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Women and Torah Ancient and Modern Midrashim

Janelle Glick¹

The study of Torah, though written by men in an ancient patriarchal society, is now a dialogue involving both males and females, and as such provides a table at which women add their voices to the record from which their ancient Israelite sisters were kept in silence. The door of feminist biblical scholarship opens wider all the time, making room for even the author of this paper, a conservative Mennonite wife, mother, and scholar to enter and consider new ways of reading scriptures. Naomi Mara Hyman writes of the following task of feminist interpretation of scripture tradition:

When we learn to see the world through the eyes of tradition and when tradition takes into itself women's views of the world, both will grow...This will not be an easy task. There are many obstacles for women, not least of which is learning the language of our tradition so that we can create our place in it... One can only acquire this knowledge through direct study of the traditional texts themselves, and accessing those sources can be challenging.²

Though challenging indeed, digging out early midrash sources pertaining to the biblical stories of Israelite women is a delight-filled process deepening both the reader's love of and interest in original biblical texts. Acknowledging new questions and the participating in ongoing dialogue opens an active presence with the scriptures, rather than an anxious observation of them.

Of personal note in this acceptance of the invitation was the author's choice to entitle each chapter with the transliteration of the Hebrew name of each woman. The use of the Hebrew name is firstly a reminder of each biblical woman's physical space in her nation's timeline as well as a way to honor her identity as she heard it spoken by her own people. Secondly, the naming of each of these women in their mother tongue exposes the possibilities of what else is unknown regarding their stories and symbolizes the bringing back of their voice to the circle of dialogue regarding the ethics gleaned from the lives they lived.

The exploration of both ancient and modern midrashim in this paper follows the sequential order of these women's stories as found in Torah. Chapter One, the story of Isshah's³ eating of the fruit of the tree of Wisdom, focuses primarily on midrashim to ponder what the judgment of God for the sin of Adam and Eve may have been, as well as to reconsider who in the temptation story is most to blame for introducing sin into the world. Chapter Two,

¹ MDiv/MA (SCPY) – TH503B: Themes of Hebrew Scriptures, Spring, 2017.

² Naomi Mara Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash: A Sourcebook*, (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc. 1997), xv-xvi.

³ H. St. J. Thackeray, MA. "Jewish Antiquities I," *Josephus With An English Translation*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1961), 18, n. 18. "Strictly *Havvah* (Eve) = "living" or "life": Josephus, constantly loose in his etymology, following the Biblical "because she was the mother of all living," implies that that is the actual meaning of the word."

the story of Lot's wife, Idit, is written in light of a main premise of Jewish interpretation: it is not the facts that are important in the biblical stories, but rather the ethics that can be applied to one's present day context. In Chapter Three, the separate rape stories of Dinah and Thamara⁴ are compared, to reveal common themes among the responses of family to such an event in a patriarchal community. Chapter Four considers the marginalized role of Mariamme⁵ in the early Israelite community, though the biblical text indicates her giftedness in both the leading of worship and the calling to prophesy.

Havvah, the Mother of All Living

People of various faith traditions believe sin to have been introduced to all mankind through the act of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden. And though the text of Genesis 3 does not state such a thing overtly, many ancient Jewish scholars of the 1st century AD also interpreted God's judgement on Eve in the garden of Eden as proof of Eve being more responsible than Adam for the introduction of sin into the world through the act of disobeying God and eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. There is, however, some discussion in ancient writings as to the reasons for her additional phrase in Gen 3:2-3 - "neither shall you touch it."⁶ Much of the midrash of the story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit centers around the questions of what God's punishment actually entailed and who was actually to blame.

What the Text Does Not Say

It is helpful to take note of what is and what is not said in this tale of forbidden fruit. The text of Genesis 3 tells a tale God's instructions to Adam, Eve's understanding of these instructions, the serpent's disproving of Eve's understanding of the instructions, both Adam's and Eve's tasting of the forbidden fruit, God's punishments on the serpent, Eve, and Adam, and their banishment from the Garden of Eden so that they could not live forever. The text does not tell us why Eve spoke of not touching the tree when God did not mention it in His instructions to Adam. The text does not tell us whether Adam or Eve is more responsible for their eating of the forbidden fruit. The text does not tell us about original sin being passed down to all human beings. It is in the writings of ancient Jewish interpretation where we first find the grappling with the questions of what God's punishment was and who was at fault for the effects on mankind for all of history.

God's Punishment

Perhaps the two accounts of the creation of Adam play a part in the question of God's punishment for Adam and Eve's later disobedience. In Genesis 1:27, it is recorded, "And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them," but in Genesis 2:7 we read that "The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth."⁷

The first story indicates that man and woman were made as God is, which could include his immortality, but as noted in *The Jewish Study Bible*, in the second story, "the

⁴ Thackeray, "Jewish Antiquities VII," *Josephus With An English Translation*, 449.

⁵ Thackeray, "Jewish Antiquities III," *Josephus With An English Translation*, 345.

⁶ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*, Second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

⁷ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 13.

human being is not an amalgam of perishable body and immortal soul, but a psychophysical unity who depends on God for life itself.”⁸ The ambiguity produced between the two stories of the original text may play an important role in the question of what God then took away as a result of Adam and Eve’s disobedience to His instruction.

In the early text of Sirach, we read of God’s words, “as soon as you eat of it , you shall die”⁹ being interpreted that Adam and Eve would become mortal – they would die at some point in time, but not necessarily at the time when they ate the fruit. This interpretation is echoed later by other authors. In the Book of Wisdom 1:13, are the following words:

For God did not make death, nor does He take delight in the destruction of the living. For God created man for incorruption [immortality], and made him in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world.¹⁰

Another ancient source incriminates Eve in its discussion of this punishment being that of immortality, saying, “Adam said to Eve, ‘Why have you brought destruction among us and brought upon us great wrath, which is death gaining rule over all our race?’”¹¹ The book of 2 Enoch goes further and puts responsibility upon God for having a plan to bring immortality to the human race: “And while he was sleeping, I took from him a rib. And I created for him a wife, so that death might come [to him] by his wife.”¹² These midrashim all considered humans to have been created as immortals, but after the fall, to have had their immortality stripped away.

While earlier midrash of this story reflected that mortality, not original sin, became inherent to the human race, later midrash, perhaps questioning the role of the tree of life in the garden if humans were already immortal, briefly explored the possibility of inherent sinfulness being the punishment of Adam and Eve’s disobedience in the garden. 4 Ezra interprets the sin of Adam as being “ours also who are your descendants”¹³.

For the first Adam, burdened with an evil heart, transgressed and was overcome, as were also all who were descended from him. Thus the disease became permanent...For the grain of evil seed was sown in Adam’s heart from the beginning, and how much fruit of ungodliness it has produced until now, and will produce until the time of threshing comes! ... O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not your alone, but ours also who are your descendants.¹⁴

Also, in *Life of Adam and Eve* we read, “And Adam said to Eve, ‘What have you done? You have brought upon us a great wound, transgression and sin in all our generations,” noting also the blame being placed upon Eve and not upon Adam. From his research of midrash Kugel concludes that, though this idea of the sinful state of Adam and Eve being God’s punishment

⁸ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 13, (n. 7).

⁹ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 14.

¹⁰ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 69-70.

¹¹ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 70, (Apocalypse of Moses 14:2).

