

The Reconstructionist
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FROM THE EDITOR

Among the areas where we search for signs of Jewish renewal are two that have traditionally been barometers of creativity: the development of new rituals and the creation of new midrash. The past few dozen years have seen an explosion of effort and energy in these areas, in a variety of Jewish settings. From formal collections of rituals (such as the new *Rabbi's Manual* of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association[RRA]) to the *havurah* or development of new, home-based ceremonies, contemporary Jews have been the participants and the beneficiaries of a remarkable burst of creativity.

The influence of feminist thinking on the area of ritual development cannot be underestimated. Much of the activity involving ritual began in attempts to develop parallel ceremonies for women that were formerly the domain of men. We think here, for example, of Bat Mitzvah ceremonies (inaugurated by Dr. Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, *z"l*) and the numerous baby-naming rituals that have circulated in a progression from mimeo to xerox and now to electronic mail and internet. We also note the groundbreaking work of the RRA in developing an egalitarian Jewish divorce ceremony.

But feminist thinking soon led us to the awareness that the "life-cycle rituals" of Judaism were primarily, almost exclusively, the life cycle rituals of *male* Jews. Consequently, new ceremonies were created: for menarche and menopause, for example, and for nursing and weaning. We have also witnessed the reclaiming of traditional rituals such as the *mikveh* (ritual bath) for new ceremonies of recovery (from rape, for example).

The awareness that women's ritual life was in need of ritual affirmation soon led to an awareness that other rituals, shared by men and women, had also gone unremarked in Jewish settings: graduation from high school; retirement, job transitions, moving. In these as well as other areas we have seen many new ideas, symbols, and ceremonies brought into play.

Similarly, we have been participants in the resurgence of midrash, the traditional Jewish affirmation of on-going meaning effected through reading traditional texts through contemporary lenses. Much of what separates Jews from each other transpires in the realm of halakhah (Jewish law)—for example, personal status issues such as patrilineal descent, marriage, conversion and divorce. But *aggadah*, or midrash, basing itself on story and experience, can be a binding force that enables Jews to affirm both individual and corporate identity as a consequence of affirming the same story/stories as our own.

Affirming stories does not mean endorsing each of them, of course, anymore than affirming that a rogue or even reprehensible uncle is a member of our family means accepting his behavior. We wrestle with the texts we inherit, across an emotional spectrum of embrace to agony.

Reconstructionist Judaism, in declaring Judaism to be a civilization and Jews to be a people, focuses our attention on what defines our identity. And increasingly, the metaphor for identity is found in the idea of shared stories.

In this issue, we are proud to present fine examples of renewed rituals and renewed midrash. The use of the matriarchal narratives as the basis for so many of the articles in this issue was unplanned, and resulted from the serendipitous submission of thoughtful articles which, remarkably, employed the same narrative stream of Torah as their focus. We believe our readers will gain an insight into the richness of the renewal of Judaism by seeing how many different ways the same stories can be employed in the service of contemporary Jewish expression.

We are also pleased to include several essays reviewing recent publications that partake of the new interest in ritual and midrash.

Our “Vintage Perspectives” segment celebrates the thirtieth anniversary of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), which opened its doors in the fall of 1968. Many of its graduates and faculty have been in the forefront on the renewal of ritual and midrash. May the College continue to thrive and grow for many years to come.

About Future Issues

Our next issue, Spring 1999, will focus on “Caring and Healing.” In coordination with the Reconstructionist Commission on the Role of the Rabbi, which began its work this past winter and plans to issue its report next year, the Fall 1999 issue will turn its attention to new perspectives on the roles of rabbis in contemporary Jewish life.

A colleague recently suggested that *The Reconstructionist* is one of the unknown treasures of our movement, an assessment with which I would not take issue. Yet many people who would enjoy and benefit from receiving this publication do not do so. If you share this belief, and want to share the excitement of the contemporary conversation we call Reconstructionist Judaism, please consider subscribing for a friend, using the convenient subscription form at the back of each issue.

— Richard Hirsh

הַזֶּעֶר לִבָּת מִרְאָה מְאֹד בְּתוּלָה וְאֵינָהּ לֹא
 יָדְעָה וְתֹרֵד הָעֵינָה וְתִמְלֹא כֶּדֶה וְתִעַל
 THE MAIDEN WAS VERY BEAUTIFUL, A
 VIRGIN WHO NO MAN HAD KNOWN.
 SHE WENT DOWN TO THE SPRING,
 FILLED HER JAR, AND CAME UP.
 GENESIS CHAPTER 24, VERSE 16

EACH TIME I PREPARE A PARASHAH

OR HAFTARAH I GO THROUGH A CYCLE OF DISCOVERY

AND GROWTH. IN THE BEGINNING, I REJECT THE TEXT, SOMETIMES DO

BATTLE WITH IT, THEN SLOWLY ALLOW MYSELF TO STUDY ITS FORM AND SUBSTANCE.

FINALLY, I DEVELOP AN INTIMACY WITH IT. IF AT TIMES THIS PROCESS FEELS CHAOTIC AND

ANXIETY PROVOKING, IT IS AT LEAST AUTHENTIC AND HAS RELIEVED ME OF MY OLD FRUSTRATION OF BEING TOLD OF THE GREATNESS OF TORAH INSTEAD OF BEING PERMITTED TO EXPERIENCE IT FOR MYSELF. THE CYCLE STARTS WHEN I FIRST READ A PASSAGE. THE WORDS USUALLY COME OUT DISCONNECTED, FEELING ALIEN AND UNCOMFORTABLE ON MY LIPS. I AM UNSURE OF MYSELF, FINDING THE HEBREW DIFFICULT WITH ITS BIBLICAL VOCABULARY AND GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES. UNFORTUNATELY, THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OFFERS FEW CLUES TO INTENT AND MEANING, AND WHAT LITTLE I DO UNDERSTAND SEEMS TO EXIST OUTSIDE OF MY EXPERIENCE. I SHUDDER, WONDERING IF THIS IS HOW EVE FELT ON LEARNING THAT ALL CREATION HAD BEEN NAMED BEFORE HER BIRTH. THAT SHE WOULD HAVE TO NEGOTIATE TERRAIN AND HALLOW TRUTHS THAT HAD BEEN DEFINED BY OTHER. THE THOUGHT GNAWS AT ME, "YOU ARE UNQUALIFIED TO CHANT THE TEXT." SLOWLY, A VISION OF WHO IS QUALIFIED EMERGES AND THAT PERSON DOES NOT LOOK LIKE ME AND THAT PERSON DOES NOT FUMBLE OVER WORDS AND MEANINGS LIKE ME. ABRUPTLY, AS IF RESPONDING TO A DARE, I SING THE VERSES BEFORE ME WITH THE UNABASHED FULLNESS OF MY VOICE, ADDING RESONANCE TO THE TEXT. EXHILARATED, I CONTINUE. OVER, AND OVER, AND OVER AGAIN I PERSIST,

CHANTING UNTIL MY MOUTH STINGS FROM THE BRANCHED TEXTURES OF THE

HEBREW LETTERS. RESTRAINT REMOVED, THE WORDS BREATHE, STRETCH

AND SWIRL THROUGHOUT MY BEING, FREE TO DANCE IN MY HEART

AND HEAD, GLADDENED TO FIND PARTNERS IN THE MEMORIES

AND GHOSTS THAT LIVE THERE. I AM A WOMAN LIVING

BETWEEN CHAOS AND CREATION, AND FOR ME THE

HOLINESS OF TORAH IS STUDDED WITH BLAZING

COTILLIONS AND THE RIPENESS OF THE MOON,

ENCOUNTERS WITH SLY SMILES AND THE

HEAVY SCENT OF MYRRH. GILA GEVIRTZ

To Dare in the Name of the Divine

BY GILA GEVIRTZ

Every year, on the 15th day of the Jewish month of Nisan, we are urged not only to retell but also to embellish the story of the Exodus. The more we do so, we are told in the Passover haggadah, the more we are to be praised. Such was the standard set by the ancient rabbis, not only for the retelling of the Passover story but *all* Bible stories. Even the drama of Mount Sinai, recorded in luxurious detail in the book of Exodus, was embroidered by these sages. By their account, every Jewish soul that ever was and would be was present as God simultaneously revealed the Torah to the community as a whole and to each soul according to its individuality. I share this midrash when I teach, and weave my own embellishment: The study of Torah awakens the memories of our souls, and until each of us has shared those memories with the community, Revelation will remain incomplete.

In this way, I not only establish the spiritual context for our gathering but also the operating assumptions that will guide us: (1) Everyone has the capacity for personal *and* authentic understanding of Torah; and (2) The mitzvah of *talmud Torah* is one of dynamic interaction between text, reader, and community.

Unfortunately, these were not the operating assumptions of my youth. On the contrary, I grew up thinking that the wisdom of Torah had to be mediated by a mind greater than mine. Indeed, at family *simhahs* when my cousins and uncles delivered *divrey Torah*, I assumed that it was my limited intelligence rather than their limited imaginations that left me uninspired.

