

REFLECTIONS ON FEMINIST JEWISH APPROACHES TO THE BIBLE AND THE MAKING OF A FEMINIST JEW IN ISRAEL

Naomi Graetz*

ABSTRACT: This article incorporates personal insights into the development of feminist Jewish approaches to the Bible. I discuss what it means to be a feminist Jew in Israel and make a clear distinction between feminist Jews and Jewish feminists, by using my personal history as a feminist Jew and how my upbringing in an intense American Jewish environment influenced me. I explain how I became a feminist Jew and reflect on the Jewish feminism that emerged between the 70s and the 90s. My reflections are part of the process through which I became a midrash writer and an independent Bible scholar and in doing so I situate myself within various feminist/Jewish approaches to the Bible. In the third section of this article I describe how I and other feminist Jews have dealt with the problematics of being both Jewishly engaged as well as being ardent feminists. I conclude the article by citing a poem by a well-known Bible scholar who represents to me what it means to be female and Jewish at the same time.

In 1992, I made a list of “How I became a feminist Jew.” This is what I wrote then:

1. *I enjoyed Junior Congregation until I turned twelve when I moved upstairs in the main synagogue (in the women's section) and became an usherette. The 5th grade cantillation class, where we learned how to read the Torah tropes, was wasted on me because they were irrelevant—who ever heard of a female Torah reader. I did not enjoy prayers in camp and I always tried to escape. I flunked Judaic subjects in high school despite my fluent Hebrew.*
2. *I read Betty Friedan when my first born daughter Ariella was five months old and thought my life was wasted and over and wished I could begin it again, unencumbered by marriage and children. I wrote an impassioned, single-spaced two pages bemoaning my fate and then forgot all about it.*
3. *My active synagogue participation began in Omer when Ariella was 10 years old with the realization that if I did not serve as a role model for the community, my daughter would not consider it natural either to participate in and/or lead services for her Bat Mitzvah.*
4. *I began to learn all the issues—reading the quarterly Conservative Judaism and everything else I could get my hands on; convincing my husband the rabbi of the correctness of this (as well as myself). First I learned how to chant a haltarah and then decided I could do Torah reading as well if not better than my husband and began doing it for more than forty years.*
5. *I began to write midrash when I returned from my “wasted” sabbatical in 1985.*
 - a. *This resulted in the investigation of rabbinic midrash to see what its attitudes towards women were, and*
 - b. *conscious writing of midrashim which reflected the feminist approaches of Judith Plaskow etc.*
6. *My participating in the first (and only) Jerusalem International Conference on Women and Judaism: Halacha and the Jewish Woman (1986) and in a feminist conference in Ireland, where I gave papers on the topic of the rape of Dinah which led me to a more radical approach which I then tempered (do not throw out the baby with the bath water).*
7. *My need for a support group and desire to set up a resource library led to starting a branch of the Israel Women's Network in the Negev.*
8. *My trip to Russia (in May 1987) led to a feeling of sisterhood vs. identity and loyalty to my religious group.*
9. *My dialogue with Arabs made me think, am I a feminist first or a Jew? Israeli? Is there a contradiction? I thought so then - if we were being honest with ourselves.*
10. *I then began to think “What does it mean to be a feminist Jew?” To whom is the ultimate loyalty? This was in the wake of the First International Jewish Feminist Conference in 1988, which was also when the Women of the Wall first met.*

Being a Feminist Jew in Israel

I have been a feminist Jew in Israel for more than forty of the fifty years I've lived in Israel. What does it mean to be a feminist Jew in Israel? In describing myself as a feminist Jew I am making a statement. Obviously there is no one party line for what it is to be a feminist and that is true more so of being a Jew. It gets even more complicated when we connect the two. Just as Judaism is not monolithic, so there are many feminisms. I think that it is safe to say that all feminists agree on three things. 1) There is such a thing as patriarchy. 2) It is necessary to be critical of this patriarchal society and finally, after critically examining society it is necessary 3) to take action, protest and attempt to change this society that we criticize. Both the Jewish feminist and feminist Jew recognize all of the above. The difference perhaps is in the degree to which one is critical. Namely, what is one willing to overlook? Where are the red lines? How deeply do we wish to go? Do we want to undermine the entire enterprise to make a point? Often the latter seems true of the committed Jewish feminist. The feminist Jew might be critical but she will press the brakes when the protest, action and attempt to change seems to be veering out of control and/or if it means being written out of her home community.