¹² Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 71, (2 Enoch (J) 30:17).

¹³ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 71 (4 Ezra 7:118).

¹⁴ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 71, (4 Ezra 3:21-22, 4:30, 7:118).

upon all humankind occurs in other texts of the first century, the Jews later abandoned it, and it was Christianity which developed the doctrine of original sin.¹⁵

Who Is to Blame?

Because the serpent first approached Eve and because Eve was the first to question God's instructions and then taste the forbidden fruit, much of the ancient midrash places responsibility upon Eve for the punishment meted out to humankind. Philo was particularly scathing in his detailed description of all the ills introduced at the making of woman:

Woman becomes for him [Adam] the beginning of blameworthy life. For so long as he was by himself, as accorded with such solitude, he went on growing like to the world and like God... But when woman too had been made...love [*eros*] enters in ... and this desire [*pothos*] likewise engendered bodily pleasure, that pleasure which is the beginning of wrongs and violation of law, the pleasure for the sake of which men bring on themselves the life of mortality and wretchedness in lieu of that of immortality and bliss.

The writing of 2 Enoch is similar in tone, and though no mention is made of the connections to human sexuality, there is the suggestion that there was something inherent to the woman Eve, which made her susceptible to the deception of the devil:

I [God] created for him a wife, so that death might come [to him] by his wife. In such a form he [the devil] entered paradise and corrupted Eve. But he did not contact Adam.¹⁶

The sentiments of Philo and 2 Enoch are seen in less detail in the works of other ancient authors. Sirach wrote succinctly that "From a woman was sin's beginning, and because her, we all die."¹⁷ In the *Syballine Oracles*, is written, "But the woman first became a betrayer to him [Adam]. She gave, and persuaded him to sin in his ignorance."¹⁸ Josephus too, though he does not specify the nature of God's punishment, writes of Eve's culpability, stating as follows:

Thereupon God imposed punishment on Adam for having yielded to a woman's counsel...Eve He punished by childbirth and its attendant pains, because she had deluded Adam, just as the serpent had beguiled her.¹⁹

These ancient interpretations understood the order of the tempted to be an indicator of the level of responsibility for the blame.

Other interpreters, however, saw a hidden motif below the plain meaning of the text which laid more responsibility upon Adam. Since the text in the second story of creation does not mention woman until 3:22, it is reasonable to assume that Eve did not hear the

¹⁵ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 72, (Romans 5:12; I Cor. 15:21-22).

¹⁶ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 76, (2 Enoch(J) 30:17, 31:6).

¹⁷ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 75 (Sirach 25:24).

¹⁸ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 76, (*Syballine Oracles* 1:42-3).

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 76. (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1:49).

instructions from God, but through Adam at a later point in the story. In Genesis 2:16-17, we read the instructions of God to Adam, immediately after placing Adam in the garden of Eden: “Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.”²⁰ In contrast with the text as spoken to Adam by God, the text spoken to the serpent by Eve contains an extra phrase: “We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden. It is only about the fruit of the tree the garden that God said: ‘You shall not eat of it *or touch it*, lest you die.’”²¹ The questions for ancient interpreters seem to have centered around the phrases of God’s original message “on that day that you eat of it you shall die” and Eve’s added detail, “neither shall you touch it.”²²

Some ancient interpreters saw this additional phrase as a hint of Adam’s desire to further protect Eve, and the shrewd use of this added phrase by the serpent to deceive Eve. The writer of *Avot. R. Nat* goes into length to build the scenario of Adam attempting to “make a (protective) hedge for the Torah”²³ by putting extra space between Eve and the forbidden fruits, ensuring that she not eat the fruit by saying God said she should not touch the tree. Sadly, according to Berlin, “Tragically, according to this rabbinic interpretation, this praiseworthy act gave the snake his opening.”²⁴ The writer of *Abot deR. Natan*, narrates a possible following scenario:

He (the serpent) said: ‘Now you say that God has forbidden us to touch the tree. Well, I can touch the tree and not die, and so can you.’ What did the wicked serpent then do? He touched the tree with his hands and feet and shook it so hard that some of its fruit fell to the ground.²⁵

James L. Kugel writes more clearly of how this hint, according to this ancient interpretation, exonerates Eve from responsibility, saying that, “She did not change God’s words because she did not hear them in the first place.”²⁶ Those among the Jewish community who interpreted the text in this way opened a way forward for women in the future.

The effects of a time when human sin was seen to result from Eve’s choice linger. According to Natalie C. Poltzer, in her article “Misogyny Revisited: The Eve Traditions in *Avot de Rabbi Natan*, Versions A and B”, aggadic expansions already reflect a Jewish understanding of gendered original sin – requiring atonement rituals by the Jewish women. However, the aggadic expansions of this mishnah stipulate a causal connection between women’s obligation to perform these three commandments (blood of *niddah*, the dough offering, and the Sabbath lights) and Eve’s primordial sin. In many of these sources, their performance atones for the sin of Eve, who brought death into the world through her disobedience, by enabling Jewish women to be efficient vehicles of bringing life into the

²⁰ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 15.

²¹ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 15.

²² James L. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 67-71, 76-78.

²³ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 15.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 77.

²⁶ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 78.

world.²⁷ Poltzer quotes a Tehina from European Medieval period for a pregnant woman about to give birth cited by Klirs (126): May the merits of the three mitsves which You have commanded every woman to keep—nide, khale, and hadlokes nyeres—protect me, that I may not—kholile—be punished for khave’s sin, and may I not—kholile—suffer any great pain.²⁸

These interpretations for the Jewish people were left behind and outdated, but appear to have been picked up and continued through the teachings of Paul and others in the New Testament. Though Christianity relies heavily upon earlier Jewish interpretations in New Testament scriptures of I Timothy 2:11-14²⁹ and II Corinthians 11:3³⁰ for the teaching of the story of Eve as a doctrine of original sin, more current Jewish traditions see Eve and Adam as responsible for humankind’s mortality, but not for the sins of the world. As Kugel so succinctly wrote, “...a careful reading of the Bible itself shows that none of these things (Fall of Man or serpent as Devil) are stated explicitly by the text – they are all a matter of interpretation.”³¹ While the ancient interpretations of Eve’s responsibility for original sin are unsupported in modern Jewish interpretations, the words of New Testament scriptures concerning the presence of original sin in connection to Eve help to maintain strong support for the understanding of original sin among fundamentalist Christian communities today.

Modern Interpretations

For Jewish feminist interpretation of Scripture, the text is tightly bound to the power of the male authors who wrote it, and they too point out for women what the text does not say. Susan Niditch writes,

The status-establishing punishments meted out to the man and woman and the social roles they are assigned do reflect the author’s male-oriented worldview, but no weighty accusation of ‘original sin’ brought about by woman is found in the text’. That is a later interpretation from authors with different theologies and worldviews.³²

The male-centric view is worthy of note for any women who have believed that they are easily deceived and unworthy to be considered rational and thoughtful human beings. Current feminist midrash seeks not to deflect the fact that Eve was first to disobey the instructions of God, but instead focuses on what was accomplished through her act of defiance. The last stanza of a poem, entitled “Applesauce for Eve” written by poet Marge Piercy, reads as follows:

²⁷ Naltalie C. Poltzer, “Misogyny Revisited: The Eve Traditions in Avot de Rabbi Natan, Versions A and B” in *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 36, no.2 (2012), 213.