A Source of Inspiration

Later on, as an art student I yearned to create Jewish art. But I quickly

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learned that the genre was defined by images of black-coated men embracing the Torah. Still uninspired, I painted nudes, their arms ample but empty. More time passed. I completed my 20s, trekked through my 30s and entered my 40s. Finally, at 43, I was not only able to envision myself as someone who had encountered God at Sinai but also as someone who could creatively render that moment. The ancient rabbis were my inspiration.

I studied their teachings and was stunned by their creativity and *hutzpah*—their flair for the daring in the name of the Divine. For, in their passion for Torah, the rabbis sired narrative midrash. With faith and abandon, they transformed textual breaches and anomalies into opportunities for humor as well as enlightenment. Setting modesty aside, they spoke in God's name, with God's full authority and with newly minted irony. With the instincts of performance artists, they spun imaginative tales of talking fish, oceans that pray, choirs of singing angels, and a living alphabet whose letters converse. Masters of the fantastical, the rabbis harnessed all creation to forge their imprint of God.

I came to view these holy men with a taste for the outrageous as the theological Bette Midlers of their time. The overwhelming question became, "Could I—dare I—emulate them?"

Visual Midrash

In the beginning, just entertaining the *possibility* that I could offer com-

mentary seemed outrageous to me. So I began my attempts at interpretation in a relatively low key, dramatically reading *haftarot* rather than chanting them. The experience was exhilarating. As I gave voice to the text and, in turn, took on the characters of God, Isaiah, *Am Yisrael*, David, Deborah, Jonah, Hosea, and Hannah, I felt the sting of the branched Hebrew letters awakening my spirit to new possibility.

And yet, verbalizing my own thoughts from the *bimah* still seemed beyond the pale. Until, one Shabbat I decided to preface my reading of the *haftarah* with a few remarks . . . a point or two . . . a tentative *devar Torah*.

In time, I spoke longer and more frequently from the *bimah*. I gained in confidence and imagined more adventurous avenues for exploring and interpreting text. I began to create laser prints by weaving the text of Torah and my own writing together with line and form.

At first, these visual midrashim provided a vehicle for exploring personal subjects, such as my childhood experience of Shabbat, my finding a voice within Jewish life, and my struggle with the moral ambiguities of war. Eventually, I expanded both the subject matter and the media of my midrashim. I went on to explore themes such as community, relationship with God, gender, healing, *mikveh*, Jewish domestic violence, and women's body image. I continued to make laser prints, but also began to weave photographic images with biblical and liturgical texts, as well as with

my own writing, creating collages both in Hebrew and in English.

Over the years, I have found that each print and collage I create reflects an awakening of my soul, a relocating and reclaiming of sacred memory. Sometimes, in the process, I sense a gentle shift inside of me. My eyes open and I feel God's breath flow through me, as if for the first time.

Three visual midrashim by Gila Gevirtz appear respectively on pages 4, 53, and 100 of this edition of *The Reconstructionist*. What follows is a brief description by the artist of each midrash.

Midrash on Genesis 12:1-3

This midrash appears in the form of a Torah scroll. At the top and bottom of the scroll are the first three verses of Genesis 12 in Hebrew: "God said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse the one that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.'"

The bottom and top of each of the two rollers of the Torah scroll (which are called *atzey hayim*, or trees of life)

are made of the following phrases from the verses: "I will bless you," "I will bless those who bless you" and "You shall be a blessing." These three phrases are repeated in Hebrew in the bands that run across the scroll.

Midrash on Genesis 24:16

As Rebecca is described replenishing her supply of water (the element essential to all life) so that she might offer drink to Abraham's servant, Eliezer, the artist describes her process of filling herself with Torah (the Tree of Life) so that she might offer it's sustenance through the chanting of the *parashah* (weekly portion read in synagogue) or *haftarah* (weekly prophetic portion).

The artwork, which is in the shape of a vessel, reflects the biblical metaphor of God as potter (see Is. 64:7, "We are the clay and You are our potter").

Midrash on Isaiah 2:4

Recalling God's redemption of the ancient Israelites from oppression, this midrash reminds us of our responsibility to emulate God's compassion and to help bring about a world of justice and peace. (Note regarding the use of womb imagery: *Harahaman* is a name of God meaning The Merciful One. Traditionally, it is said that the word *rahaman* comes from the same root as the word *rehem*, meaning "womb.")

“Where Do You Come From, And Where Are You Going?”: Hagar and Sarah Encounter God

BY TOBA SPITZER

Women's encounters with the divine in the Bible are few and far between. In contrast to the wide variety of male encounters—Abraham's conversations with God, Jacob dreaming and wrestling with the angel, Moses at the bush and at Sinai, the many accounts of prophetic call—we are told of few women who directly experience or speak with God. Given the paucity of material overall, the fact that there is a female character who has more than one extended encounter with the divine marks her as significant. That woman is Hagar, the Egyptian handmaid of Sarah and second wife of Abraham.¹ Hagar's experiences provide us with an important lens on the

broader issue of biblical representation of women's encounters with God. By comparing her experience with that of Sarah (whose one encounter with the divine is narratively sandwiched between those of Hagar), we can begin to uncover what the biblical text suggests about both the limitations on women's experience and the possibilities that lie beyond those limitations.

In the Wilderness: Hagar

Many meetings with God in the Bible take place in liminal “in-between” places, and this is also true for Hagar. Her first meeting takes place in the wilderness, where she has fled Sarai's mistreatment. In an echo

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of Jacob's famous encounter by the Jabbok river, Hagar is met by a divine messenger (*malakh YHWH*) at a place "on the way," by a body of water in the wilderness:

And a *malakh YHWH* found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, Sarai's handmaid, from where have you come, and where are you going?" And she said, "I am fleeing from Sarai my mistress." (Gen. 16:7-8)

Hagar is the first person in the Torah to meet such a divine messenger. But in contrast to Jacob, Hagar is greeted by a question, not an attack. This is to be a friendly encounter, not a night-time terror.

While the reader is immediately informed that the one meeting Hagar is of divine origin, Hagar is also given a clue, for this stranger knows her name and station in life: he addresses her as "Hagar, handmaid (*shifhah*) of Sarai." It is precisely this emphasis on Hagar's status that signals the significance of what is to come. Through an apparently unnecessary repetition—the *malakh's* calling her "*shifhah*" and Hagar's mention of "Sarai my mistress" in her response—our attention is focused on Hagar's station in life. Why this repeated identification? And what is the meaning of the *malakh's* question: "From where have you come, and where are you going"? If we as readers know of Hagar's plight, is it possible that the All-knowing One does not?

Between Subordination and Autonomy

Certainly a messenger of God knows the literal answer to his inquiry. As a narrative device both the question and the reply point to something deeper, to a tension which is key to this encounter. On the one hand, both question and reply emphasize Hagar's subordinate position in her particular social framework. She is a *shifhah*, Sarai is her mistress—on this both she and the messenger agree. If the first part of the *malakh's* question, "from where have you come?" suggests Hagar's proper place, then the second half—"where are you going?"—implies that Hagar is now out of place. Like a director who has lost control of one of his characters, the divine messenger seems to be saying: "You and I know your proper place—so what are you doing out here in the wilderness?" It is in this context that Hagar answers. Her words—"mipney Sarai gevirti anokhi borahat," "I am fleeing from Sarai my mistress" (v. 8)—go beyond a simple, factual response. "*Mipney*" means "from the presence of," but can also mean "because of, for fear of." Hagar acknowledges that her proper place is as a servant, yet she justifies the situation by asserting that it is on her mistress's account that she is out of place. While not entirely defiant, Hagar's response suggests a willingness to stand up for herself, a sense of boldness and determination.

There is another aspect to the messenger's question "where are you going?" While it does imply that Hagar

is out of place, it is not a reprimand. Rather, in its open-endedness the question points beyond Hagar's servant status towards her agency and autonomy. The question suggests that her fate is in her hands, and that we—reader and *malakh*—do not really know where she is headed. Hagar's answer, though simple, recapitulates the two aspects of the *malakh*'s question. In the first part—“*mipney Sarai gevirti*”—Hagar has left the place which properly defines her role; and in the second—“*anokhi borahat*”—Hagar is the actor, pro-actively making the choice to leave a difficult situation. It is in fact through the *malakh*'s initial address that Hagar truly becomes subject in this story.² In the beginning of chapter 16, while Hagar is still in Abram and Sarai's home, she is never addressed directly by name. The *malakh* YHWH is the first to say “Hagar,” and it is in response to his question that Hagar first speaks, and names her own situation: “I am fleeing.”