Feminist Judaism vs. Jewish Feminism

When I try to distinguish between the concepts of Jewish feminism and feminist Judaism, I often get confused. Yet I think it is important to make a distinction. It is a matter of priorities. In today's parlance, it is connected with identity politics. It is true that by making this distinction I am falling into the trap of ignoring and/or conflating other important issues. To clarify, I find it helpful to think of myself as an American Jew who has chosen to live in Israel, whereas the Jewish American still lives in the U.S. Yet, if I ask my close friends and relatives who have a similar trajectory to mine—namely Hebrew Day Schools, Hebrew speaking, Zionist Camps and Higher Education in a Jewish Institution—what they call themselves, they will all describe themselves as American Jews. The majority of Jews who live in America—who have no connection to Israel, do not attend synagogue and do not know how to read Hebrew—and are very loosely connected (if at all) with the Jewish community should be more accurately described as Jewish Americans. It is not so easy to differentiate between the Jewish feminist or the feminist Jew. There are many Jewish feminists whose main allegiance in the past was to feminism, who became interested and totally involved with the Jewish part of their identity and thus became feminist Jews.¹

When I am confronted with a conflict between my feminism and Judaism I will push the envelope as far as I can but will ultimately remain steadfast to my sense of being a Jew. I follow this principle in my academic writings. Thus in challenging the tradition to change, I have not left the camp, despite the fact that much needs to be done. Although it is more common and natural to refer to myself and others like me as Jewish feminists, it is probably more accurate to see ourselves as feminist Jews. Those many women who are activists in liberal causes and/or are in academia would probably describe themselves as Jewish feminists. Presumably they would follow their conscience in deciding their loyalties to the “cause” and/or scientific rigor. However, there are many like myself, who while engaged critically

¹ Retired Senior Teacher, Department of English as a Foreign Language, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. Email: gractz@bgu.ac.il

¹ I think that Letty Cottin Pogrebin and Phyllis Chesler are excellent examples of this. Pogrebin, a well-known feminist journalist, was one of the founders of Ms. Magazine, but then later wrote a book called *Deborah, Golda, and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America* (1991). Today she sends out a weekly digest of articles which reflect her very liberal political and religious views. See the article where she talks about this in 2014, when she received an award from Hadassah: <http://nijewishnews.com/article/19024/author-describes-return-to-judaism#.U2zipVfDX8M>. Chesler, a prominent academic psychologist, started out by writing about *Women and Madness* (1972) and later got involved in the Women of the Wall. She co-edited a book with Rivka Haut (a well-known publicly identified Orthodox feminist Jew) *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site* (2002). Both Chesler and Pogrebin (whose politics today are diametrically opposed) were participants and leaders in the famous women's Passover Seders that started in 1976 in Esther M. Broner's living room. Both also initially rebelled against the religious strictures of the Jewish homes they came from.

with our texts, also tweak our approach and try to find some saving grace, if possible in the same text. This is actually easier than one thinks, since Judaism is not and has never been a monolith. The approach to text is traditionally one of dialogue and thus one can always find an opposite opinion.

Being a feminist (religious) Jew in Israel used to be more of a problem than it is today—although Orthodox women are reviled for being feminists (especially in their own community where it is still very much an “F” word). To feminists in Israel being a religious Jew (or identifying as a Jew rather than as an Israeli) is equated with sleeping with the enemy. I have experienced the sense of being welcome in neither group because of my affiliations—on the one hand as a Conservative Jew (not accepted by the Orthodox) and as a religious Jew (not accepted by the secular). This is of course changing as more and more women with strong Jewish backgrounds awaken and re-discover the inequities in our tradition. The ferment in Modern Orthodox communities often seems like a re-invention of the wheel as they discuss women’s place in the synagogue, the wearing of *tallit* and *tefillin*, but I find it exciting to view and comment on and try to be part of this revolution as often as I am allowed in.²

Personal Background and Personal Growth as a Feminist

A word about who I am. I am a woman who will be seventy-five by the time this article will be in print. I am, first, the product of Modern Orthodoxy: thirteen years of Ramaz Day School (Manhattan), and thirteen years of Massad Hebrew-speaking summer camps in the Poconos (Tannersville and Dingman’s Ferry). This was followed by six years at the Jewish Theological Seminary (B.H.L. 1966 in Jewish History) and five years at Cejwin camps, while doing my B.A. and M.A. at City College of the City University of New York in English Literature. I married young (before turning 20) in 1963 to a rabbinical student. In 1967, we moved to Israel after the fervour of the Six Day War—for a year or two—and never returned to the States. We lived in Jerusalem for five years where I had several teaching jobs, two children, and many economic difficulties.

My life began again when in 1974 (also after a war) we moved to Omer, a very small town north of Beersheba in the Negev. We blossomed as a family (and had a third child). Small town life agreed with us all. Congregational life was a challenge, but since Israel did not really know what to expect from pulpit rabbis and their wives, we made the rules as we went along. Professionally I grew and got very involved in my teaching and research career in English. I also rediscovered feminism.

It is clear to me that my sense of being a feminist Jew began in our synagogue in Omer in 1975—the year my youngest daughter Avigail was born. I was in a new community that was feeling its way and in order to escape the responsibilities of mothering I went to the synagogue on Shabbat, leaving her care to my older daughter, Ariella (who was then a very responsible seven-year-old) for two blessed hours. In our synagogue, women were counted in the minyan out of necessity (we did not have enough men at the beginning). Ironically, given my past history in Day School, I decided to learn how to *Jeyz*, i.e. to read the Torah with the trope, the musical notes or cantillations, in our congregation. Fortunately, I have a good voice—and an alto one, so it was not very disruptive to our male congregants. I took it very seriously and prepared diligently—studying the text as well as learning how to chant correctly.

