

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-

cerned with what rabbis said in late antiquity and the Middle Ages? After suggesting two answers to my own question, I'll turn to some reflections on the "Post-biblical Interpretations" themselves.

First, I want to point out that the content of the "Post-biblical Interpretations" essays is drawn overwhelmingly from Second Temple literature, the literature of *Hazal*, and the writings of post-Talmudic medieval scholars. (*Hazal* is a Hebrew acronym that stands for the phrase "*habameinu zikhronam l'vrakhab*," or "our Sages of blessed memory"). *Hazal* are the rabbis of the *Talmuds* and the classical *midrash* compilations. The literature of *Hazal*, the great legal writings of the Middle Ages, medieval Bible commentary, and the mystical literature, are an indispensable part of our Jewish religious, cultural, and spiritual DNA. *Hazal* and the medieval scholars made us the Jews we are, and created the Judaism – Rabbinic Judaism – to which all contemporary Jews are heir. Without this rabbinic heritage, we wouldn't have the *seder*, *Hanukkah*, the structure of the prayer-service, or numerous other aspects of what makes a Jewish life recognizably Jewish.

Moreover, Jews have read the *Torah* – indeed, the entire Bible – through the lens of rabbinic interpretation for well over 1,000 years. Late antique and medieval rabbinic interpretation made that sacred but often strange Near Eastern text speak to Jews living under pagan and Christian Rome, and in Babylonia, the medieval Christian and Muslim worlds, and eventually the New World. Second, Judith Baskin rightly pointed in her introductory essay ("Women and Post-biblical Commentary") to the multivocality of rabbinic literature – that is, it includes (literally) many voices. Not only that, but this literature demonstrates to us that multivocality is ok – there may be a certain tension inherent in living with different and even conflicting viewpoints, but it can be done. Not only is it possible to live with the tensions presented by multivocality, but we *should* do so, since it is unreasonable to expect human minds to be forced to conform to any one point of view. It was likely for that reason that even the great medieval law codes became surrounded by commentary – Jewish scholars seemingly couldn't bear the notion of not being allowed or expected to argue and present different views. Classical Jewish literature and the myriad viewpoints it presents – and the fact that it even does so – should be studied and appreciated by everyone.

Apropos of multivocality, it's time to move on to the *Commentary*. In examining a selection of the "Post-biblical Interpretations" essays, I've been struck by a few things. First, the essays in the *Commentary* are neither apologetic about nor dismissive of rabbinic literature; they tell the truth. The essays do not censor the ancient and medieval rabbis in their more baldly patriarchal moments, nor do they accentuate the negative in order to condemn the rabbinic enterprise. We see here a third and better way for liberal Jewish women and men to read rabbinic literature: reading with openness to *all* that the literature has to say, wrestling with it if necessary, while all the while regarding it with deep respect and even love.

Second, these essays taken together constitute an early version of what I'll call a "*masekhet Nashim*," a tractate Women – not to be confused with the *Seder Nashim* of the *Mishnah*, *Tosefta*, and *Talmuds*. The essays collect a vast amount of rabbinic material that presents many views about women. Adding this diversity to the diversity of

the scholars who gathered this material and wrote the essays, we have at least three levels of dialogue: the rabbinic sources with themselves, the modern scholars and the sources, and the modern scholars amongst ourselves. These three levels of dialogue in the *Commentary* allow us to "connect the dots" of different texts and come up with new food for thought as well as new insight. The creation of a multi-layered conversation that invites readers to engage in the insight-producing work of intertextual exploration is, to my mind, one of the truly exciting aspects of the "Post-biblical Interpretations."

First, let's gather some food for thought. We learn in the "Post-biblical Interpretations" that the rabbis exempted women from the obligation to recite the *Sh'ma* (Gray, 1083; Hauptman, 1109), as well as from the important *mitzvah* of *Torah* study (Hauptman, 1109). These exemptions are disappointing in that they cut women off from the principal Jewish occupation – *Torah* study – and the principal Jewish affirmation, acceptance of the "yoke of the kingdom of Heaven." Yet we also learn that the rabbis were not unaware of women's spiritual capacities. The biblical Hannah is the rabbinic model for how to pray (Gray, 1083); when we pursue this reference back into *Berakhot* 31a, we see that Rav Hamnuna said: "how many great laws are there to be learned from these verses about Hannah."

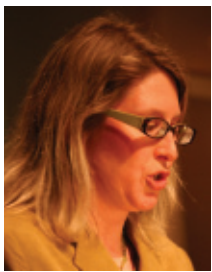
Moreover, we learn in two other places in the "Post-biblical Interpretations" that the rabbis did at times place men and women on an even spiritual plane. The rabbis list two *mizvot* applicable to men (*tzitzit* and *sukkah*) and two *mitzvot* applicable to women (*hallah* and Sabbath lights) together in referring to rewards for *mitzvot* performed in the city (Setzer, 1211). The rabbis also pointed out that on *Yom Kippur*, the High Priest would wear four garments symbolizing the four Matriarchs, in addition to offering three sacrifices representing the three Patriarchs (Labovitz, 694-695). Taking all this rabbinic material together, we see a tension: exemption of women from the Jewishly-defining *mitzvot* of *Torah* study and *Sh'ma*, and yet an apparent unwillingness to make women's spirituality secondary to men's in all cases. This tension invites further reflection – not apologetics, but reflection based on our willingness to let ourselves see multiple points of view about women in the rabbinic corpus without succumbing to the temptations of either apologetics or dismissal.

