



## Feminist Torah Exegesis

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*Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College reviews various strategies for interpreting Torah texts in the light of feminist concerns.*

### **Feminist Torah Exegesis**

**by Nancy Fuchs-  
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How do feminists  
preach Torah?  
Rabbi Elise  
Goldstein asked  
fifty-four women  
rabbis to  
comment on a  
different parsha,  
the little section of  
Torah that's read in  
the Synagogue.  
I've discovered six  
things in general  
that feminist  
rabbis do. I'll tell  
you about them  
after I say  
something first  
about Jewish  
preaching.

Jewish preaching  
has always tried to

hold tight to the text. The Torah text has been our basic tree of life. The belief of Judaism is that every word, every syllable, every space between the word, every place where one story gets next to another story, everything has something to teach. It's just a matter of asking the right questions of the text. The only answer that's unacceptable in Jewish textual exegesis is: "Oh that doesn't matter! It was just a mistake." The assumption is of meaning. And the name of the game is to find out the meaning. In this manner Torah has grown and changed through the centuries, and preachers have found it infinitely adaptable to their times and needs.

But there has been a big difference between the way people preach from Torah texts before the modern period and today, among progressive Jews anyway. Orthodox Jews still preach the way it was

preached all along. The Orthodox Jews read their meanings back into the text as if that is what the text meant. What we do in more liberal, progressive circles of Jewish exegesis is to distinguish between the plain sense of the text and our own Midrash of it, our own interpretation.

As Jews we live in an American culture in which lots of trees are growing. And you can walk away from a text. Our ancestors didn't have that option. Jews from many centuries did not have a choice. They read Torah because it was often the only text available to them. But we don't have to read our lives back into this particular book, which many of us understand to really be a document from another time and place. Some of us choose to do so. Naomi Goldenberg, for example, is a scholar, a feminist, someone born Jewish. She says: "You know what? The Bible is so

hopelessly sexist,  
it's really  
unsalvageable for  
modern people,  
for modern  
feminists." Such  
feminists leave the  
Bible behind.

Many of us make a  
different choice.  
We see it as our  
sacred text and our  
duty to wrestle.  
And like Jacob, who  
wrestles with the  
angel and says: "I  
will not let you go  
until you bless  
me," we say to  
each text in Torah,  
"I will not let you go  
until you bless me."  
That's what the  
feminist says to the  
Torah text. A rabbi  
named Amy Eilberg  
calls what we do  
"Holy Chutzpah."  
We know that  
sometimes that  
means torturing  
the text. But we  
also know that  
this is a great  
tradition of rabbis  
who have done  
this for centuries.  
They found in the  
text what they  
needed to find,  
and I can give you  
many examples of  
how traditional  
Midrash in the  
Rabbinic period  
just completely  
misread texts in  
the Torah. I'll give  
you one specific  
example. In the  
Torah, there is no

belief in an afterlife. People die and they go to their fathers in the earth, their bodies go to the earth. And the rabbis in the time of Jesus believed fervently in the possibility of the resurrection of the body. That concept was unheard of in Torah. But they read it into Torah. They misread things that the Bible said so that they could find their most cherished beliefs in the text.

A healthy cadre of feminists is doing just that, and what I'll do now is tell you what they do. Strategy one is: Notice women's presence in the text. The second strategy is, notice women's absence in the text. A third strategy is to critique texts from a feminist perspective and discover internal repair. "Repair" is a word that I'm using in quotes because I'm relating it to a Hebrew word, tikkun, which means to repair. Jews today talk about Tikkun Olam, repair of the broken world. But

tikkun is really a fixing, a healing, and sometimes what feminists find in Torah texts is that something may be deeply sexist from our point of view, but that the text has an internal critique about that very presupposition. We sometimes think that critique is in the Torah because the God part is in there. And that delights us.