Yet the tension between servitude and autonomy returns, as the *malakh* now gives Hagar a troubling directive: return, and submit “beneath her hand”—that is, to Sarai's mistreatment (v. 9). Feminist Bible scholar Phyllis Trible argues that the messenger's words

bring a divine word of terror to an abused, yet courageous, woman . . . Inexplicably, the God who later, seeing the suffering of a slave people, comes down to deliver them *out of the hand* of the Egyptians, here

identifies with the oppressor and orders a servant to return not only to bondage but also to affliction.³

In her desire to emphasize Hagar's oppression at the hands of both her masters and a patriarchal text, Trible misses the subtlety in the narrative. The messenger is telling Hagar that she is out of place; in order for the story to continue she must go back. But in the use of the *hitpa'el* form of the verb “to submit”—that is, in telling Hagar to “*hitani*,” to *cause herself to submit* to Sarai's mistreatment—the *malakh* implicitly continues to recognize Hagar's agency and personhood. As J. Gerald Janzen notes, Hagar will be able to “become subject to Sarai without losing her own subjectivity,”⁴ by acting as agent of her own act of submission. The *malakh* seems to accept Hagar's version of events, that it is Sarai's fault that she has had to flee, and in asking her to “submit herself” he is giving an insistent but not uncompassionate command.

The Promise of “Seed”

As an immediate counter-balance to the order to return to mistreatment, the messenger goes on to promise Hagar countless offspring (v. 10), in a formulation that is reminiscent of the divine promise to Abram in Genesis 15:5. There, Abram is promised “seed” as impossible to count as the stars; here, Hagar's “seed” will be multiplied to an uncountable degree. And just as Abram's descendants will have to undergo slavery before God's promise can be fulfilled (Gen. 15:13-

16), verses 9-10 of chapter 16 suggest that the divine promise of “seed” to Hagar is similarly contingent upon a period of enslavement and suffering.

The *malakh*’s words are remarkable, for Hagar is the only woman in the Bible to receive the divine promise of “seed.” She is thus designated the matriarch of a tribe, after the model of Abraham. The messenger’s promise expands upon Hagar’s agency and autonomy, and marks her as having a special relationship to the divine. These themes are further developed in the announcement of the name of her son-to-be in Genesis 16:11. Hagar is told that she will be the one to name her son, and that the name—*Yishma’el*—indicates that God has heard her *oni*, her affliction. YHWH/El is aware of Hagar and has taken her into his care, if she will play her role and return, fulfilling her destiny by giving birth to this child.

As the *malakh* goes on, in verse 12, to describe Yishmael’s fate, a picture emerges of a man who will live out a life of confrontation and independence that his mother has experienced in a limited, more passive, form. Whereas she has taken temporary refuge in the wilderness, he will be a “wild ass,” a nomad living in the wilderness. Hagar was made to suffer “beneath the hand” of Sarai, but Yishmael’s “hand” will be against all those around him: (female) suffering will be transformed into a kind of (male) audaciousness and self-imposed independence. Similarly, in contrast to Hagar who had to flee “*mipney*” her mistress, her son will dwell “*al peney*”—“in the face of”—his broth-

ers: her flight is turned into his defiance.⁵ The implicit message of this verse is that the independence and defiance Hagar has shown will find full expression in the rebellious freedom of Yishmael’s tribe.

Seeing and Naming

But this encounter does not end with God’s promise to Hagar. In verse 13 the focus shifts back from son to mother, from the *malakh*’s words to Hagar’s. Having just been told that she will name her son after the God who hears her, Hagar turns and tells the messenger *his* name, after her own experience of seeing/being seen: “And she called the name [YHWH] of the one who spoke to her ‘*atah el ro’i*.’”⁶ In an act unique to her, Hagar is naming God! But what exactly is she saying? *El ro’i* can be translated “the God who sees me,” “the God of seeing,” and the “seen God.” The precise meaning of her words is enigmatic, but Hagar is clearly identifying her meeting with the *malakh* as an encounter with God. Even more powerfully, she does not displace this act of recognition/naming onto an intermediate symbol, as does Jacob in naming a place—Penu’el—after his wrestle with the “man” (Gen. 32:31). Hagar names this deity face to face: “*You* are El Ro’i.” Hagar has not limped away; her words indicate that she is still in the presence of the divine even as she calls its name. While traditional scholars have minimized the power of this act of naming, Phyllis Trible captures the power of the moment:

Hagar does not call *upon* the

name of the deity. Instead, she calls the name, a power attributed to no one else in all the Bible . . . Hagar is a theologian. Her naming unites the divine and human encounter: the God who sees and the God who is seen.”⁷

This sense of seeing and being seen is further developed in the second half of verse 13, although the exact meaning of the words is unclear. The phrase *hagam halom ra'iti aharey ro'i* has been variously translated “Did I not go on seeing here after he had seen me?” “Have I really seen the back of the One who sees me?” “I have seen God after he saw me,” and “Would I have gone here indeed looking for him that looks after me?”⁸ Yet despite the differences, every translation shares the sense of reciprocity that Tribble points to—the God who sees and is seen, who is aware of the protagonist and is, in turn, recognized.

This is not amazement on the part of Hagar, who makes her statement in an utterly matter-of-fact way, but an acknowledgment of intimate and mutual encounter. Naming in the Bible carries with it the sense of knowing and expressing one’s essence. In naming God and explaining that name, Hagar is making a statement about the power of being seen, and thus being known. This *malakh* saw her and called her name, and in his greeting proved that he knew her (in stark contrast to Hagar’s status as nameless pawn in the machinations between Abram and Sarai). In being seen and named, Hagar achieves her own

power to see and name. This is the power of the word *aharey* (“after”) in verse 13: her ability to see comes “after” she has been seen by God.

It is true that, in contrast to Abram who is passive (that is, a non-actor in the narrative) until he receives the call and command from God, Hagar’s own agency has in fact preceded this divine encounter. She “sees” that she is pregnant in verse 4, thus precipitating the conflict with Sarai, and takes matters into her own hands by fleeing.⁹ Yet it is only in the wilderness, away from the confines of her life as maid to Sarai and wife to Abram, that Hagar can be seen and known, and thus come into her own power as seer and namer.¹⁰ Here Hagar is anything but an abject, downtrodden slave woman. Her naming of God is a simple, direct, yet audacious act. And again in contrast to Jacob, Hagar has not had to wrest a name away from the angel—she has provided it on her own. The messenger calls her name, but in this story it is the human protagonist who gives a new name.

Despair and Defiance

At the end of chapter 16 we are told that Hagar has indeed returned to her masters, and has borne a child to Abram. In chapter 21 her story picks up again, leading to a second encounter in the wilderness. Yet where Hagar’s first experience is marked by defiance and agency, this episode begins as a tragic inversion of that earlier encounter. Hagar does not flee of her own initiative but is cast out, wandering without direction. This time she does not find a spring of water, and

the insufficient supplies given to her by Abraham run out. At the peak of Hagar's despair, as she completes Abraham's act of sending her and Yishmael into the desert by casting her child under a bush to die (vv. 14-15),¹¹ the very act of seeing turns from life to death.

In chapter 16, Hagar's encounter with the God of seeing is associated with *be'er lahay ro'i*, a well of life and sight (v. 14). Here in chapter 21 there is no water, and Hagar repudiates the power of seeing: "And she went and sat herself opposite, at the distance of a bowshot, for she said: 'I shall not look upon the death of the child' " (v. 16). If seeing is associated with life, then not-seeing is associated with death. Everything has come undone, and Hagar seems to have reached the end—losing the son whom she was promised, losing the power of sight and life.

Yet even here Hagar has not completely lost her agency, her power to act:

And she went and *sat herself opposite*, at the distance of a bowshot, for she said: "I shall not look upon the death of the child." So *she sat opposite*, and she raised up her voice, and she cried (Gen. 21:16).

The phrase "she sat opposite," "*vateshev mineged*," appears twice, bracketing her statement "I shall not look upon (see) the death of the child." The repetition serves to set off Hagar's words—the only ones she speaks in this chapter—and to highlight the action itself. The word "*mi-*

neged" subtly hints at Hagar's "opposition" to this turn of events. After the second mention of her sitting down "opposite," she "raises up her voice and cries." Is Hagar praying? Pleading for divine intercession? We are not told. What is significant is that Hagar has not given in passively or silently. Hagar remains an actor in these verses, albeit a tragic one, pointedly setting her son under a bush, sitting down "in opposition," and raising her voice. Hagar then takes away the only thing left to her—her own sight—as if to say: if God no longer sees me, then I too will no longer see. This is Hagar's final act of defiance.

Return of Sight and Life

It is at this point that God does respond, fulfilling the prediction from chapter 16 that "God will hear." We are reminded of the intertwined nature of Hagar's fate and that of her son. In chapter 16 the boy's name, Yishmael, was given as a sign of God hearing Hagar's affliction. Here, in 21:17, we are told that God hears the *boy's* voice—when it has just been mentioned that it is Hagar who is crying out! Whether or not the text preserves some kind of error or confusion between different traditions of the story, the effect is one of allusion between Hagar and Yishmael. Each one reflects the other, as we saw previously in the announcement of Yishmael's destiny. If Yishmael's life is to be an amplified version of Hagar's experience, then here his voice too is amplified—it is his cry that reaches to heaven. Yet it is his mother's agency,

the power of *her* voice “lifting up,” that initiates the divine response.

