



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.

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**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 grievers.” 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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