For me, Torah reading was formative because I really got to know the text and in preparation for this reading often argued with Scripture as I prepared. Our *kehillah* was on the cutting edge of women’s participation and involvement, and I was very influential both locally and nationally. It took me almost ten years to articulate what I was feeling. As I began to write midrash in the mid 80s, I began to incorporate my work in my teaching in the Department of English as a Foreign Language at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. To justify doing this professionally, I gave two workshops on “The Use of Culturally Familiar Material in EFL: The Case of Sarah” at a Conference at UCLA (1987) and “Using

² See Naomi Graetz, “Women and Religion in Israel,” in Kalpana Misra and Melanie Rich, eds., *Jewish Feminism in Israel: Some Contemporary Perspectives* (Hanover: University Press of New England: 2003), 17-56. Of course the development in the Modern Orthodox world has improved by leaps and bounds since I wrote this article and today there are Orthodox women called *Maharat*, who are essentially rabbis in all but name.

Biblical Tales in the EFL Classroom” at the Second International Conference on Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages in Jerusalem (1988). I did not realize at this time that I would eventually become a serious independent feminist Jewish Bible scholar.

From the late 60s (after reading Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* written in 1963, the year I got married) to the mid 70s I found feminist ideas to be too threatening to me when I was busy working at supporting a family and raising three children. I had no time to think about my ascribed roles. I was afraid to explore the conflicts between who I was becoming, my place in the family and my place in the community. I opted out when friends in Beersheba and Omer asked me to be part of their consciousness raising groups. I limited myself to the smaller issues of my relationship to Judaism—it was safer for me than to explore the larger issues.

I grew into feminism through Judaism. I subscribed to magazines (*Ms.*, *Lilith*, and *Conservative Judaism*). I regularly roamed the university and local library and read whatever was available (this was before I began reading online). My sister sent me books (fortunately, there were not too many in the early days). I was on top of whatever was being written. But until the mid-seventies, I was not a participant. I enviously followed from the distance of Israel the writings and doings of many of my feminist Jewish friends and former acquaintances. I also read much of what was being written by Jewish feminists such as Susan Brownmiller, Robin Morgan, Marge Piercy, Shulamit Firestone, Gloria Steinem, among others, who were not at all engaged with their Judaism (although I believe their social consciousness was certainly influenced by it).

Writing as a Feminist Jew

My turning point was 1985 when I went on my first sabbatical and discovered alternative ways of looking at Jewish texts. I discovered modern midrash in my sister’s library by reading copies of manuscripts lent to her by Marc Gellman. Later I encountered other exemplars of midrash in some of the alternative journals that were being published then. I felt the need to write that summer when I turned forty-two. I was on my first sabbatical in Ramah, New England. I was away from home, family, and friends—alone at camp as a middle-aged woman. It was a strange experience. I began a long letter home describing what I saw around me. I brought to this letter my sense of being an outsider. I had never been to Ramah, but I had mythologized it in my mind and I saw that it had clay feet. I had serious issues to address which were worthwhile sharing with more than just my family and friends.

I was an outsider because I came from Israel and was the oldest person in camp. My critique of the prayer in the camp became a topic of discussion and launched my writing career.³ When I returned to Israel, I had an intense need to express myself and poured out these feelings by writing midrash. These tales, which followed the order of the Book of Genesis, were subsequently revised. Seven more gushed out of me during an extremely fertile writing period of three months. When the first one about Sarah was accepted for publication,⁴ I was thrilled. There had been rejections before this one and there would be rejections after.

I began to look at midrash from an academic perspective by chance. I wanted to share my midrashim at an international conference being organized by Penina Peli (1986). She suggested instead that I write about what rabbinic midrash had to say about women in the Bible. Since I had just finished writing about Dinah’s rape, I chose to write about “Rabbinic Attitudes towards Women: The Case of Dinah.” Although the paper was first presented in Jerusalem and later in Ireland (July, 1987) at the Third Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, it was only published in 1993, in a completely different version. That too was by chance, when Athalya Brenner called me and asked if she could republish my articles on Miriam and Hosea in a collection that she was editing for Sheffield Press. Over the phone I told her

³ See “Prayer is a Foreign Language: An Open Letter to the Ramah Community,” *The Melton Journal* (Spring 1987): 24.

⁴ “Sarah’s Three Lives,” *The Journal of Reform Judaism* (Summer, 1986): 43-8. This appears in *my S/He Created Them: Feminist Retellings of Biblical Tales* (1993, 2003).

that I had an unpublished article about Dinah. The book was going to press soon, but since she did not need to get permission to print it, she asked me to send it to her as soon as possible and thus it appeared in one of her first volumes.⁷

I and my Omer friends became active in the politics of the *Masorti* (Conservative) movement in Israel on the issue of the right of women to be ordained in Israel as rabbis. We studied the texts, interviewed congregations all over the country. My Omer friends (not only in the congregation) became actively involved in feminist interests, forming study groups and getting involved in local political and health issues concerning women. This activism led to my serving on the national board of the Israel Women's Network for two years. By then I was writing my book about wifebeating, *Silence is Deadly: Judaism Confronts Wifebeating* (1998). I was staking out a position as an independent feminist Jewish Bible scholar.

