weary of mountains
 Where we're always looking up
 Or looking down and sacrificing
 So our neck hurts
 And we need glasses.

Our feet upon the mountains
 Are blistered
 And our shoes are always wrong—
 Not enough "sole."

Can we sit with Sarah in a tent,
Next to Deborah under a palm tree,
Alongside Rebekkah by the well—
With Judith in the synagogue reading Torah,
to wash our feet,
to catch our breath
and our soul?¹¹

When the people of Israel crossed the Sea of Reeds, Miriam took a timbrel and led the women in singing and rejoicing. With no map to guide her, Miriam stood at the front of a multitude of slaves and taught them to dance. Like Miriam, women rabbis often felt they had no map, no guide to provide the words and the story to make sense of their sacred journey. Like Miriam, they took a chance and danced, and they lead a generation of women to do the same

In the last four decades, Jewish women have read traditional stories through the lens of their experience. They have poured their souls into the ancient text and affixed their names to the holy narrative of our people. The way we as Jews read texts, the way we understand Scripture, has been transformed. What happened was nothing short of a revolution. And it has strengthened and renewed Judaism.

NOTES

1. Linda Clark, "A Sermon: Wrestling with Jacob's Angel," in *Image-Breaking/Image-Building*, ed. Linda Clark, Marian Ronan, and Eleanor Walker (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981), 98–108.

2. Beatrice Weinreich, "Skotsl Kumt: Skotsl's Here," in *Yiddish Folktales*, ed. Beatrice Weinreich, trans. Leonard Wolf (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 246.

3. Naftali Haleva, "Haberes Buenos," in *Chosen Tales: Stories Told by Jewish Storytellers*, ed. Peninnah Schram (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995), 142–44.

4. Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990).

5. Judith Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology," in *Womanspirit Rising*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper

and Row, 1979), 198–209. Originally published in Church Women United packet “Women Exploring Theology at Grailville,” 1972.

6. Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai, Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper Row, 1990), p. 59.

7. Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Noah's Wife: The Story of Naamah* (originally published as *A Prayer for the Earth* in 1996) (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2002). See also Susan Campbell Bartoletti, *Naamah and the Ark at Night* (Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2011).

8. Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, “Idit,” *Reconstructionist: A Journal of Creative Jewish Thought* 56, no. 2 (Winter 1990–91): 20–22.

9. Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *But God Remembered: Stories of Women from Creation to the Promised Land* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1995).

10. Alice Bach and J. Cheryl Exum, *Miriam's Well* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1991); Norma Rosen, *Biblical Women Unbound: Counter-Tales* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996); Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1996); Jill Hammer, *Sisters at Sinai: New Tales of Biblical Women* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001); Elyse Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2000); Elyse Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Haftarah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Haftarah Portions, the 5 Megillot and Special Shabbatot* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2004); Tamara Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: Women of Reform Judaism and URJ Press, 2008).

11. Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, “Introduction: Unwrapping the Gift,” in *Women and Religious Ritual*, ed. by Lesley A. Northup (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1993), ix–xvi.