²⁸ Poltzer, “Misogyny Revisited”, 215.

²⁹ I Timothy 2:11-15 in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (2011). “Let a woman learn in silence in full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.”

³⁰ II Corinthians 11:3 in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (2011). “But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”

³¹ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 67.

³² Susan Niditch, “Genesis” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed Carol A Newsom et al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 31.

You are indeed the mother of invention,
the first scientist. Your name means
life. Finite, dynamic, swimming against
the current of time, tasting, testing,
eating knowledge like any other nutrient.
We are all the children of your bright hunger
We are all products of that first experiment,
for if death was the worm in that apple,
the seeds were freedom and the flowering of choice.³³

Also important for this new elevation of Eve's choice is the discussion of the Tree of Life being named in Proverbs 3:18 as Wisdom. Torah, being central to the Jewish faith, is also equated with Wisdom; connections abound between Eve's choosing the Tree of Life and its Wisdom, even if it was at the cost of eventual death.

Both ancient and modern midrash reflect thoughtful interaction with the questions of God's punishment of Adam and Eve, and of who was ultimately to blame. Whether Adam or Eve is more culpable, the point that becomes clearest in the discussions of ancient Jewish midrash is the growing agreement that Adam and Eve's sin did not mean that humanity had inherited their sinfulness; the few teachings of original sin are carried on in modernity by Christian tradition. Modern feminist scholarship reinterprets ancient statements of the responsibility of Eve for sin's entrance into humanity with a consideration of the initiative Eve took to gain the gift of wisdom and choice.

Idit's Pillar - A Monument for Ways of Seeing

The account in Genesis 19:26³⁴, of Lot's wife, Idit,³⁵ turning to a pillar of salt calls for a significant shaping of context. Interpretations of this text range from a literal reading of the text with concern for the reasons it happened, to exploration into whether or not it is still locatable today,³⁶ to a reading of the text as a word image of post-traumatic stress disorder.³⁷ For the Jewish scholar, as has always been, it is the ethical messages which are of greatest importance in this story of a woman who, fleeing her home town, looked back and turned into a pillar of salt.

Ancient Interpretation and Midrash

Traditions of Jewish midrash accept the physical turning to salt in this textual rendering, and focus primarily on Edit's reasons for looking back. According to James L. Kugel, all ancient interpreters agreed that Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt must be a punishment for sin, but there were varied interpretations on what her sin may have been.³⁸

³³ Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash*, 10 (Marge Piercy, "Applesauce for Eve").

³⁴ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 39, (Genesis 19:26, "Lot's wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt.")

³⁵ Tamar Kadari, "Lot's Wife: Midrash and Aggadah," in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. (*Tanhuma* [ed. Buber], *Vayera* 8).

³⁶ Gordan Govier, "Looking back: claims to new Sodom location are salted with controversy," *Christianity Today* 52, No. 44: 15-16.

³⁷ Steven Luger, "Flood, salt, and sacrifice: post-traumatic stress disorders in Genesis" in *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 38, No. 2: 124-126.

³⁸Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 191.

Josephus, in *Jewish Antiquities*, wrote of Lot's wife's sin being her curiosity, stating, "But Lot's wife, who during the flight was continually turning round towards the city, overly curious about it, notwithstanding God's prohibition of such action, was changed into a pillar of salt."³⁹ Other traditional sources record that Edit was punished for seeing the back of Shekinah when she looked back to see if her daughters were following,⁴⁰ and for not giving salt to strangers.⁴¹ The *Targum Neophyti* Gen 19:26 includes a possible defense for the curiosity of Lot's wife being that of concern and attachment for her family, stating, "And since Lot's wife was a descendent of the people of Sodom, she looked back to see what ultimately would happen to her father's house. And she remains a pillar of salt until the time of the resurrection of the dead."⁴² Whether her sin seemed defensible or not, both Josephus and the *Targum Neophyti* Gen 19:26 understand the sin of Lot's wife to be the fact that her personal curiosity won out over obedience to the command of the Lord.

The Jewish view of this text was later re-interpreted by early Christianity, which saw the sin of Lot's wife to be a metaphor for questioning or turning back from following God.

[...] his (Lot's) wife was destined to be a sign, for after leaving with him she changed her mind and no longer agreed, and as a result she became a pillar of salt to this day, that it might be known to all that those who are of two minds and those who question the power of God fall under judgement and become a warning to all generations.⁴³

Augustine also wrote of the sin of Lot's wife being understood in her yearning for things in the past; he wrote, "[She] serves as a solemn and sacred warning that no one who starts out on the path of salvation should ever yearn for the things that he has left behind."⁴⁴ This early Christian re-interpretation of the story of Lot's wife saw her as a symbol related to the loss of salvation that comes from following God.

Another tradition of interpretation saw Edit's sin to be that of inhospitality. Drawing from several ancient interpretive works, Tamar Kadari discusses this tradition in her article, "Lot's Wife: Midrash and Aggadah" (2009),

Jealous of others, she (Idit) offered no hospitality to guests. The angels did not initially want to be her guests, but rather those of her husband, Lot, since he was more righteous (*Num. Rabbah* 10:5); she even tried to bar their entry to the house. Lot's wife divided their house into two parts and told her husband: 'If you want to receive them, do so in your part' (*Gen Rabbah* 50:6).⁴⁵

Kirke de-Rabbi Eliezer too, in *The Book of Legends*, quotes a Rabbi Judah who said, "It was proclaimed in Sodom, 'He who sustains a stranger or a poor and needy person with a morsel

³⁹ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 191, (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1:203).

⁴⁰ Emil G. Hirsch et.al. "Lot" in *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906) (Pirke R. El. l. c.).

⁴¹ Hirsch, et.al. "Lot" in *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906) (Targum pseudo-Jonathan and Gen. R. li. 7).

⁴² Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 191, (*Targum Neophyti* Gen 19:26).

⁴³ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 192, (1 Clement 11:1-2).

⁴⁴ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 192, (Augustine, *City of God* 10.8).

⁴⁵ Kadari, "Lot's Wife", in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. *Jewish Women's Archive*.

of bread is to be burned alive'.⁴⁶ This accepted understanding at the times helps make sense of the following midrash's attempt to make sense of the sin and following judgement of Edit:

BUT HIS WIFE LOOKED BACK FROM BEHIND HIM, AND SHE BECAME A PILLAR OF SALT (Genesis 19:26) – because R. Isaac said, she sinned through salt. On the night that the angels visited Lot, Lot said to his wife, "Give these guests a bit of salt." But she replied, "[Besides entertaining guests], is it your wish to introduce into Sodom another vile custom [that of seasoning their food]?" What did she do? She went around among all her neighbors saying to each, "Give me salt – we have guests," intending thereby to have the townspeople become aware of the presence of guests in her home [and penalize Lot for it]. Hence, SHE HERSELF BECAME A PILLAR OF SALT.⁴⁷

Josephus, in his *Jewish Antiquities*, reflected the teachings he had received regarding the sins of the city of Sodom, indicating God's judgement to have come upon them for their hostility toward strangers:

Now about this time the Sodomites, overly proud of their numbers and the extent of their wealth, showed themselves insolent to men and impious to the Divinity, insomuch that they no more remembered the benefits that they had received from Him, hated foreigners and declined all intercourse with others. Indignant at this conduct, God accordingly resolved to chastise them for their arrogance, and not only uproot their city, but to blast their land so completely that it should yield neither plant nor fruit whatsoever from that time forward.⁴⁸

From this midrash, the reader gets a glimpse of the need for the Jewish interpreters to explain the bizarre and unprecedented punishment placed upon Lot's wife for her seemingly benign though disobedient action of looking back.

