



# 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  
substantiate  
his covenant  
with God.  
Hagar is  
somehow  
more  
accepting,  
more  
comfortable  
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  
instructions.  
As we  
listen to the  
silence of  
the story, for  
the mournful  
voices of  
women, we  
may  
transform  
our understand-  
ing 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 grieverers.” 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.

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.

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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