The Essence of Feminist Judaism

Before discussing what a feminist Jewish approach to the Bible is, it is necessary to attempt to draw a portrait of elements that constitute or typify a Jewish approach to the Bible. Hanna Stenström⁸ wrote that "The limits of interpretation are not related to the past, they are formulated by living communities in an ongoing process of negotiations and struggles."⁹ This is precisely the Jewish approach to text. The Torah is "a living tree to those who uphold her and whoever holds on to her [instructions] are happy" (Proverbs 3:18). The Torah includes the story of the birth of the Jewish people and the origins of the Jewish legal system.

For those following a literalist approach, the five books of the Torah were revealed by God to Moses and Israel at Mount Sinai. The words of the Torah are not merely a record of the past, but the expression of God's will, and therefore Torah is the ultimate source of authority in this Jewish view.⁸ For those who follow this approach, one may protest or question God's will, but it remains the final source of authority as it is written in the Torah. Thus, little effort can be made to eliminate abuses against women that exist in the Torah by radically overhauling the entire received system. Indeed, this view may lead to denying that any such abuses exist in the Torah altogether. The view is that *God's will* would not do anything to harm women. If we perceive abuse, the fault must be in the way we understand Torah. This view, thus, is capable of generating explanations of Torah law which "explain away" what appear to be abuses against women in the Torah. Using Hanna Stenström's terminology, one can argue that this approach is also that of the fundamentalists, for she writes that fundamentalist movements also make claims that support an understanding of religious traditions as static, unchangeable and unified.

Those who take a more anthropological approach view the Torah as a human creation, which, like any human creation, must be studied and understood in its social context. From the perspective of this view, there is no inherent authority in the biblical text. Thus, abuse and women's disabilities in biblical law derive from the social status of women at the time. If, in our time, biblical law translates into disabilities for women, then we need to effect a radical transformation and rethinking of Judaism.⁹

⁷ These three articles are still widely quoted because of the popularity of Brenner's collections. "Dinah the Daughter," in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 306-17; "Did Miriam Talk Too Much?" in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 231-42; and "God is to Israel as Husband is to Wife," in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 126-45.

⁸ The following is excerpted from a talk I gave at a research seminar in Uppsala University, October 15-16, 2007 and was relating to what the Christian feminist Hanna Stenström wrote. This talk was translated into a Swedish textbook: "Judisk feministisk bibelölkning - en introduktion" [Introducing Jewish Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible] in Hanna Stenström, ed., *Att tolka Bibeln och Koranen: Konflikt och förhandling* (Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur, 2009), 67-77 [Swedish].

⁹ "When Holy Texts become battlegrounds. Feminist interpretations of the Bible and the Qur'an, with special emphasis on the New Testament" (paper preceding mine at conference in Uppsala).

⁸ One can consider Blu Greenberg to be representative of the first approach. See Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1982).

⁹ Judith Plaskow can be considered a representative of the second approach. Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

A third view takes a more middle ground. These are those, like myself, who, because of our religious orientation, respect the authority inherent in the traditional text. However, since our feminism is inseparable from our religious orientation and is viewed as part of our concepts of spirituality and holiness, its teachings must be integrated. We bring to the texts questions from our time and seek to uncover meanings that we believe are dormant in the text, that relate to these questions. We anchor our creativity within the text. Authority evolves out of the dialectic process of closely studying the text, because of its importance and religious weight, while interpreting its meaning in terms of our own feminist and religious consciousness.¹⁰

Whatever the approach to the Torah, Jews consider the Torah to be our primary book, it is our heritage. Our association of the Torah with the synagogue is further re-enforced because of the extensive use of biblical phrases and allusions to events, places, and people from the Bible in the prayers and blessings found in the *siddur*, the Jewish prayer book.

Jewish people are expected to be literate, so that we can read and understand our sacred texts. Text study is the meaning of religious experience, even the experience of “revelation”. The ideal is that the text represents a continuous medium on which Jews base their relationship with and their supplication to God.

The feminist Jew is influenced by general feminism—but tries to remain loyal to her sense of being Jewish. She¹¹ may define herself as a feminist Jew or a Jewish feminist. She may feel that Judaism and feminism are two competing “ism”s, but she persists in seeing value in both. As a feminist she might be tempted to reject Judaism in its entirety—when the stakes get very high—but she too, like the non-Jewish feminist, considers this throwing out the baby with the bath water. Rabbi Rebecca Alpert recognizes that “Exile from one’s Jewishness is not necessarily the answer to the feminist dilemma...[on the other hand] all of Judaism is called into question by feminism...”¹²

The Bible is not just another book to the feminist Jew and she will criticize those who treat it as such. For instance, Ilana Pardes (1992) who wrote about “Counter traditions” in the Bible, acknowledges her debt to Mieke Bal (1987), the influential feminist scholar. Yet Pardes unsympathetically criticizes Bal’s statement that the Bible’s message is only an issue for those who attribute religious authority to these texts “which is precisely the opposite of what I am interested in.”¹³ The baby referred to above, the canon, has to be treated with care, if it is not to be abandoned.