The *malakh*'s call from the heavens in verse 17—an almost conversational “what’s the matter, Hagar?”—belies the anguished mother’s desperation. Judging from the messenger’s response, it seems that Hagar has been overreacting, or at least misperceiving the situation. And in an alliterative word-play on the theme of sight, the messenger tells her “*al tiri*,” “do not fear”—the similar sounding roots of “fear” and “see” making his negation of fear a negation of *her* negation of sight. And perhaps it has been only her fear that has kept Hagar from seeing, for the next thing that happens is that “God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water” (v. 19). Sight has returned, and with it, life-giving water.

Looked at schematically, the turning point in this story is its structural center—the emphasis on the word *voice*, both Hagar’s and the child’s:

- A. Water runs out/the child is sent to die (Gen. 21:15).
- B. Negation of sight (“I won’t see the child’s death”) (v. 16a).
- C. Hagar lifts up her *voice* (v. 16b).
- C1. God hears the child’s *voice* (v. 17).
- B1. Return of sight (Hagar sees the well) (v. 19a).
- A1. Return of water/child is sustained (v. 19b).

The return of sight and of life—embodied here by water—pivots around Hagar’s act of raising her voice, and God’s hearing. Salvation

occurs as Hagar reasserts herself as an actor in the story. Her passivity in being cast out by Abraham, and her inability to sustain her child after Abraham’s flask is emptied, are inverted after the encounter with the *malakh*. Now it is Hagar who fills the flask, and who sustains her child where Abraham could not.

By the end of this episode, Hagar’s agency is fully restored, and in fact extended beyond her role as assertive handmaid. The final mention of Hagar in the Bible has her taking the first step toward the divine promise of countless “seed.” Not only does the destiny announced by the *malakh* in chapter 16 begin to be fulfilled, but Hagar’s act—finding a wife for her son from her own homeland (Gen. 21:21)—is an exact parallel of Abraham’s search for a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:4). In a few dramatic verses, Hagar has been transformed from victimized and endangered slave woman to autonomous matriarch of a nascent people.

It is significant that both of Hagar’s encounters with the divine occur in the wilderness. Many of her male counterparts in the Bible—Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Elijah—also find God in the wilderness, or in a place which is no-place. Yet Hagar not only finds God, she finds herself. We do not hear Hagar’s voice in the confines of Abraham and Sarah’s camp, and no *malakh* speaks to her there. To a far greater extent than the men, Hagar must leave her defined place and her defined role in order to encounter the divine presence, to hear her name and find the power to name. The *malakh*’s

first question to Hagar implicitly acknowledges the importance of place: from where are you coming, and where are you going? Hagar's place in this moment of encounter is ambiguous: she is in-between places ("on the way to Shur," between Egypt and Canaan) and in-between roles, not quite a handmaid yet not quite free. It is in this out-of-her-place place that Hagar is able to fully meet God.

In the Tent: Sarah

The importance of place for women and divine encounter is approached—from the opposite angle—in the story of Sarah's laugh. Bounded by the two accounts of Hagar in the wilderness, Sarah's one conversation with God reveals the limiting power of place, in contrast to Hagar's redemptive experience.

As with Hagar, Sarah's encounter begins with a question of place. After enjoying an afternoon meal, a contingent of divine messengers ask Abraham, "Where is Sarah your wife?" (Gen. 18:9). As in Hagar's case, we have to assume that the questioner knows the literal answer to his inquiry. The question and its answer—"here in the tent"—establish the context for Sarah's eavesdropping, but they also affirm that (in contrast to Hagar) Sarah is clearly in her place. The messengers have come to announce to Abraham that he and Sarah will soon have a child, to which Sarah reacts by laughing.

Feminist readers have emphasized the transgressive nature of Sarah's laughing response to the divine promise of a son. Alicia Ostriker writes that

"The moment of laughter ruptures the principles of authority, whatever they may be . . . Comedy teaches that you can transgress and get away with it." Lori Lefkowitz pursues the meaning of Sarah's eavesdropping and laughter on a deeper level, and sees in it "an alternative discursive possibility to woman as Other. Instead we see Woman as outsider looking in, with powers and privileges that accrue from distance." Lefkowitz goes on to argue that the reason for Sarah's laughter remains mysterious, to the reader and to God, yet this story "represents God in relation to her as deferential to her psychic complexity, as if God . . . speaks with clarity, and Woman responds with ambiguity. He inquires, receives no satisfying response, and He shrugs."¹² While Sarah's laugh does represent a kind of defiance or transgression of boundaries, I would argue that ultimately her challenge is a failure, and her own subjectivity denied.

If Hagar pushed against the boundaries of her "place" as servant by fleeing into the wilderness, Sarah pushes the boundaries by reacting derisively *from* her place in the tent (a quite literal representation, in this story, of woman's place within the private realm). The divine promise of "seed" to Abraham is the engine driving this entire narrative, and Sarah dares to laugh! And beyond laughing (which after all Abraham has done as well), she derisively mocks both her own reproductive capacity and her husband's sexual ability: "After I am worn out, shall I have [sexual] pleasure, as my lord is old?" (Gen.18:12). The narra-

tor, in the preceding verse, mentions both Sarah and Abraham's age but emphasizes that Sarah is menopausal; similarly YHWH, in his response after Sarah's laugh, mentions only Sarah's age. By bracketing Sarah's own appraisal of the situation with these two contrasting accounts, the text highlights her mocking of Abraham. Sarah appears to be saying, in effect, that the old man can no longer perform sexually. But for all their audacity, Sarah's words come across as less defiant than sadly bitter. Mockery is a weapon of the powerless, and here Sarah is reduced to making fun of her husband's—and by extension, God's—potency, to express her disbelief.

The Last Word

The divine response to these mocking words is neither deferential nor approving. This is a passage in which God literally has the last word(s)—words which are, quite pointedly, an ironic inversion of Sarah's own. A closer look at the structure of the passage is useful in capturing the ultimately tragic tone of this encounter. There is a repeated pattern of Divine Question—Divine Announcement—Sarah's Denial, with an added closing statement by God:

- A. Messengers ask Abraham, "where is Sarah?" (v. 9).
- B. It is announced that Sarah will have a son (v. 10a).
- C. Sarah reacts to this announcement, denying the possibility of giving birth (v. 12).
- A1. God asks Abraham about Sarah's response (v. 13).

B1. Repetition of annunciation of birth of a son (v. 14).

C1. Sarah fearfully reacts to God's rebuke and denies her own response, saying "I did not laugh." (v. 15a).

D. "He" (a messenger/YHWH) refutes her: "No, you laughed." (v. 15b).

What immediately emerges from the text is that, in stark contrast to Hagar's encounters in the wilderness, Sarah has little direct contact with the divine. Until the final verse, the messengers/YHWH talk *about*, not to, Sarah, directing their words to Abraham. Both of Sarah's statements are, in turn, reactions to something said about her. Enclosed in her tent, Sarah is placed in an essentially passive position, with only the power to deny. Her reactions may be audacious, but her words lack any positive or creative power.

Where Hagar is given the last word in her encounter with the *malakh*, naming God and her own experience, Sarah's words are repeatedly taken away from her, their meaning transformed. When she mocks Abraham's potency, YHWH (mis)quotes her as disbelieving her own. When she denies laughing, "he" (presumably God) refutes her denial.

This last exchange—Sarah's only direct conversation with the divine—encapsulates her experience with a breathtaking economy of words. Structurally the passage as a whole builds to God's final words, the divine response (D) added on to the repeated A-B-C pattern. In verse 15 Sarah says

“lo tzaḥakti” (“I didn’t laugh”); God replies *“lo ki tzaḥakt”* (“No, you laughed”). One little word, *ki*, is added to Sarah’s denial, but the transformation in meaning is large. The untranslatable shift from *lo tzaḥakti* to *lo ki tzaḥakt* is the final refutation of Sarah’s power to defy authority or name her own experience. Her own words are used against her. An exchange that may first read as comedic farce¹³ reveals a deeper, more tragic view of Sarah’s lack of agency and subjectivity. Her servant is able to overcome fear in the wilderness and in so doing reclaim her sight and the power of life, but Sarah is left fearful in her tent, denying her own experience, her words literally taken out of her mouth.

On the Way

The contrast of Hagar’s and Sarah’s experiences teaches the all-important role of *place* in the Torah’s depiction of women’s encounters with the divine. For each, the encounter begins with a question about place: Where has Hagar come from? Where is Sarah? Questions suggest ambiguity, and the biblical text seems to implicitly recognize the dilemma posed by woman’s place in a patriarchal society. The women in these stories are confined to the domestic realm, defined by their relationship to husbands and sons. Yet one who is so confined and limited cannot fully experience God. Sarah’s encounter reveals the bounds placed on one who remains “in the tent”: she cannot emerge as a whole person to meet her God. Hagar’s experience shows, from the opposite side, that

women must flee the place of social constriction in order to fully meet the divine.¹⁴ Herein lies the dilemma, for if the woman remains “in the tent,” in her place, meeting cannot fully occur. Yet if she is able, like Hagar, to have direct encounter, then she must leave a significant part of who she is (in that social context) behind. Perhaps that is why only a secondary character—one who is not necessary for the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham—is allowed such a full encounter. She leaves her place and ultimately leaves the story.