These interpretations closely parallel the conclusions drawn by James L. Kugel in his book, *The Bible The Way It Was*. Kugel demonstrates the agreement found in various ancient sources which saw the great sin of Sodom to be that of stinginess, contrasted with the hospitality of Lot, as he learned it from Abraham. Several of these sources include other scripture texts, such as Ezekiel 16:49⁴⁹ and Matthew 10:14-15,⁵⁰ but some of the midrash references this as well. Josephus wrote, "But the angels came to the city of the Sodomites and Lot invited them to be his guests, for he was very kindly to strangers and had learned the lesson of Abraham's generosity."⁵¹ This interpretation regarding inhospitality as the underlying offense of Lot's wife becomes a convincing consideration in light of the need for Jewish interpretation to bring into cohesion all scriptures' texts bearing on any specific story.

⁴⁶ Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash*, 34.

⁴⁷ Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash*, 34-35, (Genesis Rabbah 51:5, 50:4, ibid).

⁴⁸ Thackeray, "Jewish Antiquities IV" in *Josephus With An English Translation*, 95-97.

⁴⁹ Ezekiel 16:49-50. "Behold this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy."

⁵⁰ Matthew 10:14-15. "[Jesus tells his disciples] And if anyone does not receive you... truly I say to you it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town."

⁵¹ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 191, (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 1:200).

Modern Interpretations

Rabbi Marci Bellows poses the questions concerning Lot's wife, "Is she a warning or a monument?" and concludes that she is both – with the intent of calling all who hear her story to look forward to changes, no matter how hesitant or anxious one might be.⁵² This theme, though universal in thought and application, addresses the Jewish mindset of applying the texts of scriptures to the current situation, trusting that the ethics of the text when it was written continue to be turned to fit the context of modernity.

Betsy Torop explores the possibility of Lot's wife's sin being in her wanting to see the destruction of others. Torop cites the words of 15th century Italian commentator Sforno: "The evil will spread to you as if it were following you but will not harm you. However, if you stop to peer [behind you], it will [overtake you] and cleave to you."⁵³ Torop also includes the extended thoughts of a feminist commentator Judith Antonelli:

The notion that watching the violent destruction of others is harmful to oneself. The concept that there are certain things at which one should not look is the antithesis of acceptable behavior in our modern society, which validates voyeurism as a 'normal' activity.⁵⁴

Torop then challenges her Jewish audience to combine their teachings on looking Other in the face, with this teaching of not watching the destruction of another: "Her (Lots wife) tragedy highlights our challenge: to develop our own 'ethic' of observation' and to strive to move beyond voyeurism to an open-eyed view of the world that leads us *l'taken olam* – 'to repair the world'."⁵⁵ Torop's interpretation focuses upon the growing concern of justice for the world, and the stance of involvement for the current Jewish generation.

Recognizing the challenges of the Genesis 19:26 text, Professor Daniel Maoz, in *Aggadic Midrash I: Sample Reader* (2012), explores the text from *Yalkut Shimoni, Vayira 84*. Considering that the Hebrew word for "followed" from this midrash has connotations for discipleship, Maoz concludes from the grammatical sense of this word that Lots wife, Edit, "turned to see if her daughter was responding in obedience to her mother," an act which redeems Edith's actions and "satisfies certain human sensitivities and sensibilities that otherwise are challenged by a potentially problematic text."⁵⁶ Understanding a redemptive interpretation of this text allows for the reader to apply an ethical teaching for oneself.

From the collection of ancient and modern interpretations discussed here, the ethical insights from the story of Lot's wife in Genesis 19:26 are manifold. First, obey the instructions of God as given, even if it involves not looking back at things that are loved. Second, be hospitable to strangers, seeing their needs and offering to feed them a meal and provide a place to rest. Third, with the observation of the sufferings of others comes a

⁵² Rabbi Marci Bellows, "The Lessons of Lot's Wife", www.jewishweek.times (10/10/2013). Accessed June 13, 2017.

⁵³ Michael Torop, "A Pillar of Salt: A Text Study", www.ReformJudaism.org. (11/18/2000). Accessed June 13, 2017.

⁵⁴ Betsy Torop, "An Ethic of Observation", www.ReformJudaism.org. (11/18/2000). (Judith Antonelli, *In the Image of God: A Feminist Commentary on the Torah*).

⁵⁵ Torop, B. "An Ethic of Observation," 2000.

⁵⁶ Daniel Maoz, *Aggadic Midrash I: Sample Reader*. Foreword by Ira Robinson. (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellon Press, 2012), 113-14.

responsibility to live in a way which repairs what is going wrong. And fourth, considering the possibility of compassion being the motivation for Lot's wife's disobedience to God opens our understanding of our own limited sight while following His commands.

Reflections of Thamara in the Story of Dinah

The rape stories of Dinah and Tamar in the Hebrew Scriptures demonstrate a similarity not only in the silence of those to whom the violence was done, but also in the responses of their family members. More midrash has been written concerning the story of Dinah than the story of Tamar, likely because it calls for further explanation of loose ends in the text, such as the question of who were the hero, the victim and the villain in the eyes of God;⁵⁷ these roles are much clearer in the story of Tamar. At least one ancient interpreter was aware of the parallels of the stories of these two women, evidenced in his recording the words of Tamar in his description of Dinah: "She pleaded, 'AND I, WHITHER SHALL I CARRY MY SHAME?' [2 Samuel 13:13]."⁵⁸ Though the stories of Dinah and Tamar are not told through their voices, both tales demonstrate themes of intergenerational punishment, paralyzed fathers, and angry, but justice-seeking brothers.

Intergenerational Punishment

Both the rape of Dinah and the rape of Tamar are understood to be a matter of just consequences for the sins of one of their parents, a concept which is accepted within Jewish culture and taught in Torah. Exodus 34:7 is the first reference for this teaching in the Hebrew scriptures, spoken by the LORD to Moses:

The LORD! The LORD! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generation.⁵⁹

Later references include repetitions of this statement and are found in Numbers 14:7 and Deuteronomy 5:9.

Four different reasons are given in midrash for Dinah's rape to be the punishment for sins of Jacob. Gen. Rabbah 79:8 considers the account of Jacob building an altar at Shalem and calling himself God or his boasting of his own honesty to Lot as being his sins.⁶⁰ A third tradition suggests that Jacob took too long to honor his vow to God to return to Bethel and build an altar.⁶¹ A fourth tradition interprets the account of Jacob & his family crossing the Jabbok river as evidence that Jacob refused to let his brother Esau marry Dinah. This interpretation states that God said to Jacob,

You withheld Dinah from your brother, and, due to her good attributes, she could have reformed him. Since you did not want to give her to Esau, who was circumcised, you are punished through her being taken by one who was uncircumcised (Shechem son

⁵⁷ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 233.

⁵⁸ Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash*, 68, (R. Huna in Genesis Rabbah 80:11).

⁵⁹ Berlin, *Jewish Study Bible*, (Exodus 34:7).