According to Alan Levenson, writing about us: “Jewish feminists are in the awkward position of having to revision a Biblical legacy while at the same time debunking tendencies to place the blame for the patriarchy, the West’s oppression of women, and even the Holocaust on the ‘Biblical’ (read) Judaic heritage.”¹⁴ In the words of Tikva Frymer-Kensky, we are aware on the one hand, that “Israel was neither the creator of patriarchy nor the worst perpetrator in the ancient world,...[and that] the patriarchy

¹⁰ Although Phyllis Trible was Protestant, she warranted an entry in the Jewish Woman’s Encyclopaedia. See: <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/author/trible-phyllis>. Her article “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” which originally appeared in *JAAR* XLI (1) in March 1973, was reprinted in Elizabeth Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives* (New York: Schocken, 1976), 217-40. I believe that it is a key to understanding the third or “middle” approach that feminist Jews take. Her later work *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984) did not attempt to “depatriarchalize” the Bible.

¹¹ Although I use the female gender to describe a feminist, I recognize that there are many Jewish male feminist Bible scholars out there, today more than in the past, since gender studies, feminism, masculinity, and even feminist masculinity have become popular and respectable areas of inquiry in academia.

¹² Rebecca Trachtenberg Alpert, “Sisterhood is Ecumenical: Bridging the Gap between Jewish and Christian Feminists,” *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review* XIV: 2 (Spring 1984): 12.

¹³ Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 26-33. Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Cited by Alan Levenson, “Jewish Responses to Modern Biblical Criticism,” *Shofar* 12/3 (Spring 1994): 107.

¹⁴ Levenson, “Jewish Responses,” 109. This was a very real issue in the early days of Jewish feminism and unfortunately still is. See Susannah Heschel, “Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Theology,” *Tikkun* 5: 3 (1990): 25-8, 95-7 and Judith Plaskow, “Blaming the Jews for the Birth of Patriarchy,” in Evelyn Beck, ed., *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (Watertown: Persephone Press, 1982), 250-4.

of Israel was part of an inherited social structure....nevertheless, we make a profound statement when we acknowledge that the Bible is patriarchal.”¹⁵

Feminism makes us suspect the authority of our texts, since we have been written out of the texts and we suspect that God was not necessarily speaking through those men who are responsible for a sexist type of Judaism. Yet the feminist Jew is very much in a relationship with Judaism—even if the relationship is acrimonious. She may be angry; she may be apologetic; but she strongly identifies with her Jewishness and wants to either change it or live with it (or both)—either in a state of conformity or rebellion. In other words, she has not written off her tradition. She may threaten the status quo; the establishment might view her as heretical—but she considers herself a member of the fold, even if there are attempts by the establishment to marginalize or silence her voice. She believes that by her efforts, and those of others, Judaism can (and should) be transformed. Our view of patriarchal Judaism is that if we look at it with fresh eyes (read feminist) we can change it. Most important of all, the feminist Jew “owns” her tradition and feels that she has a right to stretch its limits and will even point to those (males) in the tradition who did the same.

The relationship between feminism and Judaism can be described as one in which two different world views conflict. The feminist values relatedness, connection, togetherness, sisterhood whereas Judaism posits separation and holiness. The Jew is commanded to set himself apart from other nations in order to be holy. The rationale behind it is stated explicitly in Leviticus 19:2 “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” Holiness consists of both ritual purity and separation. To retain the chosen status, the nation is commanded, among other things, to separate itself from other gods (and goddesses), from idol worship, from foreigners (the gentiles), from forbidden foods, from women after childbirth and from menstruating women.

The Sabbath is a day which separates itself from the rest of the week and the Jew is commanded to observe this day, to set it apart and to engage in a totally different relationship to all of creation. Part of this change of mind-set includes restrictions on “weekday” behaviour. The *havdalah* ceremony which marks the end of the Sabbath, sanctions hierarchy and separation—it creates an “other-them” relationship. The priestly laws assume a patriarchy: God on top, the High Priest as intermediary (only he can go into the Holy of Holies to sacrifice), the lesser priests below, and still downwards, the Levites. Further down are the normal Israelites and below them are their wives and children.

To retain the chosen state, men are required to be circumcised, which separates them from the gentiles and of course from women, who are often seen as being ritually polluted or impure, i.e. the other. Part of the separation involves making boundaries, definitions—one group is inside, the patriarchy, the chosen, and then there is the other, the non-patriarchal. Those who are on the inside are in a hierarchical relationship; those on the outside have a more level relationship.

Thus, when a feminist approaches a Jewish text, and rejects the separation inherent in patriarchy, she threatens the traditional Jewish reading of the text. She comes to it bearing anti-hierarchical and anti-patriarchal biases. She notices gaps in the texts—those that leave women out; those that do not name women; those that misrepresent women or those that punish uppity women. She will challenge those who want to minimize the possibility of multiple meanings of text, of those who ignore the findings of source and form criticism, archaeology and linguistics.