Yet beyond this comment on the situation of women in biblical society and text, there is a deeper teaching here about what it means to be able to encounter God’s Presence. The *malaḥ*’s question to Hagar in Genesis 16 points to the power of moving beyond one’s “place” in order to achieve such a moment of meeting. When he asks her “where are you going?” we know that Hagar’s fate is open-ended, still a question. We learn here that it is the one on her way, the one whose future is open, who is also open to meeting. There is, as well, an element of risk and danger in this openness. The significant, sacred moment is the one in-between, the moment of not-knowing. For Hagar, it is the moment between slavery and freedom, the moment between life and death.

From Hagar we learn that meeting God is about reclaiming oneself, about being seen and called by one’s name. Encounter with the divine is at the same time about agency, about the power to see and to give a name. It is this mutuality which is at the heart of

Hagar's meeting with the Living One. Hagar is seen and sees, she hears her name and gives a name. Meeting her God outside the confines of her role as handmaid and second wife, Hagar receives a taste of her own destiny, a promise of where her own power to defy and name will take her.

Hagar teaches us the power of being on-the-way, of being open to the possibility of encounter. It is in this open, in-between moment that the power and mystery of mutual encounter is realized. This is the moment in which we are given the opportunity to hear our name, and to name the divine for ourselves.

1. The only other women to have more than one exchange with God or a divine messenger are Eve in Genesis 3, and the wife of Manoah, in Judges 13.

2. For an elaboration of this point, see J. Gerald Janzen, "Hagar in Paul's Eyes and in the Eyes of Yahweh (Genesis 16): A Study in Horizons," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 13 (June 1991): 8.

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

4. Janzen, 12. He gives an interesting and extensive interpretation of the *hitpa'el* verb as symbolic of a "middle power" that is neither passive nor active; see pages 9-12.

5. In this I am following the reading of Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 234; he translates verse 12b, "he shall camp in confrontation with all his kinsmen," as against Janzen, who sees only freedom, without the element of conflict, in Yishmael's destiny (translating 12b as "he will dwell in the presence of his peers"—see page 13).

6. Commentators seem to agree that "YHWH" is an editorial insertion that dis-

rupts the flow of the text. See for example, N. Wyatt, "The Meaning of *El Roi* and the Mythological Dimension in Genesis 16," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 8 no. 1 (1994), 143.

7. Trible, 18.

8. These translations are taken from, respectively: Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, *Far More Precious than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 159; Janzen, 13; Westermann, 248; and Th. Booij, "Hagar's Words in Genesis XVI 13B," in *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (January 1980), 6.

9. Trible eloquently makes the point about the power of this initial "seeing" on Hagar's part (page 12).

10. This suggests one answer to the question of why the *malakh* announces to Hagar that she is pregnant, when she (and the reader) are already aware of that fact. Hagar's initial recognition of her pregnancy occurs in a state of bondage; the re-announcement by the *malakh* in the wilderness proclaims the free destiny of the child, to some extent negating his conception in slavery.

11. There is an aural play on words here, with Hagar's act (*vatashleh*, in Gen. 21:15) echoing Abraham's (*vayishalheka*, in verse 14).

12. Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 125; Lori Hope Lefkovitz, "Eavesdropping on Angels and Laughing at God: Theorizing a Subversive Matriarchy," in *Gender and Judaism: The Transformation of Tradition*, ed. T.M. Rudavsky (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 160-161.

13. This is the reading of J.C. Exum and J.W. Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1990), 124.

14. There is an interesting parallel here between Sarah and Hagar's position and that of the Hebrew slaves in the book of Exodus, who similarly could not meet their God until they had fled the "narrow place" of bondage in Egypt for the on-the-way place of Sinai, in the wilderness.

God's Covenant with Israel: A Midrash on Genesis 17 and 21

BY ELLEN M. UMANSKY

As a woman reading texts that are clearly androcentric—that is, that emerge out of and largely focus on male concerns and activities—I constantly find myself asking questions of Jewish texts that neither the texts themselves, nor, in the case of biblical texts, later generations of rabbinic commentators even attempt to raise, much less answer. In reading chapters 17 and 21 of the book of Genesis and noting the identification, in both, of male circumcision as the sign of God's covenant with Israel, I have often asked myself: "If circumcision is, for Jewish men, a sign of covenantal membership, what sign is there, or what sign should there be, for women—i.e., what sign do women have that we, like men, are God's covenantal partners?"

Yet in rereading Genesis 17, which views circumcision as a sign of God's

covenant with Israel, and Genesis 21, which describes Abraham's circumcision of Isaac, I came to realize that I had been unable to learn the answer because I had asked the right question in the wrong way. Unlike the biblical Leah, for example, who *did* have a daughter, Sarah had only a son.

Thus, in approaching *these particular texts*, my question needed to be: If God, as the biblical narrative so clearly implies, entered into a covenantal relationship with Abraham *and* Sarah *and their* offspring (not simply Abraham's, since were that the case, Ishmael would have gained membership into the covenant as well), what was the nature of God's command to Sarah? What, in other words, does the Torah tell us about the sign of covenantal membership that binds mother to son? Only after I had explored this question, I realized, could

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I then ask: are there other insights, including those that focus on the obligations of mothers and fathers to their daughters, that can also be gleaned from these particular Torah texts?

Given the Torah's apparent silence on the nature of God's command to Sarah, yet exploring the possible meaning of Genesis 21:7 which describes Sarah as "suckling *children*" (emphasis mine) even though she had only *one*, I used midrash, the literary form through which Jews have long undertaken theological inquiry, to raise, and possibly answer, these questions. What follows is my midrashic response to many of the theological issues that Genesis 17 and 21 raise for me as a Jewish woman.

In Remembrance of Sarah

She heard God call him. "*Lekh, le-kha,*" God said to her husband, Abram, "go forth, take your wife, and your nephew, Lot, and complete the journey begun by your father. I will bless you and your offspring and give to you the land of Canaan that you might finally have a home." Offspring? she thought. We have no offspring and I am long past childbearing age. She laughed, then fell silent, hoping against hope that God meant these words to be taken literally, and that someday, somehow, she in fact would bear a child. No sooner had they arrived in Canaan, then her dreams for the future were forgotten. There was famine in the land, they had no food, and if they stayed there, surely they would die.

So they went to Egypt where unwittingly or, perhaps, selfishly, Abram

placed her in danger, insisting to the Egyptians that she was his sister and not his wife. Taken to Pharaoh's palace and then, to his bed, she watched in horror as he approached her. Silently, she screamed, "How could you have done this to me, God? In faith, I too left my birthplace and went to the land of Canaan. Abram, it seems, was rewarded for his faithfulness by escaping prison. But what, oh God, about me?"

God heard her cries and, for her sake, afflicted Pharaoh with a disease that made his attempts at physical intimacy impossible. Afraid that Sarai might be a sorceress, Pharaoh demanded to know her true identity, and, relieved to learn that she possessed no magical powers, gave Sarai and her husband food and material goods and sent them back to Canaan. When Sarai's dream of childbearing returned, God's promises were renewed. Yet mistakenly thinking God wanted her to find a younger woman to bear her husband's child for them, she gave Abram Hagar, who soon gave birth to Ishmael. For thirteen years, Sarai tried to convince herself that Hagar was only a surrogate, that she, Sarai, as inheritor of God's covenant, was Ishmael's true mother. But Sarai knew otherwise. Hagar was Ishmael's mother and the covenant, it seemed, would be established through him.

Signs of the Covenant

Then, one day, she again heard God's voice. Telling Abram that he would now be known as Abraham, "father of a multitude of nations," God renewed the promises given so

many years before, adding that all of Abraham's male descendants were to be circumcised on the eighth day following their birth, as a sign of the covenant between Abraham and God. "Sarai too," God continued, "shall be blessed and her name changed to Sarah, princess of a multitude of nations. Within a year, she will give birth to a son, Isaac. The sign of my covenant with Sarah will not be physical but spiritual. It will not be cut into Isaac's flesh, but into his heart, reminding him that as a human being he is both body and spirit and that his obligations to his children extend beyond that of circumcising his sons.

Remembering my covenant with Sarah, he is obligated to awaken within his children a love of God and of the Jewish people, teaching them by word and by example how to sanctify their lives and how to fight against injustice in order to repair the world and make it whole." Sarah heard these words and once again laughed—this time with joy.

And Isaac remembered his father and his mother and the covenant that they had made with God, as did his wife, Rebecca. Thus, Jews continue to circumcise their sons, as did Abraham, and to "suckle [their] children" (Genesis 21:7)—that is to nourish them with words and deeds, as did Sarah.

