

Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi is recognized as a ground-breaker. In 1990, she was the first woman to be hired by HUC-JIR as a full-time tenure-track faculty member for the rabbinical school and she became the first female tenured full professor at HUC-JIR in the rabbinical school in 1995.

"My memories of those first days at HUC-JIR are twofold," Eskenazi recalls. "First, I experienced a tremendous welcome by my colleagues, who were so pleased with the appointment. Second, I felt a great sense of

the State of Israel is for contemporary Jews," she explains. Her specialization is in Ezra-Nehemiah studies, an area chosen for several reasons.

"A key element was that this was an area much neglected in general scholarship. In fact, when I began, the writings of the post-exilic era were denigrated by major figures in 19th and 20th century Biblical studies who regarded these texts and period as a time of decline. Julius Wellhausen, the 19th century scholar known for his influence on modern source criticism of

edited into the shape that we have it today. "In fact, the reason we have the Bible that we have," she claims, has to do with the communities and conditions in the post-exilic era that influenced those communities to preserve these writings rather than some other writings. In Jewish tradition, Ezra was always appreciated as the one who was as worthy as Moses to bring the Torah."

Eskenazi's other field of inquiry is literary and feminist studies. "Being in Los Angeles and amidst the colleagues doing this work and within the context and

primarily from North America, as well as from Europe and Israel. Despite the sponsorship of the WRJ, the contributors are not exclusively affiliated with the Reform Movement. "Our scholars are the best scholars in the field, regardless of their institutional affiliation," Eskenazi notes. This is a project by women for *klal yisrael*.

The list of contributors is still in formation, with about 100



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by Jean Bloch Rosensaft

responsibility to my male and female students, because they had never had a woman as their teacher at HUC-JIR. The women students felt particularly affirmed. For some, it opened up a profession of academic study that has led former students like Rabbi Andrea Weiss to become the next generation of faculty here. Today, women faculty at HUC-JIR may be taken for granted, and I'm very happy that it is. It's nice to have moved beyond the one-and-only to one of many."

Eskenazi's scholarship is focused on the area of post-exilic Biblical text, an area in which she has published quite extensively and significantly. The post-exilic era, when Jews returned from exile in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C.E., "was a time as significant for them as the establishment of

the Bible, said that these texts reflected the decline into mere Judaism. For him, the Bible at its best were figures like David and the Prophets, traditions only revived at the time of Jesus. In Jewish tradition and my own assessment, however, the post-exilic era was a time of enormous creativity and significant transformation, so my goal was to influence scholarship toward a reassessment. I'm happy to say that in the years since I began, this reassessment has happened, not simply because of what I did but as a consequence of a new wave of scholarship in which I participated. Today, there is clear recognition as to the significance of this period for any work on the Hebrew Bible."

Eskenazi asserts that the post-exilic period was when the Bible was

community of those who had been thinking about feminist issues long before I began has been very significant," she notes. "Dr. Rachel Adler, Rabbi Laura Geller, Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, and I were part of a feminist criticism group, and it was possible to think seriously about those issues in conversation with other scholars and to connect my work with that of others in a very meaningful way."

The WRJ Women's Commentary on the Torah (see page 11) is an extension of these interests. Eskenazi, as Editor-in-Chief, projects that this massive undertaking will be completed in the next five years. Her editorial board includes professionals in the rabbinate, cantorate, and Jewish education as well as Biblical scholars, rabbinic scholars, and Jewish philosophers,

already engaged. The assignments number five contributors for each of the 54 Torah portions yielding nearly 300 entries for the final publication. Eskenazi, herself, will tackle the first *parashah*, *Bereshit*. There will be an introduction to each book and additional specialized articles, including topics important to women: statistics about mortality rate, life expectancy, child-rearing in ancient Israel, and women's rituals in the Bible.

Eskenazi wants us to learn more about these rituals. "We know from the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac in Genesis 21, for example, that Abraham makes a great feast when Isaac is weaned. Weaning was a very important rite of passage in the Bible, as part of the life cycle from birth, to weaning, to adult-

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hood. In Exodus 38, there is a reference to the women who were hosting at the opening of the Tent of Meeting, which clearly suggests that they had some sort of official function – which in some English translations has been rendered as ‘ministering.’ There are many things to be learned about the way in which women contributed to the building of the Tabernacle.”