She will want to read women back into the text, which misses a woman’s presence, when the traditional reading has not noticed her absence. She will uncover the texts of terror that have served as warnings to women to stay in their place: the acrimonious relationship of Abraham’s wives, Hagar and Sarah; the sibling rivalry between Sister Leah and Sister Rachel; the non-participation of Dinah in her rape; Jephthah’s nameless daughter; the sex sirens and temptresses: Delilah, Potiphar’s (nameless) wife; the story of the suspected adulteress (Sotah) and the most frightening story of what can happen to an unprotected woman in a lawless society (the concubine at Gibeah).¹⁶

¹⁵ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “The Bible and Women’s Studies,” in Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, eds., *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 18.

¹⁶ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

She will have noted that the people (and land and cities) of Israel are depicted with feminine metaphors—often uncomplimentary ones—and that they are all at the mercy of the ruling god who is sometimes depicted as an angry husband. She, or rather, in the case of my feminist colleague Mayer I. Gruber, he, will acknowledge that the message which prophets transmitted from on high in order to make this world a better place in which to live “can be hazardous for men and women” and that with the help of the ever-expanding discipline of Biblical Studies we can “see further beyond what the prophet/ess saw and thereby supply the antidote to some of the poison that the prophet may have mistaken for medicine.”¹⁷

We have seen that the relationship between feminism and Judaism has many points which can be described as points of conflict. It might seem that within these parameters, the relationship of the feminist to the Bible is hopeless. Is it possible to treat feminism and Judaism as capable of harbouring similar systems of value? If we look at the writings of feminist Jews, we find that they are unwilling to give up on Judaism; they try and point to similarities rather than emphasize differences. How do they (we) do it?

Perhaps the most obvious way is to take an apologetic, whitewashing approach. Rather than admit that there is something wrong with our tradition, we engage in comparison with other religions, seeing ours as less sexist than others, or look at historical context—contending that gender was not an issue for our forefathers.¹⁸ The danger of doing this is that it can lead to the acceptance of what is and encourage a lack of effort to make change. Hanna Stenström pointed this out early in her paper when she writes:

Work for change inside faith communities often relies on the conviction that the Bible and the Qur'an - or at least central parts of them - support the cause of women, if properly interpreted. Gender equality...is often understood by believing women to be anchored in the centre of the tradition, or in the work of the founder of the tradition. At the same time, the patriarchal traits are understood as secondary, for example as something brought in during the tradition of interpretation and use of the texts.

This is very clearly the case in the Christian tradition. In early forms, and even today in more popular forms of feminist interpretations of the New Testament and feminist Christian theologies, Jesus is understood as the friend of women, who treated women as equal with men and lived according to an ideal that was distorted by the Church during the centuries - in fact, the problems already begin after only a few decades, with Paul.¹⁹

But the problem with this approach is that it allows us to relax and not criticize our own tradition, something which is antithetical to the feminist.

Another approach is to ask “who owns the tradition?” What is authentic? What is inauthentic? Who decides? In this approach we take an anti-monolithic approach to text. Levenson calls this “pluriformity.”²⁰ There are majority and minority opinions. Both are preserved, not only in the Talmud, but in the Bible as well. There are more ways of reading the text than can be imagined and there is no one right way to relate to the sacred traditions. In fact, one can argue that the rabbinic tradition of interpretation was just continuing to make this point in its multiple reading of the Bible. The rabbis encourage us to read and reread the Bible: “Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it.”²¹ This is the basis of a midrashic approach to text. Although midrash was mostly created by male rabbis, there is nothing to stop the modern writer and reader of the Bible from creating new midrash which re-examines

¹⁷ Mayer I. Gruber, “A Re-Evaluation of Hosea 1-2: Philology Informed by Life Experience,” in Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, ed., *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1999), 173-4.

¹⁸ In my book *Silence is Deadly: Judaism Confronts Wifebeating* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1998), 157-70, I devote an entire section to Apologetics in Jewish sources. See Saul Berman, “The Status of Women in Halakhic Judaism,” in Elizabeth Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976); Blu Greenberg, “Marriage in the Jewish Tradition,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22:1 (1985).

¹⁹ See her introduction to Hanna Stenström, ed., *Att tolka Bibeln och Koranen: Konflikt och förhandling* (Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur, 2009), 67-77 [Swedish]. The reference here is from the original paper which I was sent prior to the conference.

²⁰ Levenson, “Jewish Responses.”

²¹ Mishnah Avot 5:22. “*hafokh bah vahapekhi bah d'kholah bah*”

texts which may be unfavourable and unsafe for women and refashions, reinterprets and revises them. One can also uncover and recover women's stories and refocus the stories so that women take their proper and rightful places. This approach can harmonize the Bible and feminism because it views the Bible not in its fixed text but as "work in progress."