The Four Wives of Jacob: Matriarchs Seen and Unseen

BY ELIZABETH WYNER MARK

The sons of Jacob were twelve. The sons of Leah: Jacob's first-born, Reuben; Simeon; Levi; Judah; Issachar; and Zebulun. The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. The sons of Bilhah, maidservant of Rachel: Dan and Naphtali. And the sons of Zilpah, maidservant of Leah: Gad and Asher—these are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan Aram.¹ (Gen. 35:23-26)

Consistently, the narrative voice of the Torah declares that the twelve sons of Jacob/Israel had four mothers: Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, Zilpah. Of the sixty-six descendants of Jacob who accompany him on the journey to Egypt, the text describes twenty-three, more than one-third, as “the sons of

Zilpah” and “the sons of Bilhah.” More individual descendants and more generations of descendants on that journey are accounted to Zilpah than to Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife (Gen. 46:8-26). Nowhere in Scripture does the narrative voice ever tell us that the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah become the sons of Leah and Rachel.

Nevertheless, egalitarian liturgists who expand the invocation “God of our fathers” to include matriarchs almost always name only the traditional *arba imahot*: Sarah, the great-grandmother of the tribes, Rebecca, the grandmother, and Rachel and Leah, the two mothers of higher social class. Some new liturgies make a point of naming Leah before her younger sister Rachel, Jacob's favorite, as a rejection of husband's preference as the ordering criterion.² However, in whatever order, these liturgical additions

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clearly exclude the two servant-class mothers, Bilhah and Zilpah. I hope to show that if one is motivated to question this ancient caste division of the Mothers of Israel, it is surprisingly easy to find ample support within traditional Judaism for a radical inclusiveness.

Contemporary Treatments of Bilhah and Zilpah

Feminist commentary on the Jacob story largely ignores Bilhah and Zilpah, even in works with the stated goal of giving voice to silent and powerless female Bible characters. For example, Bilhah and Zilpah are not listed among the mothers of Genesis in Alice Bellis's *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* despite the author's promise to foreground victimized biblical women. In Bellis's retelling of the Jacob story, Bilhah and Zilpah have a presence only as anonymous servants given to the patriarch for breeding purposes. Their namelessness symbolizes a selective perception of victimization which allows the author to see patriarchal oppression only in the lives of the primary wives: "Most modern feminists," she writes, "will undoubtedly feel that Rachel and Leah were victimized by their father and a social structure that valued women primarily for their ability to bear children."³

An early ground-breaking feminist work with the promising title of *Written Out of History: Our Jewish Foremothers* leaves Bilhah and Zilpah still "written out." A reference to "the mothers of Israel—Sarah, Rebecca,

Leah, and Rachel" follows a statement that "Bilhah had two sons" with no explanation offered for the non-recognition of Bilhah as one of these mothers of Israel.⁴ And selective perception escalates in Norma Rosen's *Biblical Women Unbound*. Here Bilhah and Zilpah are completely erased from the biblical story, with no mention even of nameless handmaids in the author's long midrashic expansion of the saga of Jacob's family.⁵

Ellen Frankel, in her *Five Books of Miriam*, may be a lone voice calling for recognition of the two servant matriarchs. In messianic times, she writes lyrically, "all six of Israel's mothers will rejoice." She notes that even Hagar, the servant cast out of the patriarchal family, has her liturgical place in the Rosh Hashanah Torah reading, while "poor Bilhah and Zilpah have vanished completely from Jewish worship."⁶ As we shall see, though, Frankel's somewhat contradictory treatment of Bilhah and Zilpah accords them less honor and status than abounds in traditional rabbinic and Orthodox Judaism.

Bilhah and Zilpah in Midrash

There is evidence of an early and ongoing rabbinic tradition that recognized six matriarchs, including Bilhah and Zilpah. It echoes in midrashic texts collected over many centuries, in which familiar sets of six are cited to explain biblical occurrences of that number. Why did the princes of Israel bring six wagons as an offering, asks *Numbers Rabbah*, for example. The matter-of-fact answer: "six corre-

sponding to the six days of creation, six corresponding to the six orders of the Mishnah, six corresponding to the matriarchs [*imahot*], who are Sarah and Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, Bilhah, Zilpah."⁷

In the Torah narrative Bilhah and Zilpah are in effect chattel property, but rabbinic tradition gave them a midrashic existence in which they became persons—family members, free women, and full wives. Midrash tells us, for example, that Bilhah and Zilpah are half-sisters of their mistresses, daughters of the same father, Laban, by a concubine. Rashi finds a proof-text for this in Laban's repetition of the word "daughters" when he and Jacob part company: "If you ill-treat my daughters or if you marry wives in addition to my daughters . . ." (Gen. 31:50).

There is a midrash which interprets Bilhah's name as a reference to her astonishing beauty and her empathic fear for her mistress's future as a barren woman. Zilpah's name is said to suggest tears of sympathy for Leah, who as Laban's older daughter might have been forced to marry Isaac's older son, the villainized Esau.⁸

According to Midrash, Leah and Rachel were prophets who understood in advance that all four of Jacob's wives would play an essential role in the divine plan to create the twelve tribes of Israel. Because of this foreknowledge, it was said, they freed Bilhah and Zilpah before presenting them to Jacob as additional wives.⁹ Proof of Bilhah's emancipation was found in the difference in the wording of Rachel's presentation of Bilhah to

Jacob compared to Sarah's presentation of Hagar to Abraham. Since Rachel did not say, in the words of Sarah, "Consort *with my maidservant*" (Gen. 16:2), but instead said, "Here is my maidservant, Bilhah—consort *with her*," the rabbis infer that Bilhah was no longer a servant by the time Rachel completed her statement.¹⁰ The biblical text's continuing references to Bilhah and Zilpah as maidservants is explained as the Torah's way of displaying the respectful attitude of the emancipated servant women toward their former mistresses.¹¹

Bilhah and the Brothers

After the death of Rachel, the Torah appears to report the scandalous information that Reuben "lay with" (*vayishkav*) Bilhah (Gen. 35:22). However, a talmudic interpretation of the word *vayishkav* rejects the idea of sexual activity between Bilhah and Reuben, emphasizing instead the special intimate relationship between Bilhah and Jacob. According to the talmudic account, Reuben was enraged at the sight of his father's bed newly installed in Bilhah's tent, a move which he perceived as a slight to his mother Leah, so he disturbed Bilhah's bed (*vayishkav*) in some way, and perhaps his father's bed as well.¹² The *Zohar* describes this aggressive act as an affront to the Shekhinah because of the holiness of sexual relations between Jacob and Bilhah, "for the Shekhinah is always present whenever marital intercourse is performed as a religious duty; and whoever obstructs such a performance causes the Shekhinah to depart from the world."¹³

After Reuben's symbolic attack on the beds, midrash tells us, Jacob and Bilhah never made love again.¹⁴

One of Joseph's dreams in the Torah narrative predicts that his mother, father, and brothers will bow down to him in the future (Gen. 37:9-10). Given that his mother Rachel has died, this is a problematic prediction. Midrash resolves the problem by explaining that the mother-figure of Joseph's dream-life is not the deceased Rachel but Bilhah, the woman who had mothered him from the age of eight on.¹⁵ Bilhah's love for Joseph was considered so profound, according to one midrashic tradition, that she died immediately of a broken heart at the news of his presumed death.¹⁶ It was said that she was buried next to Rachel, and that on his deathbed Jacob asked his children to bring the bones of their mother Zilpah to be buried near her co-mothers, Bilhah and Rachel.¹⁷ According to another tradition, Bilhah survived Jacob and, because of her closeness to Joseph, was chosen to be the emissary sent to Joseph by his brothers after their father's death. Bilhah pleaded with Joseph to forgive his brothers, who included her own two sons and young Benjamin, the son she had raised from infancy.¹⁸

The Adoption *Derash* and Liberal Judaism

How is it that Bilhah and Zilpah, who according to the Torah text were the mothers of one-third of the tribes of Israel, are not universally recognized as matriarchs? Rabbi Burton Vi-

sotzky, a founding presence of the Genesis television conversations, has expressed amazement at the huge discrepancy between the plain sense of biblical text and its various received readings. "The vast chasm," he says, "between what Jews call *peshat* and *derash*, between the actual narrative and the way generations of communities have interpreted it, is an object of wonderment and dismay." Mediating that chasm, according to Visotzky, puts us in a state of cognitive dissonance.¹⁹

There is a *peshat/derash* chasm between the presentation of four mothers and the recognition of two mothers. I suggest that the potential for cognitive dissonance in the mediation of that chasm varies across the branches of Judaism. For Orthodox Jews, committed above all to preserving liturgical tradition, recognition of all four mothers of the tribes produces only a minimum of dissonance. The God invoked by Orthodox Jews in prayer is, after all, still the God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Liturgically, the *imahot* are irrelevant no matter what their number.

Paradoxically, precisely because of their commitment both to the inclusion of women and the revision of liturgy, recognition of the servant mothers evokes the highest level of cognitive dissonance for liberal and feminist Jews. This potential dissonant state is avoided, however, by the adoption *derash*, which erases Bilhah and Zilpah from the center of the patriarchal family saga, annulling their motherhood by reading their part of

the Jacob story as an account of mother substitution. They become non-mothers, rendered invisible, their exclusion from the matriarchs not even noticed. The adoption *derash* permits one to say that the maids are biological mothers only and that psychologically and legally the real mothers are the mistresses of the household. One might even believe, conveniently, that respect for the institution of adoption actually *requires* not seeing Bilhah and Zilpah as mothers.

