

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

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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

Plaut's *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* published in 1981 by the then-UAHC Press and re-issued twenty-four years later, and the first *Torah* commentary of the 21st century, *Etz Hayim* published by the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Assembly in 2001. These volumes – all – stand out on library shelves with distinguishing and distinguished markings of dark, rich jewel-colored covers, glittery lettering, marbled pages. Their aesthetic sends a clear and powerful message to readers: We are classics with an elaborate form that complements our significant content. We constitute what matters in the world of Jewish study. In the case of *seforim*, it would seem, you can judge a book by its cover.

Of course, the real irony here is that leather bindings and gold letters are hardly indigenous Jewish markings. Though the Muslims may have called Jews “People of the Book” as early as the eighth century, *seforim* are a relatively recent phenomenon in the millennia-long continuum of Jewish history. Until the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, sacred texts in Hebrew were very scarce, given the fact that they were produced laboriously by copying one manuscript from another. Unlike leaders of the Catholic Church who attempted to stop the dissemination of printed books, Rabbinic authorities were enthusiastic about printing and regarded it as *avodat ha-kodesh* [holy work]. The first printed Hebrew book appeared in 1470; it was a *Torah* commentary, that of Rashi, the eleventh-century French sage who explained obscure and difficult words while drawing on the vast reserve of *Midrash*. It took nearly an additional half century for the original printed text of the Hebrew Bible to appear. When it was first published in 1517, the Bible contained Rashi's commentary alongside scripture. This, to me, represents tacit permission to future generations to perpetuate the interpretive act of biblical study.

Within two centuries, the Hebrew Bible would be published in languages other than Hebrew and with commentaries drawn from a world beyond the Jewish purview. In a letter dated July 29, 1779 [cited in Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*], Moses Mendelssohn, the man known to historians as “the first modern Jew,” confessed that his own children of Berlin were ignorant of Hebrew and so he set out to translate the Bible into, what he called, “decorous and refined German as that spoken in our own time” [Mendelssohn's words in introduction to the *Biur*]. In his translation, which appeared in 1780, Mendelssohn used Hebrew characters, producing, in effect, a Hebrew transliteration of German meant to familiarize non-Hebrew readers with the letters of the ancient alphabet. To the translation, Mendelssohn appended a commentary that came to be known as the *Biur* [i.e. explanation]. Besides relying on time-honored Jewish interpretations, particularly those of the 13th-century exegete Nahmanides, Mendelssohn, like his German counterparts, dedicated himself to the moral and intellectual improvement (known as *Bildung*) of his people. He based his desire for Jews to fashion a new cultural identity on the enlightened notion that “to instruct a nation is to civilize it” [Diderot to Catherine II, as cited by Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment* (1969), p. 512]. Mendelssohn recognized that Jewish biblical exegesis, from Rashi onward, had been pliant enough to encompass any number of new ideas, including those of his own time drawn from European philosophical discourse.

The Torah: A Women's Commentary resembles Mendelssohn's *Biur*

in many respects. Beyond the simple facts that the *Biur* was a collaborative effort, involving four other scholars besides Mendelssohn and that it took more than a decade to evolve into its final form, its primary purpose, like *The Women's Commentary*, is pedagogic in nature. It sought in its time to teach the timeless value of Hebrew scripture by making it accessible and relevant and thereby meaningful to a new generation. *A Women's Commentary* – supremely collaborative in nature and crafted over the course of 14 years – is instructive to our generation. Its interpretations of biblical text derive from the lived experiences of women and men and women with men, who for over three decades now have been the beneficiaries of scholarship that asks hard questions about relations between the sexes, how society is constructed, and the value ascribed to segments of our communities.

In closing, I wish to draw on the work of Professor Fritz Bamberger, whose memory we honor this evening. In 1961 members of the Society of Jewish Bibliophiles gathered for their annual meeting at the Library of the Cincinnati campus of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. At the meeting, a tiny jewel of a book – elegantly-bound in red with gold lettering – was distributed to each member of the society. Professor Bamberger was the compiler and English translator of this volume which contains a collection of sayings culled from Jewish writings extolling the virtues of the written word and taking its title *Books are the Best Things* from the verse of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In the introduction to this book, which was reprinted in 2003 and distributed as a gift to each member of the HUC-JIR faculty by President David Ellenson, Professor Bamberger wrote the following:

“The books of the Jews are much more than pleasant accessories of civilized living. They were a necessity built into the life of each Jew, prescribing...life's goals – its conduct and its everyday routine. Reading was studying, never a sophisticated pastime...but a sacred duty...While in other cultures books might convey to the reader the distance...between life and literature, the books of the Jews verily were their life.”

I'd like to imagine Professor Bamberger's delight in seeing *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* takes its well-deserved place on the bookshelf of the Jews' life, beside those that came before it and those that will most certainly follow.

REFLECTIONS ON THE TORAH: A WOMEN'S COMMENTARY AND POST- BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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Someone studying the *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* might wonder what the many essays on “Post-biblical Interpretations” are doing there. The running commentary, “Contemporary Reflection,” “Voices,” “Another View” – all these make sense in a 21st-century *Torah* commentary. But why should we be con-