Employing an array of approaches, including historical and literary criticism and deconstruction, Eskenazi’s scholarship clearly filters into her teaching as Professor of Bible at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles. “There are two important criteria for me when I teach,” she says. “One is anticipating what our students in the rabbinical, education, and communal service professional programs need to know – familiarity with the texts and the skills to become effective interpreters of those texts – given the work that they will do when they leave HUC-JIR. The second is their own growth, so that they continue to draw sustenance and significance as human beings from study. When you are a Jewish professional, the community depends on your capacity for profundity and wisdom, as well as skills and knowledge. The Bible that I teach is not just a tool for other people, but a major life-long resource that can nurture our students and enable them to nurture others.”

Her teaching is informed by Biblical feminism, which she defines as a critical approach to text that looks at both men and women, recognizing that gender is an important element. The Bible, she believes, does not seek to promote the vested interest of males over that of females, but

rather is concerned with the community as a whole and with perpetuating the traditions, the teachings, and the values to the next generation. “It is the priority of community and continuity of values that is central to Biblical text,” Eskenazi says.

“The Bible was not written in the 21st century, therefore it expresses itself in the criteria of its own time. Its writers were primarily urban people and males rather than the entire population. And

authoritative Prophets in the Bible. She was the Prophet who authenticated the Book of Deuteronomy in 621 B.C.E., as a result of which King Josiah instituted major reforms. The reason we have the Book of Deuteronomy in our Torah is because Huldah validated it as the word of God.”

Eskenazi praises Huldah for her unquestioned authority in her time. It is a fact that the leaders of the nation went to her and

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First meeting of the editorial board of The WRJ Women’s Commentary on the Torah, Los Angeles, January 2002. From left: Dr. Judith Plaskow, Rabbi Andrea Weiss, Dr. Sherry Blumberg and Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi. Photo by Eve Roshevsky.

so it speaks more clearly in those voices of such educated elite who were more often males,” she explains. “But it does not denigrate the intelligence and resourcefulness of women. In fact, most of the women who do appear in the Bible and have a part in the Bible, are presented as extremely resourceful – take Huldah, for example.”

Huldah is a well-known Biblical character to all of Eskenazi’s students, but little known to most others. According to Eskenazi, “Huldah, mentioned in II Kings 22, was the woman who had greater authority than probably any other woman in Jewish history – and one of the most

not to another living Prophet, such as Jeremiah, who presumably was alive at that time. Eskenazi recounts a favorite story about this Prophet. “The rabbis were uncomfortable with Huldah’s authority and wondered whether Huldah was really a man or a woman. Someone else said, ‘well maybe it’s her husband who is the Prophet.’ And this is the part I love: we know what her husband does. He’s not a Prophet, but the keeper of the King’s wardrobe, which means he stayed in the palace and took care of the clothes while Huldah was out there in public speaking the word of God. It’s a wonderful

example of a professional couple that reverses our stereotypes of gender roles in antiquity!”

Having taught at the University of Denver and having served as Director of its Institute for Interfaith Studies prior to coming to HUC-JIR, Eskenazi feels that there are important differences between the secular university world and the seminary environment. “Here, our students are already dedicated and eager to learn precisely the things that we have to teach. The passion they bring and their desire to make a Jewish difference in the world make a tremendous difference to me.”

Eskenazi also values the opportunity to work with Hebrew language in a Jewish context, so that Hebrew is part of a living tradition that has important things to say to how we live our lives, rather than serve as an academic discipline only.

Regarding her hopes for her students, she says she wants them to know the text of their tradition and to be able to approach it critically, “to learn to read the Bible from right-to-left, which is in Hebrew and also means to read it in terms of its own time and place, and to learn how to read it left-to-right, in our own time and place, thereby honoring the questions posed by the Bible as well as honoring our own questions and seeing how it speaks to our own time. And it’s extremely important to know the difference. The Bible is scripture not because it’s simply a historical document, but because it proved able to empower people in their lives for well over 2,000 years. It was preserved because it has something to say and we have to hear it. But we also need to be very clear as to what our questions are, and what it can or cannot say to our own time.”