⁶⁰ Tamar Kadari, "Dinah: Midrash and Aggadah", (*Gen. Rabbah* 73:9) (Gen. 33:20; Gen 30:33).

⁶¹ Kadari, "Dinah", (*Lev. Rabbah* 37:1).

of Hamor); you did not give her in legitimate matrimony, therefore you are punished by her being taken by Shechem illegitimately.⁶²

These are the four interpretations linking the rape of Dinah to the sins of her father, Jacob.

There are also two traditions of interpretation linking the rape of Dinah to the sins of her mother, Leah. The first tradition considers Leah's sin to be the way in which she "went out" dressed as a harlot to meet Jacob to call him to her tent; Tamar Kadari summarizes this midrash by saying "for acting in such an immodest manner, she was punished by her daughter behaving in the same fashion when she went out to visit the daughters of the land."⁶³ The second tradition cites the same incident but a different sin. Rather than her sin being immodesty, it is her ungratefulness which resulted in her punishment:

God asked her, Is this the reward for a good deed? Is this the reward of your sister Rachel, who gave you her signs with her husband [that Jacob and Rachel had agreed upon, so that Laban would not be able to deceive Jacob], to spare you embarrassment on your wedding night? As punishment for this behavior, God caused Leah even greater embarrassment with the episode of Dinah.⁶⁴

Not only are Jacob's sins seen to be visited on his daughter Dinah, but also the sins of her mother Leah.

In comparison, Tamar's rape is considered to be a consequence only for the sin of her father, David. According to notes on 2 Samuel 13.1-22 in the *Jewish Study Bible*, "Tamar's rape is seen as punishment for David, corresponding to his adultery: a sexual offense followed by a murder."⁶⁵ Kadari also discusses the midrash on David's sin and the rape of Tamar as one of four punishments brought about by the sin of David:

David sealed his own fate when he said (II Sam. 12:6): "He shall pay for the lamb four times over," and was penalized by the death of four of his children: the first child born to Bathsheba, Amnon, Tamar [who was raped] and Absalom. David also suffered personally as part of this divine recompense: he was afflicted with leprosy for six months, the Sanhedrin separated from him, and the *Shekhinah* (Divine Presence) departed from him (BT *Yoma* 22b).⁶⁶

No mention is made of the sins of Tamar's mother in the midrash, but the connections are clear between Tamar's rape and the sin of David with Bathsheba.

Inactive Fathers

Jacob, the father of Dinah, and David, the father of Tamar, both appear to be paralyzed in bringing about justice for their daughters. While Jacob may have been stymied by multiple expectations for his people as given by their God, David is more likely frozen in his recognition of this event being brought upon Tamar by his own sins.

⁶²Kadari, "Dinah", (*Gen. Rabbah* 76:9; *Tanhuma* [ed.Buber], *Vayishlah*, 19).

⁶³ Kadari, "Dinah", (*Gen. Rabbah* 80:1).

⁶⁴ Kadari, "Dinah", (*Gen Rabati*, *Vayishlah*, p. 168).

⁶⁵ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 626, (n. 2 Samuel 13.1-22).

⁶⁶ Tamar Kadari, "Bathsheba: Midrash and Aggadah." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive.

In the story of Dinah, Jacob “kept silent until they (his sons) came home.”⁶⁷ Perhaps Jacob’s silence was due to uncertainty, as the commentary of Josephus suggests:

When Shechem, the son of the king Hamor, saw her, he stole her away and lay with her, and, being now enamored of her, asked his father to take the girl for his wife. Hamor, agreeing, went to Jacob to request that Dinah now be legally joined to his son Shechem. Jacob, having no way to gainsay because of the standing of the person asking, still *thought it unlawful to marry his daughter to a foreigner*, and asked permission to hold a council on the subject of his request.⁶⁸

The phrase, “having no way to gainsay,” suggests the possibility that Jacob did not know how to bring about justice to a situation that went against the command recorded in Deuteronomy 7:3-6 stating that he should not give his daughters in marriage to foreigners, and the law in Deuteronomy 22:28-29 stating that a rapist was to marry the woman he raped:

(Deuteronomy 7:3-6) You shall not make marriages with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons... For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth.⁶⁹

(Deuteronomy 22:28-29) If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes and lies with her, and they are found, then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman fifty pieces of silver, and she shall be his wife as a result of his having violated her; he may not divorce her all his days.⁷⁰

It seems likely that Jacob may have wished to accept Shechem’s offer of marriage for his daughter Dinah, but was also aware of the command to not be married to foreigners, resulting in his hesitation about taking action without consulting his sons.

Uncertainty or not, Jacob’s passive response calls to mind the silence of David following the rape of his daughter Tamar. Tamar herself knew what her rights were according to Assyrian laws, and begged her rapist and half-brother Amnon to ask David for permission to marry her. Instead, Amnon refused and ordered her to go away instead. Genesis 13:21 reads, “When King David heard about all this, he was greatly upset.” In notes of *Jewish Study Bible*, are found the following words: “David is greatly upset, but he does not act; as the story unfolds, this inaction is a clear criticism of David.”⁷¹ Josephus provides the following reason for David’s inability to bring Amnon to justice for causing such desolation in the life of his half-sister: “Now when her father David learned of this, he was grieved by what had happened, but, as he loved Amnon greatly, - for he was his eldest son - he was compelled not to make him suffer.”⁷² As Amnon’s father and the king of Israel, David could have applied pressure of varied kinds to bring about the marriage of Tamar to Amnon, but it

⁶⁷ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, *Jewish Study Bible*, 64. (Genesis 34:5).

⁶⁸ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 237, (Josephus *Ant.* 1.337-38)

⁶⁹ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 237 (Deut. 7:3-6)

⁷⁰ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 235 (Deut. 22:28-29).

⁷¹ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 627.

⁷² Thackeray, “Jewish Antiquities IV” in *Josephus With An English Translation*, 453.

appears from scripture that he did not do so, considering first his love for Amnon rather than his duty to his daughter.

Angry, Justice-Seeking Brothers

The silence and inaction of the fathers Jacob and David stands in stark contrast with the immediate anger and action of Dinah's brothers Simeon and Levi, and Tamar's brother Absalom. Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi, reference Shechem's rape of Dinah as not only sin against Dinah and their family honor, but also against all of Israel. Whether an exaggerated cause or not, it certainly made them feel justified in incapacitating an entire city of males through circumcision and then massacring them at their weakest.⁷³ The address of Jacob, on his death bed, gives more light to his feelings about the extreme measure his sons took to revenge the sin done against Israel and his daughter, Dinah.

Simeon and Levi are brothers, weapons of violence are their stock-in-trade. Into their company let me not come, in their assembly let me not rejoice. For in their anger, they killed a man; and when in a good mood, they maimed an ox! Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their wrath – how unyielding! I will divide them up in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.⁷⁴

Louis H. Feldman discusses the reasons ancient midrash places the fault of the massacre in Shechem's town in the hands of only Simeon and Levi:

For apologetic reasons, since Jacob was identified as the ancestor of the Jewish people, Josephus takes care to add the extra-biblical detail (Ant. 1.340) that Simeon and Levi acted without their father Jacob's permission in massacring the Shechemites, and that Jacob was stricken with consternation (EKAXQ I) at the magnitude (4uyF_Oog) of the deeds of Simeon and Levi and was angry with them (Ant. 1.341)⁷⁵

If their own father considered their response to be violent than was merited, it calls into question the character of Simeon and Levi in their revenge of Shechem's injustice toward Dinah.

