

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

Dr. Wendy Zierler, Associate Professor of Modern Jewish Literature
and Feminist Studies, HUC-JIR/NY



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

poem in the form of footnotes, immediately alert us that this poem is in dialogue with diverse biblical sources. What is not immediately evident is that the entire poem is a poetic rejoinder to a rabbinic *midrash* on the creation of Eve, found in *Genesis Rabbah* 28:2 and quoted in the name of R. Joshua of Sikhnin. The *midrash* ostensibly aims to answer why is it that in describing the creation of woman, the bible uses the verb “*va-yiven*” and he *built* the rib into woman. Why not “*vayalas*,” he made, or “*vayitser*, he formed, as in the case of Adam? Rabbi Joshua answers with a wordplay, that *vayiven* is used since it approximates another verb “*vayitbonen*,” suggesting that as he built woman, he *considered well* which part from Adam to use so as to avoid negative results.

“I will not create her from Adam’s head, lest she be swell-headed; nor from the eye lest she be a coquette, nor from the ear, lest she be an eavesdropper, nor from the mouth, lest she be a gossip, nor from the hand, lest she be light-fingered, nor from the foot, lest she be a gadabout, but from a modest part of man, for even when he stands naked that part is covered. And as he created each limb, he ordered her, ‘be a modest woman.’”

But then what happens? Things do not come out as God expects. Referring to various biblical verses in Isaiah, and Genesis that describes feminine vice, R. Joshua notes that despite God’s plans and directives, woman turned out to be all that God had attempted to avoid: she is swell-headed, as seen in the description of the Israelite women in Isaiah 3, given to eavesdropping as in the example of Sarah in the tent who eavesdrops of Abraham and the angels, jealous and prone to thievery, as in the case of Rachel, who envies her sister’s fecundity and steals her father’s teraphim; gadabouts as seen in the story of Dinah who goes out to see the Canaanite women, etc. This *midrash* on the creation of Eve thus becomes a lament on what might call the “six deadly sins” of womankind.

What Gottlieb does is take Rabbi Joshua’s question, his answer, as well as the narrative template of this *midrash*, and turn it all on its head. Instead of searching the Bible for verses that prove feminine vice, Gottlieb mines the text for stories that bring honor to women. Instead of worrying about which of Adam’s body parts not to use, the poem enumerates an excess of good choices, all of which will yield a wonderful human result. And instead of imagining God as a kind of hapless, *schlemiel* Creator, who cannot get woman to turn out according to his ‘Modest Woman Plan,’ Gottlieb imagines an effectual *Shekhinah*, with an affirmative creative agenda, who blesses each part of woman’s body as created in Her own image.

This is an example of modern *midrashic* poetry that borrows the method and format of a prior rabbinic *midrash* in order to convey a counter-traditional, feminist message. Gottlieb’s poem pays tribute to the literature of *Hazal*, as “an indispensable part of our Jewish religious, cultural, and spiritual DNA,” as Alyssa Gray put it in her remarks, but also argues that more and in some cases, completely different things need to be said, not just about man, woman but also about God. And that this too is *Torah*.

The other kind of feminist strategy that I would like briefly to point out to you this evening is exemplified on page 471 of the *Commentary* in the poem “Before” by Yokheved Bat-Miriam (1901-1980), one of the first modern Hebrew woman poets.

Before, in this way, in bygone days,
Women, like me, in silence
Would bear supplications, hidden flames,
With a throbbing spirit.

They would – and in splintering wails
would prostrate themselves over ancestors’ graves.
And raise candles for the souls of the dead
with trembling hearts.

They would – for the holy arks
they would volunteer precious curtains.
On silk and velvet, in silver thread
were interwoven secret hopes.

Many and varied were the women
unfortunate, beaten, desolate.
Only one, only one nowadays is
close to my yearning heart:

Hannah who went up for the festival
year after year to the tabernacle,
to pray, to speak her heart,
her prayer without sound and without tear.

Different from her am I
and different also is my expression
But like her longing among the shadows
I will stand and speak my heart.

This poem exemplifies the ways in which feminist *midrash* can function as feminist history – or *herstory*, as it is often called. If so much of the Bible offers male-centered stories and genealogies and only clipped, fragmented bits about women, Bat-Miriam attempts to conjure up a lost history of Jewish women’s spirituality and synagogue ritual art, which finds no representation in prior sources, and thus, to create a creative lineage to which she can attach herself as a modern Hebrew poet, even if her artistic idiom differs greatly from that of her predecessors. The idea of contribution, collaboration, shared spiritual efforts spanning generation and place is so powerful in this poem, and indeed in this *Commentary*. They, like we, have made offerings not just for art’s sake, but for the sake of our synagogues, to sustain Jewish life. Like the women who made candles, embroidered curtains, prostrated themselves at gravesites, this commentary, in a sense, is a set of women’s ritual contributions, albeit in a new scholarly, literary, and exegetical form.

The one named predecessor in this poem, the biblical Hannah, is remembered, for her invention of the *silent prayer*. If women’s prior, non-verbal artistic, spiritual, and literary contributions were formerly shrouded in historical silence – Hannah was misunderstood by the priest Eli; similarly, Bat-Miriam stands alone at the end of this poem, it seems, in her effort to “to speak her heart” – the publication of this *Commentary*, which includes so many diverse scholarly, literary, and interpretive women’s “Voices,” marks, once and for all, in a canonical sense, the end of this silence. How privileged we all are to stand together to mark this occasion, “speaking our hearts” together in dedication to the *Torah* and its ever-evolving traditions. ■