

REVIEWS

Women Talking Torah

A new, unique—and gendered—look at the Bible

Until our own lifetime, traditional Jewish texts have been almost exclusively the product of only half the population. Once women began to study and to teach, and our voices began to be heard from pulpits, it was only a matter of time until a women's commentary would emerge. We have already seen many books that are collections of women's sermons or midrashim, or that reflect new feminist understandings of the ancient world. But the arrival of *The Torah—A Women's Commentary* (URJ Press and WRJ, eds. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss, \$75) marks a watershed in Jewish history.

It is a huge undertaking, magnificently executed and written solely by women, one which offers new information and insights on every page. The kabbalistic tradition recounts how the Shekhinah (God's presence, which is identified with the people Israel) is held in Egyptian bondage. But did you know that she is portrayed as a menstruating woman, who leaves Egypt and becomes pure during seven times seven days, reaching her wedding with the Holy One at Sinai on the 50th day, Shavuot, with the Torah as their ketubah?

This new volume, leather-bound and physically gorgeous, proudly announces itself as a work by women. As if to make up for millennia of anonymity, the book meticulously attributes authorship to each of its literary components. Its design suggests a female aesthetic sensibility, with a single border of leaves and pomegranates adorning the green cover, an artistic theme that also accompanies each weekly section. Although the book does offer commentary on all aspects of the text, it focuses, of course, on issues of special interest to women, including female characters in the Torah.

Each *parasha* (weekly portion) of this new volume includes an introduction, an

outline, and explanatory notes. Particularly helpful are the numerous cross-references. Four additional sections follow the weekly portion: one entitled Another View, setting the material in its ancient context; Post-Biblical Interpretations, presenting a selection of traditional rabbinic and medieval commentary; Contemporary Reflection, frequently highlighting a particular issue that has relevance to our lives today; and finally, Voices, a collection of creative works, poetry or poetic prose, functioning as modern feminist midrash.

The translation reflects careful consideration of gender, both in God language and in references to human beings. In every case, the translation attempts to discern whether the text refers to a man or men, or to people without regard to gender.

My only regret is that I did not have access to this book in the decades I have been teaching and preaching, especially for the 375 women I have taught for adult bat mitzvah since 1978. *The Torah—A Women's Commentary* is sure to become a staple for book groups and adult education classes, as well as what my Tanakh teacher in rabbinical school used to call a *vade mecum*, a book to take along, particularly for private study during services.

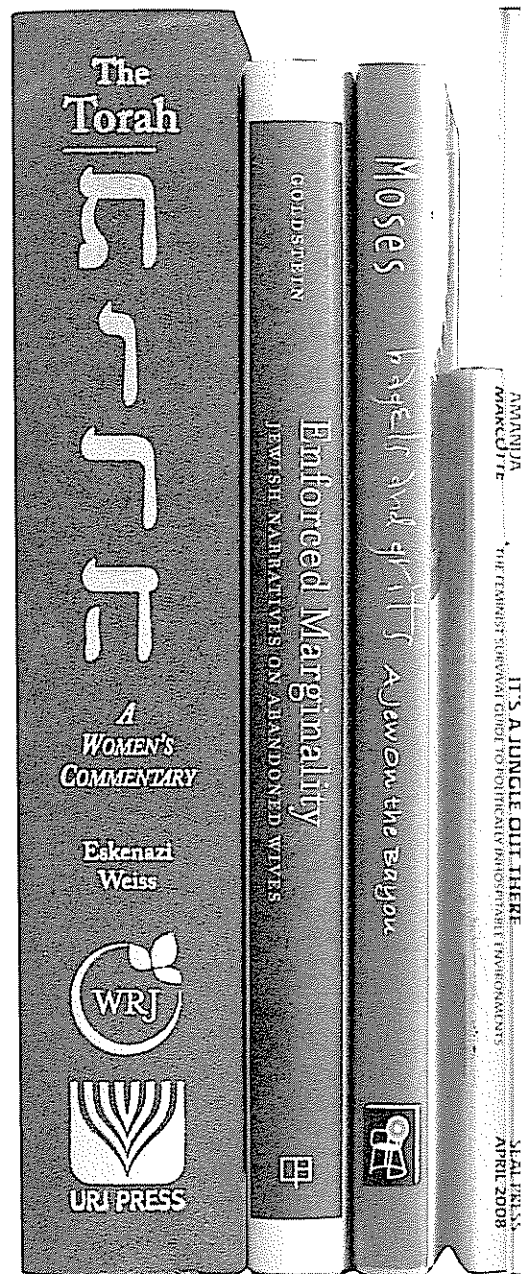
I am tempted to congratulate those responsible for this magnificent volume with a heartfelt *yasher koach*. But since this expression has masculine overtones ("may your strength be upright"), I will instead offer *kol hakavod*, all honor, to its authors as well as the editors, visionaries, and funders, for having produced a work that is sure to become an instant classic.

RABBI AVIS D. MILLER

Cocky Feminism

Laughing, or interviewing, our way out of patriarchy

Amanda Marcotte, best known for her blogging, has a new book that proves



she can play tough in multiple media. *It's a Jungle Out There: The Feminist Survival Guide to Politically Inhospitable Environments* (Seal, \$13.95) showcases Marcotte's acerbic yet casual feminist tips for less-than-perfect situations (whether you're in an "abstinence-only" classroom or maneuvering the "wedding-industrial complex"). Although the subtitle is true—the book is indeed a guide—Marcotte goes the extra mile: this book serves as a primer for current feminist issues and does so in an ironic, sarcastic, cocky-but-well-informed tone that will be instantly familiar to younger readers. The advice itself ranges from the highly practical (when buying a sex toy in a state which bans them, remember to refer to the merchandise as "educational models") to the