For egalitarian Jews, the adoption *derash* is the essential socially acceptable justification for withholding recognition from the servant mothers. Without it, an egalitarian prayer leader faces a choice of two discomfiting alternatives: to perpetuate an ancient caste distinction by excluding Bilhah and Zilpah from the matriarchs, or to violate the familiarity of liturgical custom by including two decidedly unfamiliar names. With it, there is no dilemma. Leah and Rachel are declared the adoptive mothers of the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, and the problem is solved. Few are motivated to examine the support for this interpretation in the biblical text, the rabbinic commentaries, and anthropological sources.

A Comparison of Commentaries

The enabling verses for the adoption *derash* occur in two ambiguous speeches by Rachel, each expressing at least a hope of some kind of claim on Bilhah's future son(s): first, her offer of Bilhah to Jacob (Gen.30:3-4), and, second, her naming of the baby Dan

(Gen.30:6). If I am correct in assuming that the motivation to annul Bilhah's motherhood is more compelling within liberal than Orthodox Judaism, we might expect to find this motivational difference displayed in differing interpretations of these verses. We might expect an Orthodox commentary to be relatively open to the recognition of Bilhah's continuing motherhood, while a liberal commentary might tend toward interpreting the ambiguities of the text as suggestive of mother substitution.

And indeed, that is exactly what I found in comparing two Torah commentaries representing the poles of the Orthodox-liberal spectrum. As a traditional Orthodox exemplar, I chose the *Artscroll Tanach*, whose translator and textual commentator, Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, describes its aim as the provision of "authentic, unalloyed Torah, as our Sages understood Hashem's Word, without watering down by non-traditional sources."²⁰ In contrast, a basic assumption of my liberal exemplar, the Reform movement's *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, with textual commentary by Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, is that the Torah originated "in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people."²¹ Its English text is the 1967 revision of the New Jewish Version (NJV), published first in 1962 by the Jewish Publication Society, a translation which draws upon Christian writings and extrabiblical Near Eastern materials as well as Jewish commentaries.²²

Although there is no comparable feminist Torah commentary, Frankel's

Five Books of Miriam weaves the voices of women around the themes of the weekly Torah portions. Since the book seems to advocate the eventual recognition of Bilhah and Zilpah as matriarchs, I have included it as a feminist exemplar in my comparison of the presentation of the servant-mothers.

Contrasting Presentations

Of the three works, only the Orthodox *Artscroll* commentary foregrounds Bilhah and Zilpah as central characters in the story of Jacob's family. A bold-face title in the *Artscroll* precedes the text of Genesis 30:3-4: "Jacob marries Bilhah." A similar bold-face announcement is found at Genesis 30:9: "Jacob marries Zilpah." The *Artscroll's* Table of Contents summarizes this part of Jacob's story under just five headings, two of which present the servant-wives: "Leah is married to Jacob," "A new arrangement is made for Rachel," "The birth of the tribes," "Jacob marries Bilhah," and "Jacob marries Zilpah." Note that, remarkably, Jacob is the active subject only in regard to his marriages with Bilhah and Zilpah.

In contrast to the *Artscroll's* centering of Bilhah and Zilpah and its insistent definition of their relationships with Jacob as marriages, Frankel accords them neither centrality nor wife status in *The Five Books of Miriam*. They are not on her list of major "Dramatis Personae," a list that includes Hagar, Lilith, and Serakh bat Asher (the granddaughter of Zilpah). Rather, they are relegated to the "Cameo Appearances," where they

are described as "Leah's and Rachel's maids, Jacob's concubines, mother [*sic*] of four of Israel's tribes."²³ One heading refers to "Rachel's Maid, Bilhah."²⁴ The final list of "Women in the Torah" emphasizes their lowly status—maidservant first, concubine second, mother third.²⁵ Even their motherhood is challenged by Leah's surprising assertion of a claim beyond any in Torah or traditional midrash: Zilpah, she says, is "my surrogate" whose two sons plus her own six sons constitute "my eight sons."²⁶ This non-recognition of Zilpah's motherhood violates the sense of Leah's declaration in the Torah after the birth of her youngest son: "This time, my husband will live with me, for I have borne him *six* sons" (Gen. 30:20).

Wives or Concubines?

Both Rachel and Leah present their maids to Jacob as an *ishah*, using a presentation formula similar in wording to Laban's presentation of Rachel to Jacob: so-and-so gives so-and-so his/her daughter/maid to Jacob as an *ishah* (Gen. 30:4; 30:9; 29:28). In all three instances the *Artscroll* renders *ishah* as "wife." In contrast, the NJV of the Plaut commentary translates *ishah* as wife only in reference to Rachel. For the maids, the NJV translation of *ishah* is "concubine."

It is striking, and perhaps shocking, that the egalitarianism of the original language is withheld from the English reader of the NJV translation. Moreover, the status distinction it introduces contradicts the traditional rabbinic inference of significance in the absence of the word *pilegish*, "concu-

bine,” in the presentation statements. *Genesis Rabbah* clearly emphasizes this absence in its comments on the similar wording of Sarah’s presentation of Hagar to Abraham: “*le’ishah velo lepilegesh*, to be a wife but not a concubine.”²⁷

The distinction between wife and concubine in ancient Israelite society is not sharply drawn. According to Nahum Sarna, the basic difference between a concubine and a wife is simply that no bride-price is paid for a concubine, and “the interchange of terminology shows that over time the distinction in social status between the two often tended to be effaced.”²⁸ This interchange of wife-concubine terminology occurs in the Reuben-Bilhah incident, where the text does refer to Bilhah as a *pilegesh* (Gen. 35: 22). The *Artscroll* and Plaut handle this in very different ways. Plaut says nothing about it—the English of the NJV has already established “concubine” as the appropriate title for Bilhah. In contrast, the *Artscroll* views this word as so obviously inappropriate that its purpose must be to present us with “Reuben’s slur that Bilhah was a concubine.” In fact, according to the *Artscroll*, Reuben’s disregard for Bilhah was the substance of his sin:

... that the Torah here refers to her as a *concubine* is only to allude to Reuben’s *misconception* of her as such. He believed that she was not Jacob’s full-fledged *wife*, and therefore he became indignant over the slight to his mother’s honor. But later in this verse, the To-

rah goes on to emphasize that *all* twelve sons—including those of Bilhah and Zilpah—were equally full-fledged *sons of Jacob*, and that by implication Bilhah was his legitimate wife. That Reuben erroneously entertained thoughts to the contrary, was tantamount to defiling his father’s wife, and the Torah records it as such.²⁹

Plaut defends the selective translation “concubine” for *ishah* on the basis of two Near Eastern legal precedents: a marriage contract from Nuzi and the Code of Hammurabi. From the Nuzi contract, he quotes the stipulation that a childless wife will supply her husband a slave girl as “concubine,”³⁰ but in fact another translator has rendered that same Nuzi word as “wife,”³¹ so the Nuzi precedent cannot resolve the concubine/wife translation problem.

As to the Code of Hammurabi, Plaut points to its statement that “a slave girl elevated by her mistress should not and could not claim equality.” He seems on shaky ground, however, in arguing that social status differentials imposed by this pre-Israelite law code must be reflected in dichotomous translations of a single Hebrew word. Certainly one effect of this contrast in translation is clear. Rendering as “concubine” the word commonly understood in its Hebrew context to mean wife, despite the absence of the Hebrew word commonly understood to mean concubine, subtly facilitates the denial of mother status to Bilhah and Zilpah by assigning them to a cat-

egory completely alien to our present-day concept of family. The exclusion of “concubines” is less noticeable and less troubling to modern readers than the exclusion of “wives.”

***Ibaneḥ Mimenah*: Sarah and Rachel and the Fruitfulness Tradition**

The interpretation of Rachel’s offering speech in Genesis 30:3 is crucial to the adoption *derash*. Her words are an obvious echo of Sarah’s statement two generations earlier as she offered her maid Hagar to Abraham. Both Rachel and Sarah say: “*ibaneḥ mimenah*” / “may I be built up through her” or “may I too have a son/sons/children through her.” To these two words Sarah added a “perhaps” and Rachel adds “*gam anokhi*” / “I, too.”

From the perspective of the adoption *derash*, Rachel’s identification with Sarah could be problematic, and Plaut does not remind the reader that Rachel repeats Sarah’s very words. (“Sarah’s dilemma is reenacted” is his only comment.) After all, despite Sarah’s *ibaneḥ mimenah* declaration, God did recognize Hagar and not Sarah as the mother of Ishmael and all Ishmael’s descendants (Says God, “But the son of the slave-woman as well will I make into a nation . . .” Gen. 21:13). If we follow Rashi’s interpretation that “I too” is Rachel’s reference to Grandmother Sarah’s words, we would understand her to be fully aware as she speaks that the formula *ibaneḥ mimenah* does not guarantee a transfer of mother status. For

Rachel such a transfer could be at most a hope, with Sarah’s “perhaps” still included.