A fourth strategy is to critique texts from a feminist perspective and offer explicitly external repair. You can give a whole sermon on something that is bluntly no good from our perspective in Torah, but then offer from the spirit of Torah, a repair of it from our perspective. A fifth strategy is, highlight a woman's issue in a text, something that nobody ever saw before. And the sixth strategy is to highlight what we call women's values. What are women's values? Are there such values? Are they feminist values?

Let's notice the first strategy -- women's presence in the text. When we start to read Torah we say it is patriarchal. It comes from a time when women were bottom of the barrel. And then we are surprised, lo and behold to our delight, a lot of women are in Torah. Sometimes they don't do as much as we'd like. In Jewish feminist circles we hear all the time about Miriam. We now have Miriam's tambourine, a new Jewish ritual object, because Miriam held the tambourine when they crossed the Red Sea. So artists make illuminated tambourines, and people use them in worship. But when you look in the Torah, Miriam is hardly mentioned. We've lifted her up, beyond where she was in the text.

On the other hand, when you read Genesis, there are quite a few women. And a great deal of feminist preaching is based on noticing women. One example takes notice of a non-Jewish woman,

Hagar. Hagar is a phenomenally important person. And in this little text from Rabbi Michal Shekel, we find out why:

Hagar  
gives God a  
name.  
Abram has  
never done  
this nor has  
anyone  
else.  
Throughout  
chapters  
of the  
Torah,  
Abram  
needs signs  
to substanti  
ate his  
covenant  
with God.  
Hagar is  
somehow  
more  
accepting,  
more comf  
ortable with  
God. Hagar  
accepts her  
encounter  
for what it  
is. She  
takes the  
initiative  
and she  
names God.  
What  
courage!  
Hagar  
names God  
"El Roi,"  
God who  
sees me.  
This is in  
response to  
God's  
naming her



child  
Ishmael,  
which  
means,  
“God  
hears.” In  
naming  
God, Hagar  
affirms that  
God sees as  
well as  
hears.

So, here we have  
the story of  
Ishmael, who in  
tradition we  
understand to be  
the father of the  
Arab people, the  
brother of Isaac,  
who’s banished  
along with his  
mother, Hagar.  
And this Torah  
commentator  
notices that Hagar  
says: I’m going to  
give you a name  
God. You who see  
me. And that’s the  
only time in the  
Torah, until that  
moment, that  
anyone had dared  
to name God. And  
it is the only time  
in the Torah,  
totally, that a  
woman names  
God.

Strategy number  
two: Notice  
women’s absence  
in the text.  
Traditional  
Midrash says that  
a black fire is on  
white fire in the

Torah. And that as much truth is in the white fire as in the black fire. The black fire is the letters and the white fire is the white paper around it, the parchment. Rabbi Dayle Friedman notices a story that has no women in it at all. It is one of the stories that is hard to preach, the story of Aaron's sons' deaths. The chief priest, Aaron, had two sons, Nadab and Abihu, and these sons brought strange fire to God. And God didn't like it, so he killed them. This story is used to show that we shouldn't have creative liturgy. We don't know what this is doing in Torah. But the next thing that happens is that Aaron is very sad, obviously, because he's lost both of his sons. So it kind of ends, and it's strange because we don't get much.

Right after the sons died the next thing that happened in the text is that God gives the instructions for the sin offering for Yom Kippur. Rabbi Friedman says:

What a lovely juxtaposition. Your sons die and the next thing God does, rather than giving rachamans, compassion, God is telling them: "and you've sinned so much that on Yom Kippur you have to do this, this and this." So she is saying: maybe if we had heard a woman's voice we would have had a different response from God:

... maybe,  
just maybe  
if women  
had told  
this story  
instead of  
men, God's  
voice would  
have come  
to lovingly  
console  
Aaron  
rather than  
to offer  
rules and in-  
structions.  
As we  
listen to the  
silence of  
the story,  
for the  
mournful  
voices of  
women, we  
may  
transform  
our under-  
standing of  
loss, of  
grieving  
and of  
healing,

while  
nothing  
could erase  
the loss of  
Nadab and  
Abihu. The  
voices and  
the ways of  
women  
might have  
offered  
solace to  
their  
suffering  
loved ones  
and  
perhaps, by  
extension,  
to bereaved  
men and  
women  
throughout  
the ages.