For example, we can look at similarities between Jewish experience and female experience and point to both groups being identified as an oppressed people. Just as the Jew was endangered by anti-Semitism and assimilation; so women are threatened by sexism and the need to conform to male values.²² In Rebecca Alpert's opinion, the "feminist priority has deep roots in Jewish tradition. The Torah, the prophets, and the authors of rabbinic Judaism all expressed concern about the conduct of human relationships and the need to incorporate people who were considered marginal, often referred to as 'the stranger, the widow, and the orphan.'" She sees as priorities the end to war, poverty, and reallocation of scarce resources and sees these goals as "rooted in Jewish values and Jewish sources."²³

Or we can model ourselves on the rabbinic approach to text which often presented the very biblical texts that dictate the hierarchy of priests and kings as texts which mandate learning and knowledge as keys to power. Although there may be some debate as to whether women should partake of the democratic pursuit of learning—the opening has always been there and it is up to women to grab the opportunity.²⁴ Part of the democratic preaching of the rabbis is the relationship to others which is often sympathetic—we should not do to others as we would despise being done to ourselves, a powerful message which can be translated to include women. The Jewish world claims that its purpose of being a chosen people is not to conquer but to engage in *Tikkun olam* (perfecting the world). This is totally compatible with feminism. One might also argue that we all share the same God and come from the same place. Finally, it is possible to look at certain constructs which on the surface seem to be inimical to equality and see them as being grounded in feminist concerns. We see examples of this in the work of two feminist theologians, Marcia Falk and Rachel Adler.

Marcia Falk has suggested the potential of Shabbat, which has separate categories of work and rest; and Kashrut, which separates milk from meat, to be originally anchored in a concern for humanity and the environment. She writes that "as feminist theory applies itself to Jewish culture, it need not argue against the maintenance of all ideas and practices that separate Jews from other peoples." She argues that not all "dualistic separations built into Jewish rituals" are necessarily harmful. She feels that we can choose what to keep, what to let fall by the wayside, what to re-create so that they "reflect our experiences as women and our values as feminist Jews."²⁵

Rachel Adler, in her watershed book, *Engendering Judaism*, refuses to be bogged down by the image of an abusive god. She says that if we pathologize God's violence, our options for response are narrowed. She feels that if we accept the metaphor of an abusing God then we are perpetuating distrust and the only thing to do is to reject such a God. This she finds intolerable since if we discredit the prophetic message we are also discrediting the ethics of social justice to be found in these texts. Instead she writes of a *bat kol*, a feminine voice that shapes the masculine voice of God and the prophets, revealing the interdependency of God and humanity. This interdependency leads the way to a better world which women and men build together.²⁶

Are there limits to new interpretations? At what point does interpretation become dangerous and no longer God's word? Is interpretation free of all restraints? It is interesting that in Mishnah Avot (3:11) the rabbis deny a place in the world to come to anyone who "interprets the Torah in a

²² This was argued by Aviva Cantor, an early feminist and one of the founders of *Lilith* the independent Jewish Feminist quarterly magazine in her book *Jewish Women/Jewish Men: The Legacy of Patriarchy in Jewish Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995). See my "Review of Aviva Cantor's Jewish Women/Jewish Men," in *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends* 6/1 (November, 1996): 107-10.

²³ Rebecca Trachtenberg Alpert, "Sisterhood is Ecumenical: Bridging the Gap between Jewish and Christian Feminists," *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review* 14/2 (Spring 1984): 12-3.

²⁴ R. Eliezer vs. Ben Azai on *tiltul* (see BT Sotah 20a).

²⁵ Marcia Falk, T. Drorah Setel, et al., "Roundtable: Feminist Reflections on Separation and Unity in Jewish Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies* 2/1 (1986): 122-3.

²⁶ Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998).

contemptuous way”. I would argue that this exclusionary attitude stems from fear. Feminist Judaism is “dangerous”. It is challenging, but it also opens doors. The feminist Jew is interested in being inclusive, not exclusive, and as such offers us new readings filled with hope, glimpses of God, and the opening up of interpretation to all.

To illustrate this, I have chosen to end this article by quoting part of a poem by my contemporary, the late Jewish feminist²⁷ Bible scholar, Tikva Frymer-Kensky:

*Not all women are mothers:
Some women cannot,
some will not,
and some never get the chance.
Biology is not destiny,
women are not nature,
women who do not mother are still women.
A woman who does not mother is not less than a man.*

*But—I am afraid to say this aloud:
A woman who gives birth is more.
Maybe only for that period from conception to birth,
a woman who gives birth is more.
Touched by sacred mission,
containing magic action,
channelling the destiny of all,
redoing creation,
and, maybe, even altering it.*

*I am afraid to say this aloud:
Perhaps I should shout it from rooftops.*

**WOMAN CAN BE MOTHER
MOTHER CAN BE CREATOR**

*But maybe it is enough to whisper it.
Powerful whisper,
secret sigh of a sacred society.
Soon I will be an ordinary person again,
with all the cares and joys of men and women,
working and loving and seeking God.
Now is my chance to feel myself touched by divinity,
tapped for a sacred role.
Now is my hour to add to the kingdom,
share in the power,
rejoice in the glory.
To partake for a moment in foreverness,
and spend a little eon in the One.²⁸*

²⁷ Both Tikva and I were born in 1943. We both attended the City College of New York and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. I was in many Bible classes with her where she blossomed and learned ancient Sumerian languages. After becoming a well-known biblical scholar (Assyriologist), she became a feminist Jew when she had a “click moment” after being passed over for an academic position for which she was more qualified. This was told to me by her husband, Rabbi Allan Kensky when I visited him in Wilmette, Chicago, after her untimely death in 2006.