As in the case with Dinah's brothers, the immediate response of Absalom, Tamar's other brother, upon hearing of her rape by Amnon, was hatred for Amnon.⁷⁶ And once again, the anger and action of his son stands in contrast with the inaction of Tamar's father, David. 2 Samuel 13:21 reads, "When King David heard about all this, he was greatly upset. Absalom did not utter a word to Amnon, good or bad; but Absalom hated Amnon because he had violated his sister Tamar,"⁷⁷ and in the record of Josephus, "in secret waited for a favourable opportunity to take vengeance for his crime."⁷⁸ It is to be understood that two years later, when Absalom kills David's son Amnon, it is justice visited upon David for the murder of

⁷³ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 65-66, (Genesis 34:24-29).

⁷⁴ Kugel, *The Bible As it Was*, 234 (Genesis 49:5-7).

⁷⁵ Louis H. Feldman. "Philo, Pseudo-Philo, Josephus, and Theodotus on the rape of Dinah" in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 94, No. 2 (2004), pp. 253-277. (University of Pennsylvania Press).

⁷⁶ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 627 (Genesis 13:22).

⁷⁷ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 627 (Genesis 13:2—22).

⁷⁸ Thackeray, "Jewish Antiquities IV" in *Josephus With An English Translation*, 453.

Bathsheba's husband Uriah, many years earlier.⁷⁹ Josephus attempts to defend the silence of David by writing that David "had the intention of sending for his son Absalom, not that he might be punished on his return, but in order that he might be with him, for in the course of time his anger had abated;"⁸⁰ however, this is not stated in original biblical texts. In fact, the text of Genesis 14:23-33 indicates a continued strained relationship between David and Absalom, further supporting evidence for David's continued shame at what transpired between Amnon and Tamar, and his inability to mete out justice for Tamar:

And Joab went at one to Geshur and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. But the king said, "Let him go directly to his house and not present himself to me." ... Absalom lived in Jerusalem two years without appearing before the king. Then Absalom sent for Joab, in order to send him to the king ... Absalom replied to Joab, "I sent for you to come here; I wanted to send you to the king to say [on my behalf]: '...Now let me appear before the king; and if I am guilty of anything, let him put me to death!'"⁸¹

Absalom continues to give his father David a chance to take responsibility for the grief of Tamar, but there is no indication that this happens, and Absalom's rebellion toward his father's inaction continues to escalate. The rape of Tamar and David's lack of justice is presented in Hebrew Scripture as the catalyst for Absalom's rebellion against his father.

Modern Midrash to Balance Ancient Midrash

Ancient midrash repeatedly points to Dinah as being responsible for the fact that Amnon raped her, and modern midrash seeks to bring balance to this reflection of male-dominated text. The following midrash is harsh to our modern minds, but an important example to note in considering the role of gender in interpretation:

She brought upon herself her violation by Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, who is called a serpent, and he bit her; [...] THEN GOD BLESSED THEM, AND GOD SAID TO THEM: [BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY, FILL THE EARTH]AND SUBDUE HER (Genesis 1:28). The man subdues the woman, and the woman does not subdue the man. But, if she walks about a lot and goes out into the marketplace, she finally comes to a state of corruption, to a state of harlotry. And so you find in the case of Jacob's daughter Dinah. All the time that she was sitting at home, she was not corrupted by transgression; but, as soon as she went out into the marketplace, she caused herself to come to the point of corruption.⁸²

Modern midrash writers are calling out this kind of patristic interpretation, and pointing to the fact that the writers of the biblical texts were male, and thereby did not show adequate understanding or compassion toward the victim, Dinah, in this story. Many feminist scholars, like Naomi Mara Hyman, are now asking, "How might these midrashim have differed had women been part of the process?"⁸³ Feminist interpretation also seeks to add in the voices

⁷⁹ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 627 (note. 13:23-39).

⁸⁰ Thackeray, "Jewish Antiquities IV" in *Josephus With An English Translation*, 457.

⁸¹ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 630.

⁸² Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash*, 68, (Midrash Tanhuma 8:12).

⁸³ Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash*, 67.

of women who have been silent in their biblical text, as is the case with Dinah. Following is an example of what may have changed in the text had Dinah been allowed to speak:

Why did my father blame me? I was as innocent as the virgin land we had settled [...] How could he think I would invite anyone to forcibly enter my body! [...] They wouldn't let it rest. It rankled and festered like an open wound that would not heal [...] My two older brothers, Shimon and Levi, came to me full of plans. They explained their strategy. They were doing it for me [...] "Who cares?" I asked. "Will killing bring about absolution? Will it restore my innocence? Will it free me to love? Will it free me of the fear of being hurt again?" [...] Their plan succeeded. They avenged my honor. It was over for them, but not for me. I lie awake at night. Was it the right thing to do? So many lives lost! For what!⁸⁴

This example demonstrates how the inclusion of the woman's voice within the midrash can introduce new possibilities for interpretation of patriarchal biblical texts. The story need not change, but the level of ethical insight is deepened and made more applicable to the lives of women in Judaism today.

The themes of intergenerational punishment, silent fathers, and angry brothers are developed around the stories of Dinah and Tamar in the male-centric view of biblical authors. In recent feminist interpretation, however, new themes are developing, including that of giving voice to the experiences of the women in the stories. The stories of Dinah and Tamar in the Hebrew Scriptures function as part of a narrative that is not their story alone – though the sins against them were tragic, they function as secondary characters in the narratives of judgement of the sins of their parents, the hesitations of their fathers, and the retaliation of their brothers. But their stories still matter and are reflected in the specifics of the laws Israel written down to protect the women of Israel from defilement and desertion.⁸⁵ For though God promises that the sins of the fathers can be visited upon their children up to four generations, He also promises that he extends kindness to a thousand generations, and Dinah and her family and Tamar and her family are known and judged by Him.

Chapter 4: Miriam Ha-Neviah, the Prophetess

Following the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, Miriam, who had protected Moses at birth from death of boy babies ordered by Pharaoh of Egypt, re-enters Hebrew Scriptures in a much more prominent role. The reader wonders what role she played between the years of her brother's entrance to Egyptian culture and his leading the exodus out of Egypt; what could all be unpacked from the words of the prophet Micah's reflection: "And I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam."⁸⁶ Exodus 15:20-21 describes Miriam as a prophetess and a worship leader for the women. Various midrashim sources shed light on how Miriam's roles as worship leader and prophetess were viewed by her own Jewish people.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 68-71.

⁸⁵ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, (Leviticus 18:9) "The nakedness of your sister – your father's daughter or your mother's whether born into the household or outside – do not uncover their nakedness." (Deuteronomy 22:28) "If a man comes upon a virgin who is not engaged and he seizes her and lies with her, and they are discovered, the man who lay with her shall pay the girl's father fifty [shekels of] silver and she shall be his wife. Because he has violated her, he can never have the right to divorce her."

⁸⁶Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 1202 (Micah 6:4).

