



THE 2008 DR. FRITZ BAMBERGER MEMORIAL LECTURE

Opening the Door to the Deep: Creating a Women's Torah Commentary

Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York – March 6, 2008



(From left) Dr. Andrea L. Weiss, Dr. Carole B. Balin, Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson, Dr. Wendy Zierler, and Dr. Alyssa Gray.

The Bible: A Women's Torah Commentary received the *Everett Family Foundation Jewish Book of the Year Award* at the 58th National Jewish Book Award ceremony in New York on March 5, 2009. Published by WRJ and its partner, the URJ Press, this publication was edited by Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Professor of Bible at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles, and Rabbi Andrea L. Weiss, Associate Professor of Bible at HUC-JIR/New York. It is the result of 14 years of work by more than 100 women theologians, historians, sociologists, scholars, anthropologists, poets, rabbis, and cantors from the United States, Canada, Israel, and South America. The 2008 Dr. Fritz Bamberger Memorial Lecture celebrated the publication of this groundbreaking volume, which provides women a voice in commentary. The presentations by Dr. Weiss and HUC-JIR faculty and contributing authors Dr. Carole B. Balin, Professor of Jewish History, Dr. Alyssa Gray, Associate Professor of Codes and Responsa Literature, and Dr. Wendy Zierler, Associate Professor of Modern Jewish Literature and Feminist Studies, was moderated by Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson, Executive Director of the Women's Rabbinic Network.

THE POWER OF LEARNING FROM AND WITH WOMEN SCHOLARS

Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson,
Executive Director, Women's Rabbinic Network

This evening of celebration in honor of the completion and publication of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* is a very meaningful one for me and for many others. Many women have joined us from both the Women's Rabbinic Network and the Women for Reform Judaism. All of us who have worked our entire careers to create a new and more complete vision of *Torah* that reflected the reality of women's experiences and women's perspectives have a great deal to celebrate with this publication. That this celebration takes place as part of the lecture series established in honor of Dr. Fritz Bamberger by his family, is particularly meaningful. I did not know Dr. Bamberger well, but I do feel a deep sense of connection to him and to his family. I do know very well the significance and impact of his life on HUC-JIR and on David Ellenson's intellectual life. My sense of gratitude for the Bambergers' generosity and care is very deep. We are grateful to the co-editors of this commentary, Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Dr. Andrea Weiss, for starting us off, rolling the stone off the well, and opening the door to some deeper reflections.

It is a distinct honor to moderate such a distinctive panel of women, all members of the HUC-JIR faculty. Being on the panel with them shows me just how profoundly our Jewish world has changed. I can never take for granted the power of learning from and with women scholars. I have learned that once women enter into the arena of *Torah* learning and study it never is really just mix and stir. It's really mix and transform. The presence of women demands that the text be seen with new eyes and heard with new ears. It is this creativity and vision which we truly celebrate on this unique evening. The world has truly changed in our lifetime. Our panel really reflects the amazing transformation that has taken place at HUC-JIR. How privileged we all are to be witnesses to this. And it is a particular privilege that as moderator I am able to participate in a conversation about a text with which we wrestle so deeply.

When we complete the chanting of the book of of the *Torah*, it is customary for the community to acknowledge that moment by chanting "*Hazak, Hazak, v'Nithazek*" – "Be strong, be strong, be strengthened." We find ourselves strengthened by the work of these four amazing scholars and the work of all whose energy, creativity, and efforts brought this volume into existence. As we conclude this evening with a song from Debbie Friedman, whose music inspires and transforms us all, my prayer is that we continue to go from strength to strength, that we continue to be strengthened, and to strengthen each other as we make our *Torah's* meaning go even deeper and towards truth.



OPENING THE DOOR TO THE DEEP: THE CREATION OF *THE TORAH: A WOMEN'S COMMENTARY*

Dr. Andrea L. Weiss, Associate Professor of Bible, HUC-JIR/NY

The potential for *Torah* study to satisfy the contemporary longing for spiritual meaning was one of the driving forces behind Cantor Sarah Sager's dream of creating a women's *Torah* commentary. In the fall of 1993, at the national assembly of the Women of Reform Judaism in San Francisco, Cantor Sager gave a talk entitled, "Sarah's Hidden Voice: Recovering and Discovering Women's Spirituality." She concluded her speech with the following charge:

I present this idea of re-claiming *Torah* as a very specific proposal to this great gathering of Jewish women, to this unique organization dedicated to the spiritual life and religious empowerment of Reform Jewish women. If we are really serious about women's spirituality, about re-claiming our history and our voices, about liberating the concepts of God and community, of integrating the *Torah* of our tradition into the *Torah* of our lives, then there is something very concrete that we can do. We can commission the creation of the first women's commentary to the *Torah*.

Fourteen years later, Cantor Sager's dream was fulfilled with the publication of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, which was debuted in December at the Reform Movement Biennial in San Diego.

In the Song of Songs, the male speaker describes his lover as "a locked fountain, a sealed-up spring" (4:12); he speaks of her as "a garden spring, a well of fresh water (literally, 'living water')" (4:15). For women and men, for Jews and non-Jews, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* offers a new way to unlock the fountain of *Torah*; it provides a fresh chance to drink deeply from this well of living water in order to quench our thirst for answers and questions, for meaning, for community, for glimpses of the Divine.

How does the *Commentary* accomplish this? One way is by providing multiple lenses for viewing each *Torah* portion. First, the heart of each parashah is the "Central Commentary," which provides a verse-by-verse explanation of the biblical text, highlighting female characters and issues involving women. Second, a shorter, "Another View" essay focuses on a specific element in the *parasha* in a way that complements, supplements, or sometimes challenges the Central Commentary. Third, a "Post-Biblical Interpretations" section brings together teachings from rabbinic writings and classical Jewish commentaries, showing how traditional Jewish sources responded to texts pertaining to women. Fourth, a more philosophical essay called "Contemporary Reflection" explores various aspects of the *Torah* portion and challenges readers to consider how the *parasha* speaks to us as contemporary readers. And fifth, the "Voices" section contains a collection of creative responses to the *Torah* portion, mainly poetry. Five distinct modes of biblical interpretation; five different doors to the deep.