Friedman created that ex nihilo. She actually studied scholarship about Middle Eastern female grieving rituals, and she knew that there were female griever." Not only that, but in the Middle East today, among Arabs and Jews, you can actually see things that are 2,000 years old. And you see the way women are led in their wailing, in their funerals. There are special women in the community known as the wailers. They lead the other women in

profound visual  
and audible  
expressions of  
grief.

Next, critique text  
from a feminist  
perspective and  
discover internal  
repair: Now we are  
getting more  
subtle. This text is  
not one that will  
lead to lifting up of  
anybody. Rabbi  
Rochelle Robins  
preached on  
Deuteronomy, the  
portion of the text  
in which the land  
of Israel is  
described as  
oozing with milk  
and honey. Your  
translations  
probably say  
flowing, but  
literally the word is  
oozing. And then  
she looks at where  
else we see oozing,  
and where we see  
milk and honey.  
And lo and behold,  
our land is very  
much a female  
body.

So she says a  
biblical tradition  
that personifies  
land and borders  
as women who are  
to be sexually  
desired, and who  
are to be occupied,  
is a challenge for  
our feminist  
sensitivities.  
Deuteronomy

personifies the land as female, and the land is also understood as female, and creates a scenario in masculinized Israelites desires. They consequently prepare themselves to move in and occupy the female body/land. The ambivalent attitude toward desire is expressed in the language of Deuteronomy 6:3, which hints of the duality of desire and revulsion inherent in the male construct of femininity. We're getting into heavy stuff here. This is not Hebrew school material.

Rabbi Robins argues that because land that's oozing with milk and honey in the text, so other beings that are oozing with milk and honey are seen in some of the same ways the land is seen. This equation of women and land and the consequent objectification of women create a situation whereby we see women as able to be either

desired or reviled.

The notion that the Israelites never do enter the land at the end of Deuteronomy leaves us with a powerful message. So Robins turns it around, saying, look where the Torah ends. The sacred book that we read in synagogue is not Joshua. We do not read Joshua in synagogue. It's only in Joshua, the next book, that they get into the land and conquer it. The actual Torah ends at the moment when Moses dies and they are looking out at this non-conquered, non-occupied. And then we go back to Genesis. We finish the last word that Moses died, and then the next thing we read is, "in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," and we read them next to each other and never conquer the land in the synagogue.

This rabbi wants to say, maybe inside the text, they are making their own

internal critique.  
On some level we  
may claim that the  
book of  
Deuteronomy is  
unwilling to have  
us enter the land,  
in those  
circumstances.  
Until the body is  
seen in its  
wholeness, we are  
not ready to enter  
her. Our entering  
must be a  
partnership, a  
gentle and mutual  
ingathering.

Laura Geller finds a  
text that doesn't  
have any repair in  
it. She goes outside  
for the repair. The  
text is about the  
Nida. Nida are the  
laws of  
menstruation. We  
know the text, and  
I do not know what  
you do with it  
because you live in  
a tradition that  
doesn't observe  
these laws. The  
orthodox Jews  
learn here their  
laws of why they  
have to separate  
for the days of the  
menstrual cycle,  
and then the  
woman has to go  
to be cleansed in  
the mikva and  
comes back to her  
husband. So what  
do liberal Jews do  
with this? What do  
feminist Jews do  
with this? One  
thing we can do is



just leave it alone.

For the medieval scholar Nachmanides, it is a mythic category. It's all about defiling, contaminating, a source of contagion. Maimonides, on the other hand, a good guy on this particular issue says it is just a legal prohibition that was originally intended to curb the mythological fears that penetrated our folk traditions from the surrounding pagan cultures.

