

THE POWER OF LEARNING FROM AND WITH WOMEN SCHOLARS

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

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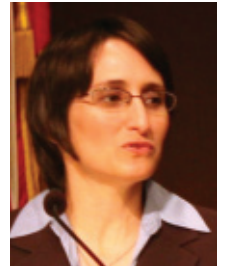
This evening of celebration in honor of the completion and publication of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* is a very meaningful one for me and for many others. Many women have joined us from both the Women's Rabbinic Network and the Women for Reform Judaism. All of us who have worked our entire careers 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.

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.

The idea of a multi-vocal *Torah* commentary is both definitively Jewish and definitively feminist. The design of the *Women's Commentary* was inspired by *Miqraot G'dolot*, the standard form of Jewish Bible commentary since the sixteenth century. *Miqraot G'dolot* contains the Hebrew text and an Aramaic translation, along with commentaries by a range of different scholars, all of whom interpret the text for their own generation. So, too, our *Commentary* contains the *Torah* text, a translation (in our case, what is called a "gender accurate" English translation), and various commentaries reflecting the interests and concerns of our own day and age. A key difference, however, is that in *Miqraot G'dolot* all the sages are Jewish men; in our *Commentary*, all the sages are Jewish women. Thus, drawing upon a classical Jewish model of biblical exegesis, we have created a *Torah* commentary for the 21st century – a commentary for both women and men alike.

Another example of the multi-vocal nature of the *Commentary* is the diversity of our contributors. The *Commentary* was published by the URJ Press, which is part of the Union for Reform Judaism; and it was developed and funded entirely by the Women of Reform Judaism, the remarkable organization that raised the \$1.5 million needed to produce this project. Nonetheless, this is a commentary by and for *klal Yisrael*, the entire Jewish community. Our contributors hail from across the globe – from North and South America, Israel, and Europe – and they represent the full Jewish spectrum: Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, Orthodox, and secular Jews.

Likewise, in the few months since its publication, the *Commentary* has been embraced by a diverse audience. Celebrations of the *Commentary* have been held or are being planned at the seminaries of the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements; and just yesterday, we had an event at General Theological Seminary, which is part of the Episcopal Church. A recent article in the *Christian Science Monitor* quoted Orthodox Rabbi Bradley Hirschfield, who called the *Women's Commentary* a "magnificent work" and stated: "I'd love to see more Orthodox people say, 'No, we don't share their theology, but boy, they've helped us to appreciate the text we both love better.'"

Since Tamara Eskenazi unfortunately could not be with us this evening, she asked me to share with you some of her reflections on the *Commentary*:

"In the *Torah*, the call from and to the deep, the reaching for water and sustenance, is a call to holiness, which is why the book of Leviticus, which we begin reading next week, is so central – physically and spiritually. The call to holiness is not only about orienting us comfortably in the world, but it also entails examining our most public and most private actions in light of the high ethical standard that the *Torah* spells out: how and what we eat, how we treat each other and the stranger, how we treat the poor, how we approach God."

As is evident when studying the *Torah* in general and the book of Leviticus in particular, the call to holiness is also unquestionably a call to justice. In the 21st century this call to justice takes on an added weight; and those of us who write commentaries are keenly aware of the need to heed the call. In transmitting a tradition through a commentary, one inevitably highlights certain elements. After all, it simply is not possible to comment on everything in the text, especially in a single volume commentary; so one must be selective. Yet, one also needs to know when to challenge the received tradition. The *Torah* it-

self is a collection that exemplifies both gestures. It is tradition, drawing upon the wisdom of generations past and present in order to guide a people. But it is also a counter-tradition, standing against some current ideas and practices in the biblical world.

Every commentator in every generation is obligated to replicate these two activities: affirmation and critique. Commentators who exposit the text must also be ready to expose – not only the text, but our own cultural blind spots. We live at a time when sacred texts are used as weapons against innocent people. Thus, as commentators, we cannot forget the actual context into which our comments enter. In writing the *Commentary*, our task has been to write about the *Torah*, but with an eye to how our readers are going to use these teachings." An illustration of this pattern of embracing but challenging the tradition can be found in Tamara Eskenazi's "Another View" essay in *parashat K'doshim*. Based on her reading of the *parasha*, she expresses a new notion of holiness when she asserts:

"*Parashat K'doshim* articulates more comprehensively than any other portion of the *Torah* what it means for persons and community to be holy. Dictionary definitions of the Bible's concept of holiness emphasize the notion of separation. In *parashat K'doshim*, however, holiness comes from cultivating relationships. Connections – not only separations – define the holy community: the connection to parents whom one must honor, to the poor and the disadvantaged whom one must protect, to the neighbor and stranger whom one must love, and of course to God."

The Torah: A Women's Commentary is such an important addition to our collective Jewish library, an exciting new resource to help us read and wrestle with *Torah*. This, after all, is what Jews have been doing for thousands of years – and now we have many new voices to add to that conversation.

THE NEWEST LINK IN THE CHAIN OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Dr. Carole B. Balin, Professor of Jewish History, HUC-JIR/NY



If not now, at some later point, I invite you to pick up this book, to lift *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. You will notice that this *Torah* is downright heavy. Indeed, this hefty volume will take up its share of space on your bookshelf. As you "turn it and turn it again," as Rabbi Ben Bag Bag admonishes us in Pirke Avot (2:25), notice its gold, embossed lettering

on the front and binding; take pleasure in its smooth, eco-friendly green texture; admire, as my 9-year old daughter does, its delicate, border illustration of vines and pomegranates.

For centuries, traditional texts of Jewish culture – what are commonly known as *seforim* – have appeared in a particular guise. Consider copies of the Bible, the *Mishnah*, the *Talmud*, *Shulkhan Arukh*, *Zohar* and more recently J.D. Hertz's *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* published by Soncino Press originally in 1936, Gunther