²⁸ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Motherprayer: The Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 84-5.

This excerpt is the end of a long poem in a chapter entitled “Midpassage”. It begins by tracing the lines of Tikva’s immediate family and goes back millennia to both biblical women and those from the ancient near east with whom she was so familiar. To me her book *Motherprayer: The Pregnant Woman’s Spiritual Companion* represents the completion of the full circle. Tikva began her career as a biblical scholar and was exposed to feminism. She became a Jewish feminist in her later writings.²⁹ I believe that from the 90s she realized that the personal is indeed political and that at this juncture she became a committed feminist Jewish Bible scholar.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adler, Rachel. *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998.
- Alpert, Rebecca Trachtenberg. “Sisterhood is Ecumenical: Bridging the Gap between Jewish and Christian Feminists.” *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review* 14/2 (Spring 1984): 12-3.
- Bal, Mieke. *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Berman, Saul. “The Status of Women in Halakhic Judaism,” in Elizabeth Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman*, 114-28. New York: Schocken Books, 1976.
- Cantor, Aviva. *Jewish Women/Jewish Men: The Legacy of Patriarchy in Jewish Life*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995.
- Chesler, Phyllis. *Women and Madness*. New York: Doubleday, 1972.
- Chesler, Phyllis, and Rivka Haut, eds. *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism’s Holy Site*. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2003.
- Frymer-Kensky Tikva. “The Bible and Women’s Studies,” in Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, eds., *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies*, 16-39. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.
- Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *The Pregnant Woman’s Spiritual Companion*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995.
- Graetz, Naomi. “Sarah’s Three Lives.” *The Journal of Reform Judaism* (Summer, 1986): 43-8.
- Graetz, Naomi. “Prayer is a Foreign Language: An Open Letter to the Ramah Community.” *The Melton Journal* (Spring 1987): 24.
- Graetz, Naomi. “Dinah the Daughter,” in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, 306-17. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993.
- Graetz, Naomi. “Did Miriam Talk Too Much?” in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, 231-42. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994.
- Graetz, Naomi. “God is to Israel as Husband is to Wife,” in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, 126-45. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.
- Graetz, Naomi. “Review of Aviva Cantor’s Jewish Women/Jewish Me.” *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends* 6/1 (November, 1996): 107-10.
- Graetz, Naomi. *Silence is Deadly: Judaism Confronts Wifebeating*. Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1998.
- Graetz, Naomi. “Women and Religion in Israel,” in Kalpana Misra and Melanie Rich, eds., *Jewish Feminism in Israel: Some Contemporary Perspectives*, 17-56. Hanover: University Press of New England: 2003.

²⁹ From the 90s through to her untimely death, Tikva Frymer-Kensky published several books: In 1992, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Macmillan Free Press). In 1995, *Motherprayer*. In 2002, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books). In 2006 *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society). Her commentary on the book of Ruth came out after she died. She wrote it together with Tamara Cohn Eskenazi in 2011. *Ruth: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation. JPS Bible Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society).

- Graetz, Naomi. *S/He Created Them: Feminist Retellings of Biblical Tales*. [Second revised edition] Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2003. [First edition: Chapel Hill: Professional Press, 1993.]
- Graetz, Naomi. "Judisk feministisk bibeltolkning - en introduktion" [Introducing Jewish Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible], in *Att tolka Bibeln och Koranen: Konflikt och förhandling* edited by Hanna Stenström, 67-77. Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur, 2009 [Swedish].
- Greenberg, Blu. *On Women and Judaism*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1982.
- Greenberg, Blu. "Marriage in the Jewish Tradition." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22/1 (1985): 3-20.
- Gruber, Mayer I. "A Re-Evaluation of Hosea 1-2: Philology Informed by Life Experience," in Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, ed., *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation*, 170-82. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Heschel, Susannah. "Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Theology." *Tikkun* 5/3 (1990): 25-8, 95-7.
- Levenson, Alan. "Jewish Responses to Modern Biblical Criticism: Some Reflections and a Course Proposal." *Shofar* 12/3 (Spring 1994): 100-14.
- Pardes, Ilana. *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Plaskow, Judith. "Blaming the Jews for the Birth of Patriarchy," in Evelyn Beck, ed., *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, 250-4. Watertown: Persephone Press, 1982.
- Plaskow, Judith. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990.
- Pogrebin, Letty Cottin. *Deborah, Golda, and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1991.
- Setel, T. Drorah et al. "Feminist Reflections on Separation and Unity in Jewish Theology." *Journal of Feminist Studies* 2/1 (1986): 113-30.
- Stenström, Hanna, ed. *Att tolka Bibeln och Koranen: Konflikt och förhandling*. Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur, 2009.
- Trible, Phyllis. "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," in Elizabeth Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, 217-40. New York: Schocken, 1976.
- Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984.