Laura Geller says, Why don't we reframe the ritual, change the language, transform the community? Let's create a new ritual that will celebrate the holiness present in our lives at this important moment of transition. Let's write a blessing that says, "Thank you God for making me a woman." And when you go to your mother and say, "Mom I just got my first period," we say, "let's say the

blessing." This blessing does not exist in traditional Judaism. It's a play on a traditional Jewish blessing that is said by orthodox Jewish men every morning. They say, "Thank you God for not making me a woman." So it just takes away the word "not," transforming the blessing, transforming the ritual.

Highlight a woman's issue: Rabbi Eileen Schneider looks at the laws of Kashrut. A lot of the Torah is laws, and a lot of our preaching is story and reading new stories. But a lot of it is finding meaning in laws. So the laws of Kashrut are the kosher laws, which foods you can eat and what you cannot eat. In orthodox tradition, they study the laws and figure out how to observe them, and they discuss the ins and outs and the particularities of them. But in our community, those laws are not lived so thoroughly anymore, although

often they are lived in a more modified version. We also want to find more meaning in them. Rabbi Schneider says that she is looking at the question of young girls and eating disorders. And she says: "What are eating disorders about? They are about strange issues of control." And she says Kashrut, the laws of kosher, are also about control and food. With eating disorders the control is internal. There is a sense that if we control our eating we'll be better people. With Kashrut the control is external. And by the way, we don't have to be talking about the pathological end of the spectrum, of people who are in severe eating disorders. We could be talking more generally about our culture's confusion around eating and food.

So let's look at the laws of Kashrut. With Kashrut we have an external control. We are following ancient laws and traditions that define us as a

people. With eating issues there is a lot of external pressure of societal expectations. With Kashrut, for non-traditional Jews, there is a voluntary aspect. A decision to say, "I'm going to let this aspect of my life be ordered by this set of rules that are outside me." Rabbi Schneider says that to keep kosher reminds her at all times that she is Jewish. That she can elevate the act of eating. That she can choose the kinds of controls that she wants to place on herself. That they are controls related to holiness, tradition, Judaism, and ethical concerns. And paradoxically we move from all the stigma that constant media messages have placed on this simple biological necessity. As women, we can feel that we are controlling our Kashrut with food, not food controlling us.

And finally, number six, 'to highlight women's values.' There's a lot of discussion

about what are women's values and if there are women's values, where do we find them in the text. By women's values we don't mean that women are born with a gene for these values. But rather that women's experience has tended to make women, through their life experiences, tend more in these directions. And here is a classic case from Carol Gilligan, that women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship, but they also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care. Human relationship is caring. Woman's place in man's life cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, helpmate, the weaver of those networks of relationships in which she in turn, relies. But while women have thus been taking care of men, men have tended to devalue care.

traditional Jewish Midrash some of you may be familiar with. There is the story of Abraham's taking Isaac to the mountaintop. The next story says that Sarah died. So the rabbis, this is an ancient Jewish Midrash, ask the question, "what's the connection? When did she die?"

The Midrash comes up with an answer. They say, Satan went to Sarah and appeared to her in the guise of Isaac. This is when Abraham is taking Isaac to the mountaintop. When Sarah saw him, she said to him, "my son, what has your father done to you?" And he answers her: "My father took me up hill and down dale, up to the top of a certain mountain. He built an altar, arranged the wood, bound me on top of it, he took the knife to slaughter to me, and if God had not said, 'Don't stretch out your hand,' I would already be slaughtered." And he did not finish the story before

she died.

So the tradition understands that Sarah died out of shock and grief, not because her son had died, but because her husband had been prepared to kill him, if necessary.

So why is this parsha called "life of Sarah"? Rona Shapiro notices that after Sarah's death, Abraham becomes more of a real guy. Maybe he's finally getting it, maybe he's finally read Carol Gilligan after all these years. And so Abraham says, now he's not going to mountaintops and tying up his son for sacrifices. He buys a plot of land, tries to get his son engaged to be married, marries again himself, has more children and dies. So this is a new Abraham, a different Abraham from the one we knew, who was looking for holiness on the mountaintop.

These are a little taste of some of

the six different ways that feminist Torah commentary and preaching is going on.

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