Eskenazi entered academic life while raising her five children and after exploring other traditions and other sacred texts. Study for its own sake led to an undergraduate degree in Philosophy, a Master's degree specializing in the New Testament and Second Temple text and her doctorate from the University of Denver and its Iliff School of Theology. Citing not only Rosenzweig and Buber, but also Tolstoy, Gandhi, Thomas Merton, and the Catholic worker Dorothy Day as her spiritual mentors, her intellectual and spiritual quest brought her to the Bible, "not because it's the only literature I've looked at, but because I've looked at others. I was able to come to this as the most alive and meaningful text to me, a love that I communicate to my students. I consider it a source for a vocabulary and values with which to construct a world and create communities that have the power to sustain and inspire people."

At a time when scholarly circles apart from the Jewish community are coming to the realization that there is a significant connection between academic concerns and lived lives, Eskenazi reminds us that seminaries like HUC-JIR have never lost the connection between thought and practice. "We have such an extraordinary concentration of scholars specializing in the study, interpretation, and research of Jewish text. We possess an incomparable reservoir for Jewish studies. We have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to express this kind of research and learning that takes place in a context that is so thoroughly Jewish – that is connected not only academically but is connected existentially to the lives of persons and community."

LISTENING TO OUR MOTHERS: THE WOMEN OF REFORM JUDAISM WOMEN'S COMMENTARY ON TORAH

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Our commitment to women means that we primarily attune to the voices of women - in the text and in our community. Throughout history our human family, our Jewish family, has been sorely deprived of half of our ancestors – we are ready to become a more complete community.

In practice all this entails looking most closely at texts where women appear and asking why they do not appear elsewhere where they belong. It means asking who they were and how they lived, where they were and where they were not. It means listening to their words and listening even harder to their silences. Listening also means that we continue to listen as we work on the commentary.

Jews never resorted to a single voice. The very first pages of the Torah resist a single voice: Genesis begins with two versions of creation, two voices that disagree as well as complement each other in describing the origins of the world. The conversation between different voices continues in the Jewish tradition in the way traditional Jewish Bibles were printed over the centuries. The Torah text typically appeared on the page surrounded by commentators who responded to the text and often to each other. Consequently, along with the Torah there were always Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Sforno, and many others.

Our commentary follows this model by incorporating different voices, including those of the rabbinic sages from our past and rabbinic and other sages from the present.

We will always interact with rabbinic traditions. We want to enjoy Rashi's sensitivity when speaking about the five daughters of Zelophehad. In *Parashat Pinhas* from the Book of Numbers/ *Bemidbar*, for example, he compares them favorably with Moses.

These five sisters in the Book of Numbers approach Moses, the leaders of the people, and the entire community. They draw near because they see a problem that needs a solution: the problem is that they have not been given an inheritance that they believe is due to them. They refuse to be left out and demand their rightful share. And so they dare speak to Moses, the priest Eleazar, all the other leaders, and the entire *edah* (congregation or formally constituted assembly). They say: "Give us a holding among our father's kin." (Numbers 27:4) Give us a share of our heritage, why should we be left out.

They get what they want – a share, a large share I should add. Moreover, as a result of their courage, a new Torah law is created, one that intends to benefit future generations long after them.

Their story is the story of *The WRJ Women's Commentary on the Torah*. The women of Reform Judaism said: "Give us a share among our brothers. We are no longer willing to be left out." Instead of land, the WRJ ask for something even more enduring – "give us a share of our Torah." The result is a Torah commentary that we trust will benefit all of us. With this commentary we will continue as sisters to empower the women – and men – who come after us for generations to come.

*Share in the learning of
"Mining the Jewish Tradition for its Healing Wisdom"*

The HUC-JIR Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health and Temple Chai of Phoenix hosted this international conference in May for nearly 300 rabbis, physicians, nurses, cantors, educators, artists, mental-health professionals, and lay people interested in Judaism's health-related texts and resources. For video and text of keynote speeches by **Rabbi Elliot Dorff** – "Mishneh Ha-Briyyot: A New Jewish Approach to Disabilities," **Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi** – "Biblical Reflections on Holiness, Health and Hope," **Dr. Arnie Eisen** – "Choose Life: American Jews and the Quest for Healing," and **Dr. Arthur Green** – "Healing the Self, Healing the Cosmos: Reflections in the Neo-Hasidic Spirit," please click on <http://www.huc.edu/kalsman>