Second, let's derive some new insight. Looking at Judith Abrams's discussion of famous Talmudic story at *Bava Metziah* 59b (761), we see that she tells us that Imma Shalom's attention "was diverted," which had a disastrous consequence. Although it may seem to be of little consequence, let's ask: What caused the diversion? When we go to *Bava Metziah* 59b itself, we see that one explanation offered for the diversion is that Imma Shalom went to give bread to a poor man at the door. Looking deeper, we see that giving bread to poor people at the door is how the *Talmud Bavli* most typically represents women as doing *tsedaqah*. Moreover, the *Talmud* represents this sort of personal, in-kind *tsedaqah* as superior to men's monetary *tsedaqah* because a poor person benefits immediately from food, but not from money, which is at least one step removed from food. Following this intriguing idea further, I find that Mrs. Mar Uqba makes that very point in explaining to her husband why he was burned in the course of a *tsedaqah* venture gone awry while she was not (Ket. 67b), and Abba Hilqiah also makes this point in explaining why his wife was a more

effective rainmaker than he (Tan. 23b). From the portrayal of women's *tsedaqah* in the *Talmud* we learn something important: in giving *tsedaqah*, the personal touch is literally best. While all *tsedaqah* is religiously significant, the *Talmud* stresses the religious superiority of this personal, human touch. By following a textual trail beginning with a Talmudic reference in a "Post-biblical Interpretations" essay, we've arrived at an important insight into *tsedaqah* practice – one which the *Talmud* represents as characteristic of women and which it explicitly favorably compares to men's *tsedaqah* practice. By providing many, many more such opportunities for intertextual detective work, the "Post-biblical Interpretations" will help us make the *Torah* great and glorious.

ON THE "VOICES" SECTION AS AN OCCASION FOR DEEP (FEMINIST) TORAH STUDY

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For years, a primary goal of my teaching at HUC-JIR and other settings has been to show the ways in which modern Jewish and particularly modern Hebrew literary works can be read as an additional layer of interpretation of the Bible and our classical sources. In all my courses I insist that modern Jewish literature sources be considered part of our sacred, spiritual canon. More specifically, as a scholar of the beginnings of modern Hebrew women's writing, I ask my students to consider what happens when after centuries of literary silence, women begin to write works of literature in Hebrew and address and enter into this canon. What new answers do they provide about the text and what new questions? How do they re-imagine the old stories and what kinds of counter-traditional interpretations do they offer?

You can imagine my delight, then, to see this approach to studying literature with and as *Torah* 'canonized' in the "Voices" section of the *Torah: A Women's Commentary*. Here is a Bible, meant for synagogue, ritual use, that actually places women's literary sources in a hard-bound, gold-lettered volume, along with exegesis by so many, wonderful women scholars. The range of contributors is truly breathtaking, including Yiddish, Israeli, German, British, American, Canadian women poets and writers, from the 18th, 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, poems by rabbis, poems by women rabbis, by eminent Hebrew women poets, among them the first women to write poetry in Hebrew, poems written explicitly in response to biblical materials as well as others that the editors, through creative juxtaposition, have brought into a meaningful conversation with the biblical text, by thinking to print them alongside a particular *parasha*.

The material is vast, and there is no way to survey all the kinds of interpretation that emerge from this writing. What I'd like to demonstrate for you today by way of two examples is how one might

use the "Voices" section of the *Commentary* as a resource and an occasion not merely for quick reflection, but for deep *Torah* study. Specifically, I want to explore the "Voices" selections as feminist *midrash*, showing how they borrow the method of rabbinic *midrash*, building upon and responding to classical *midrashim* as well as creating or uncovering stories and ideas that found no canonical expression in the prior, written tradition.

The first example that I'd like to refer to is Lynn Gottlieb's poem, "Awakening," which can be found on page 32 of the *Commentary*:

Shekhinah gazed upon the sleeping form of HeShe.
 "I shall divide this being
 So HeShe can find loving companionship
 Like the other creatures in the garden."
 HeShe lay asleep in the grass
 Curled up like a snake in the warm sun
 Dreaming of angels.
 Shekhinah thought,
 "Which part of the body
 Shall I take to form the woman?
 Perhaps from the mouth
 So she can tell stories like Serach,
 The woman who smells of time.
 Perhaps the eyes
 So she sees the inside truth of things
 Like Soft Eyes Woman Leah.
 Perhaps from the neck
 So she walks with pride
 Like the daughters of Zelophehad
 Who are Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.
 Perhaps the ears
 So she hears my laughter
 Like See Far Woman Sarah.
 Perhaps the heart
 So she flows with tender mercies
 Like Soft Hearted Woman Rachel.
 Perhaps the arms
 So she heals and restores with touch
 Like the Hebrew midwife women.
 Perhaps the legs
 So she goes out seeking wisdom
 Like Truth Seeking Woman Dinah.
 Perhaps from the flower of her passion
 So she enjoys the fruits of her body
 Like Shulamit."
 Then Shekhinah blessed every part of woman's body, saying,
 "Be pure of heart
 and always know you are created in My image."
 Then she awoke, first woman.

Lynn Gottlieb, a pioneering woman rabbi, is known for her book on the *Shekhinah*, *She Who Dwells Within*, which attempts to bring a sense of the female presence of God into people's lives. Fittingly then, her poetic re-imagining of the Creation of woman refers to God as *Shekhinah*. The source references that preface as well as follow the