Miriam as Worship Leader

Following the event of Moses leading the children of Israel in the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15, Miriam is recorded to have taken her timbrel in her hand, and being followed by the women in a dance with timbrels, she then chanted the following words of song: “Sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.” Miriam’s text seems at first glance to be merely a repetition of the text of Moses, bringing about reflection on whether women sang separate from the men of Israel. This is the opinion of Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, who wrote the following:

AND MIRIAM SANG UNTO THEM [Exodus 15:21]. Scripture tells that just as Moses recited the song for the men, so Miriam recited the song for the women: SING YE TO THE LORD, FOR HE IS HIGHLY EXALTED, ETC. [ibid.].⁸⁷

Ephraem in *Commentary on Exodus 15:3* agrees, saying, “The people were divided into two groups on that day, so that they might sing the wondrous hymn to Him who split the sea and drowned their oppressors on that day. Moses led the men in singing and Miriam the women.”⁸⁸ Perhaps so, but it is also possible that Miriam had a more specific purpose in mind. Moshe Reiss quotes Toveh Cohen in “Miriam Rediscovered,” positing that Miriam’s version of the song was a “non-elitist religious rite... transforming the magnificent but incomprehensible prophetic song (led by Moses) into a chant easily learned by those who heard it.”⁸⁹

It is helpful to note several characteristics of both versions that demonstrate the possibility of Miriam’s non-elitist changes. Moses’ version begins with the personal pronoun I, whereas Miriam skips the reference to herself and immediately makes it an invitation to the group to sing to the LORD for his victory. The lengthy song of Moses references actions and imagery of Ugaritic poetry of the Late Bronze Age⁹⁰ – it is a loftier and more educated language formation – likely difficult to connect with for a people raised as slaves.

There is also, however, later midrash concerning a different song text sung by Miriam and the women, based on a fragment found in the Dead Sea scrolls, which is translated as follows:

You have put to shame...
For You are clothed [?] in majesty
Great are You, savior are You...
The enemy’s hope has perished, and he is forgotten...
They have been lost in the mighty water, the enemy...
Praise to the heights... You gave...
Who does gloriously.⁹¹

This new text talks about the enemy being lost in the mighty water, but since the fragment is so small, it can only be speculated that it was the new song of Miriam and the women.

⁸⁷ Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash*, 90, (Shirata 10:58-65, in Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael).

⁸⁸ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 350, (Ephraem, *Commentary on Exodus 15:3*).

⁸⁹ Moshe Reiss, “Miriam Rediscovered” in *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 38.3 (July-September 2010).

⁹⁰ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 127.

⁹¹ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 351.

Interesting to note, according to the research of Simcha Paull Raphael,⁹² there is no midrashim on Miriam's drumming and dancing at the Red Sea, indicating that this currently powerful text for Jewish feminists⁹³ did not catch the attention of early male midrash writers. They seem to be mostly interested in her connections with Aaron and by her role as a prophetess.⁹⁴ Much of the midrash discusses the likelihood that Miriam began prophesying before the birth of Moses, since she is named only as the sister of Aaron. An example follows,

And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took etc. The 'sister of Aaron' and not the sister of Moses! – R. Amram said in the name of Rab, and according to others it was R. Nahman who said in the name of Rab: It teaches that she prophesied while she yet was the sister of Aaron only.⁹⁵

Rashi was the only one who took note of the presence of the timbrels in the desert. He wrote, "A Timbrel. This is a kind of instrument. *In dance with timbrels*. The righteous women of that generation were so confident that God would perform a miracle for them that they brought timbrels with them from Egypt."⁹⁶ It is possible that Miriam's prophetic call to the women to play their timbrels and dance in celebration became the model for the victory dances performed by Jewish women in later history. Deborah, another prophetess, is later recorded in scripture as singing a victory song, and unnamed groups of women danced after battles in Judg. 11:24 and I Sam 18:6.

Miriam as Prophetess

The Hebrew word for prophetess (*nebiah*) is the feminine form of the prophet (*nabi*), meaning to be a spokesperson or inspired person.⁹⁷ The description of Miriam as prophetess in Exodus 15:20 is the first mention in the Tenach of someone (male or female) having a prophetic spirit.⁹⁸ Numbers 12:2 demonstrates that Miriam herself understood her role with the Israelite people to be connected to hearing the words of God, when she, along with Aaron, said, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?"⁹⁹ It is clear that the writers of the biblical text saw value in Miriam's role in leadership alongside her brothers, Moses and Aaron.

The words of Miriam in Numbers 12:2, though demonstrating Miriam's public role as a prophetess among her people, brought about punishment by the Lord, and midrash explores the reasons that may be linked to her punishment. In *Midrash on Psalms*, the following connections are made with other scriptures:

⁹² Simcha Paull Raphael, "Miriam Took Her Timbrel Out and All the Women Danced: A Midrashic Motif of Contemporary Jewish Feminism," *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* Winter 2010 7 No. 2, p. 5-6 (*Legend of the Jews*, ed Louis Ginzberg; *Sefer Ha-Agadah*, ed Bialik and Ravnitsky; *Ishai HaTanakh*, published in English as *Encyclopedia of Biblical Personalities*).

⁹³ Raphael, "Miriam Took Her Timbrel Out," 1-2.

⁹⁴ Raphael, "Miriam Took Her Timbrel Out," 6-7 (ref Babylonian Talmud Megila 14a; Genesis Rabbah 80:10; Exodus Rabbah 1:17; Rashi on Exodus 15:20; Ramban on Exodus 15:20).

⁹⁵ Raphael, "Miriam Took Her Timbrel Out," 6, (Babylonian Talmud Sota 12b).

⁹⁶ Raphael, "Miriam Took Her Timbrel Out," 7, (Rashi on Exodus 15:20).

⁹⁷ <http://www.biblehub.com>.

⁹⁸ Reiss, "Miriam Rediscovered," 1.

⁹⁹ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 293.

The Rabbis say: The words SUFFER NOT THY MOUTH TO BRING THY FLESH INTO GUILT [Ecclesiastes 5:5] are addressed to Miriam. As soon as she spoke against Moses, she became leprous, for it is said MIRIAM AND AARON SPOKE AGAINST MOSES [Numbers 12:1]. And what happened to her? AND BEHOLD MIRIAM BECAME LEPROUS, WHITE AS SNOW [ibid., 12:10]. NEITHER SAY THOU BEFORE THE MESSENGER [Ecclesiastes 5:5]: before Moses. WHEREFORE SHOULD GOD BE ANGRY AT THY VOICE [ibid.], the voice that Miriam let escape from her mouth against Moses the righteous. AND DESTROY THE WORK OF THY HANDS [ibid.] – that is, destroy the merit of her timbrel-playing, of which it is said AND MIRIAM THE PROPHETESS, THE SISTER OF AARON, TOOK A TIMBREL IN HER HAND [Exodus 15:20].¹⁰⁰

In another midrash, *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 6:12, the same two actions of Miriam are contrasted in the following way:

So when God waged war at the Red Sea, Miriam chanted a song, and she was named prophetess, as it is said, AND MIRIAM THE PROPHETESS...TOOK...[Exodus 15:20]. When however, she slandered her bother, God commanded that she should be sent to the mines, as it is said, AND MIRIAM WAS SHUT UP [Numbers 12:15].¹⁰¹

Miriam's questioning of Moses' authority was seen by ancient interpreters as possibly negating her positive influence as a prophetess among Israel.

Comparing Miriam's music and dancing with other prophets in Hebrew Scriptures, Reiss references Cohen's ponderings on other biblical texts where prophets are recorded as employing song and dance to speak for the LORD and the people. In Samuel 10:5ff, Samuel explains to Saul after his anointing that as he approached the Hill of God, a band of prophets would come down from the shrine, and "preceded by lyres, timbrels, flutes, and harps, and they will be speaking in ecstasy."¹⁰² Reiss also references the dance performed by the prophets of Baal in I Kings 18:26, demonstrating that dance (and likely drumming) were a part of the work of prophets in the days of Israel.

Midrashic elaborations have been written concerning the character of Miriam, and one tells the story of childhood prophesy, before the birth of Moses. In this midrash, Miriam predicts to her parents, "My mother is destined to bear a son who will redeem Israel."¹⁰³

'Seven prophetesses'. Who were these? – Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda, and Esther. 'Miriam', as it is written, And Miriam the prophetess the sister of Aaron. Was she only the sister of Aaron and not the sister of Moses? - R. Nahman said in the name of Rab: [She was so called] because she prophesied when she was the sister of Aaron [only] and said, My mother is destined to bear a son who will save Israel. When he was born the whole house was filled with light, and her father arose and kissed her on the head, saying, My daughter, thy prophecy has been fulfilled. But when they threw him into the river her father arose and tapped her on the head, saying, Daughter, where is thy prophecy? So it is written, And his sister stood afar off

¹⁰⁰ Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash*, 90-91, ("The Midrash on Psalms 52:1," in *the Midrash on Psalms*).

¹⁰¹ Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash*, 91, (Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:12, in *The Midrash*).

¹⁰² Berlin, *Jewish Study Bible*, 565, (I Samuel 10:5).

¹⁰³ Reiss, "Miriam Rediscovered," 1, (Megillah 14 a).

to know; (Exodus 2:4) to know, [that is,] what would be with the latter part of her prophecy.¹⁰⁴

In other midrash, closer to the biblical text, interpreters noticed that the second time the Israelites have no water to drink seems to occur as a result of Miriam's death in Numbers 20:1.¹⁰⁵ Interpreters began calling the rock that moved with the Israelites to provide them with water, The Well of Miriam, in honor of her role as prophetess in the Israelite community. The interpreter in *Targum Neophyti Num 21:1*, considered Miriam's death to have been pivotal in the decision of king Arad to go to battle with Israel: "And the king of Arad heard... that Miriam the prophetess had died, thanks to whose merit the well had sprung up, and that the well was hidden away."¹⁰⁶ In these early midrash, ancient interpreters, though they did not give much attention to the dancing of Miriam and the women in worship, considered Miriam's role as a prophetess among her people to have great weight and significance.

Modern Interpretations

Feminist scholars today are filling the gaps of earlier midrash.¹⁰⁷ writing songs and poems for Shabbat liturgy to honor the worship ritual introduced in Hebrew Scriptures. These written texts are giving rise to other art forms, one of which is the painted tambourines with images of Miriam leading women in dance, often given to Jewish girls at their Bat Mitzvahs. Miriam's Well Healing services are also being held by mainstream Jewish Federations and Conservative synagogues.

There is another midrash approach to the story of Miriam – one in which she is remembered for the loneliness of her role as female prophet in the developing Israelite nation, and the questions this may have incited. The following words of Naomi Graetz, write Miriam was speaking, reflect this sentiment:

It was the morning of her third day of banishment. Why must those who are diseased expiate their sin by spending the entire period alone – separated from others similarly afflicted? What kind of God demands that one endure this mental and physical pain in a state of loneliness?... Why wasn't Aaron similarly afflicted?... Perhaps I wasn't chosen because I am a woman. Is it God who does not want women to worship Him? Or is it those who claim to speak in His name, who control the power, who do not want women to worship Him?... Is it Moses or God who makes these decisions? Does it matter? It does! For this is not the God I left Egypt to worship... It is lonely here. Four more days to go.¹⁰⁸

In Raphael's collection of more modern midrash poetry and songs in honor of Miriam's story, she reflects upon the last two stanzas of the following song text, *Miriam – By The Shores*:

Enticed to sing, drawn to move

¹⁰⁴ Raphael, "Miriam Took Her Timbrel Out," 6, (Babylonian Talmud Megila 14 a).

¹⁰⁵ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 363-364. (Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities*, 20:8; *Targum Neophyti Num 21:1*; *Fragment Targum Num 20:1*; *Sedar Olam 10*.)

¹⁰⁶ Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 365.

¹⁰⁷ Raphael, "Miriam Took Her Timbrel Out," 1.

¹⁰⁸ Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash*, 92-93, (The Discredited Prophetess, Naomi Graetz, in *Melton Journal*, 1987, 10.

Mesmerized by such emotion^[1]
The men saw us reach out our hands
Stretching across the ocean.
As they watched, and they clapped, they began to sway
Drawn to ride the wave^[2]
and all our brothers began to dance^[3]
They dance with us today!

Whereas “first wave feminism” spoke predominantly to women, and emphasized the challenges of women’s experience in the 1960s and 1970s, over time men were influenced and often inspired to support the clarion call of feminism, in general, and feminist Judaism in particular. . . This image reflects a new vision of the Jewish life in which supportive men and powerful women collaborate and co-participate in the divine service and in the collective transformation of Judaism.¹⁰⁹^[4]

The works of Raphael and her feminist contemporaries reflect the second wave of feminism in Judaism, in which men are invited back into the exploration of the texts for women in their time.

Miriam’s role as a worship leader and a prophetess to the Jewish people is one that takes on greater significance over time, especially for Jewish women. It is evident that, as Simcha Paull Raphael writes, “the motif of Miriam the prophetess... has come to life in our times.”¹¹⁰

Conclusion

This paper has explored the midrash, both ancient and modern, of five Israelite women, with the goal of hearing their voices between the lines as told by the men in their lives. In doing so, the stories of Isshah, Idit, Dinah, Thamara, and Mariamme call us to sit with the universal inner themes of women: pursuit of wisdom, longing for home, unheard pleas for help, and marginalized gifting.

There is, unfortunately, within some modern feminist biblical interpretations, a cynicism which cuts down upon the male gender for its use of power and voice in the writing of scriptures. This negative energy is not conducive to entering the dialogue around the ethics of ancient scriptures for a current faith community. The authors of Torah were fulfilling a mandate given to them by God, and though their voices marginalized the voices of women, many stories of the influence of female gender remains. And what remains is enough to invite feminist scholars to engage creatively and passionately in writing modern midrash, without needing to forcefully turn over the imbalance of power in the conversation. Hyman provides the following traditional image as a way to think about the possibilities waiting in feminist biblical scholarship:

Some hold that the Torah was written in black fire on white fire, and that the white spaces around the black letters hold meanings that we have yet to uncover...It has also been said, more recently, that we have received only half of the Torah, because the Torah as we know it was written by men and the women’s Torah has yet to be

¹⁰⁹ Raphael, “Miriam Took Her Timbrel Out,” 10-11.

¹¹⁰ Raphael, “Miriam Took Her Timbrel Out,” 1.

revealed. I like to think that the women's Torah can be found in the white fire, in the white spaces whose meanings we have yet to uncover, and that a part of each of our souls is still standing at Sinai, ready to receive it.¹¹¹

Whether or not women are writing a new Torah or simply uncovering what has always been there, waiting to be discovered, it remains a sacred work and humbling in its scope.

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¹¹¹ Ibid, xvii.

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