What is the early interpretation of the nature of Rachel’s hope? One answer is found in the Torah text itself, in Leah’s explanation of her renewed fertility after presenting Zilpah to Jacob, when she says, “God has granted me my reward because I gave my maidservant to my husband” (Gen. 30:18). Rabbinic Judaism offers substantial additional support for understanding Rachel’s hope as a wish to be rewarded with her own biological children. *Genesis Rabbah*’s explanation of the reward dynamics is clear: “And God remembered Rachel: and this was but just, because she had brought her rival into her home . . . For the sake of Dan [Bilhah’s first son], Rachel was remembered, for the sake of Dan, Joseph and Benjamin were born . . .”³²

A lively midrash recounts an argument between Rachel and Jacob, in which she accuses him of not measuring up to his grandfather Abraham, who had prayed for Sarah to conceive even though, like Jacob, he already had children of his own. Jacob responds, “Then do as my grandmother did. My grandmother took a rival wife into the house,” to which Rachel replies, “If that is the only impediment, here is my maid, Bilhah . . .”³³

In the sixteenth century, Sforno interpreted Rachel’s hope in terms of a biological process. In his view, Rachel’s *ibaneḥ mimenah* expresses her wish that the jealousy she expects to feel for Bilhah will stimulate her reproductive system.³⁴

The *Artscroll* weighs in heavily on the side of the fertility-wish tradition, citing Rashi, Sforino, and Midrash in support. It makes clear that Rachel's model is Sarah, who was built up as a consequence of her gift of Hagar—not through Hagar's son Ishmael but through her own son Isaac.

Samson Kardimon has suggested that the sages' early understanding of *ibaneh mimenah* as the mistress's wish for her own fertility was "too irrational" for modern biblical commentators who therefore moved to the more "rational" adoption reading.³⁵ The choice of translation for the word *ibaneh*, which can be linked to *banah*, build, or *ben*, son, may be related to the translator's point of view in regard to this fruitfulness vs. adoption issue. It seems consistent with Kardimon's view that the *Artscroll* translates the *ibaneh* declaration as "and I too *may be built up* through her," while the "modern" NJV's translation, in the *ben*/son tradition, is more suggestive of adoption: "that through her I too *may have children*."³⁶

Earlier in the century, in a less "modern" time, the previous Torah translation of the Jewish Publication Society (1917) had rendered *ibaneh* as "builted up"—and *ishah* as "wife" in reference to the handmaidens.³⁷ One might speculate that these changes in the JPS translation were responsive not only to the pressure of an evolving rationalism, as Kardimon maintained, but also of the pressure on liberal Judaism in particular of evolving egalitarian values in regard to women. The pressure to be gender-inclusive reinforces the usefulness of a clear ratio-

nale—adoption—for limiting the matriarchs to the familiar *arba imahot*.

Birth on the Knees

For the adoption *derash*, the most important words spoken by Rachel in Genesis 30:3 are "that she may bear on my knees." The *Artscroll* takes a metaphorical view of this phrase. Its only comment is based on Targum Onkelos, whose Aramaic translation actually omits any reference to knees. Enhanced by the commentator's interpolations, Onkelos in the *Artscroll* reads: "[This is a figurative expression meaning] and I will rear [the children she will bear]."³⁸

In contrast, Plaut imputes ceremonial power to the act. He comments that Rachel is performing "the ancient custom of establishing the child's legitimacy or of adopting him by placing him on her knee."³⁹ Although he asserts that in four ancient legal traditions this ceremony transfers motherhood, the published support for that assertion seems rather thin. E.A. Speiser, a major source for Plaut on nonbiblical Near Eastern parallels to Genesis, cites in his own Anchor Bible translation only one legend as evidence for an on-her-knees adoption ceremony, and he seems rather tentative about its power to transfer mother status. Rather, he emphasizes Rachel's intentional state:

To place a child on one's knees is to acknowledge it as one's own . . . This act is normally performed by the father. Here, however, it is of primary interest to the adoptive mother who

is intent on establishing her legal right to the child.⁴⁰

Among the many extant Near Eastern adoption contracts there are few clearly relevant models for the adoption *derash*.⁴¹ In the Nuzi contract cited by Plaut, the children of the slave girl do not become the children of the mistress. In fact, Van Seters dismisses this text as irrelevant to the Jacob story, asserting that “the situation is so different from anything in the OT [Old Testament] that to use it as a parallel is more misleading than helpful.”⁴² As to the Neo-Assyrian contract often mentioned as a precedent, scholars disagree on its meaning because of its ambiguous pronouns.⁴³ And the Code of Hammurabi applies only to marriage with a priestess obligated to childlessness who will give her husband a slave woman so that he may have descendants. This is unlike the case of Jacob, who already had four sons when Bilhah became his wife. More importantly, the Code does not stipulate that the slave’s child will be considered the child of the priestess.⁴⁴

Jeffrey Tigay, in his *Encyclopedia Judaica* article on adoption, reviews ancient Near Eastern law and rejects the theory that birth on the knees represents an adoption ceremony. His conclusion is supportive of the fertility-wish interpretation. Birth on the knees, he says,

more likely reflects the position taken in antiquity by a woman during childbirth, straddling the knees of an attendant (another woman or at times her

own husband) upon whose knees the emerging child was received . . . Perhaps Rachel attended Bilhah herself in order to cure, in a sympathetic-magical way, her own infertility . . .⁴⁵

God Has Given Me a Son

As Rachel names Bilhah’s first child, she declares, “God has judged me; He has also heard my voice and has given me a son” (Gen. 30:6). These words are apparently the basis for Plaut’s assertion that from this point on Rachel “speaks of Bilhah’s children as ‘mine.’” In other words, despite the fact that there is no biblical statement by Rachel claiming Bilhah’s children as “mine,” Plaut declares this naming to be the defining moment when motherhood officially passes from Bilhah to Rachel. In contrast, the *Artscroll* interpretation is more nuanced. Its comment on Rachel’s “son” statement is: “One to whom I can be at least a *spiritual* mother. Although I am not his natural mother, I can care for him and raise him as my contribution to Jacob’s family” (italics in the original). The literal reading here is rejected; Rachel can provide some motherly services but she can never be fully and completely the mother of Dan. The baby boy added to Rachel’s household is called her son in the same way that Ruth’s child is called the son of her mother-in-law Naomi:

Naomi took the child, and held it in her bosom, and she became his nurse. The neigh-

borhood women gave him a name, saying, 'A son is born to Naomi.' (Ruth 4:16-17)

This "son of the household" understanding is consistent with Tigay's opinion that Rachel here is proclaiming her "ownership" of the child's mother rather than the adoption of the child.⁴⁶

Honored but Still Invisible: An Orthodox Resolution

There can be no question about the *Artscroll* commentary's openness to "seeing" Bilhah and Zilpah. In the detailed textual commentary, their presence is highlighted in bold-face type and in story headings. They are accorded honor, dignity, full wifehood, and full motherhood, all on the basis of traditional rabbinic Judaism. A different approach, however, emerges in Rabbi Nosson Scherman's "overview" of the story of Jacob's marriages, which the *Artscroll* offers as a context for understanding the textual commentary.⁴⁷ Here Bilhah and Zilpah are simply ignored, their exclusion apparent even in the overview's title, "Jacob, Rachel, and Leah." In this fourteen-page essay Bilhah's name appears twice, but only as "Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid." Zilpah is never mentioned. The complete removal of Bilhah and Zilpah from the family story is achieved in the overview's summary statement: "Jacob and the family he was destined to establish represented a complete unity of purpose. So did the two wives he was to take."⁴⁸

This perspective suggests that the

real purpose behind the textual commentator's spirited defense of Bilhah and Zilpah as free women and full wives is the idealization of Jacob, who is described in the overview as the "chosen one of the Patriarchs, the ideal human being whose wishes were motivated only by truth."⁴⁹ His two names, Jacob and Israel, according to the overview, represent two aspects of his perfection, and for each there is the perfect partner: for Jacob there is Rachel, representing the Torah way in the world, and for Israel there is Leah, representing the holiness of Israel. But *all* the conjugal relationships of such a holy figure, even those relegated to ultimate invisibility, must be regarded as sanctified marriages.

The allegorical reading of the story permits this easy separation of textual details from larger metaphorical concepts. Bilhah and Zilpah may be honored at the textual level as appropriate marital partners and mothers of the tribes but at the allegorical level only the primary wives represent attributes of godliness. The servant wives recede back into their invisibility.

The invisibility of the servant mothers safeguards the preferred readings of the story of Jacob's marriages in different ways for different groups. For Orthodox Judaism, total invisibility is unnecessary. As one sees in the *Artscroll*, Bilhah and Zilpah may be acknowledged and given the honor and dignity that befit consorts of Jacob, but they must disappear into the maids' quarters when the high-minded allegory of unfolding patriarchal perfection is recounted. For liberal Judaism in general, the invisibility

provided by the adoption *derash* avoids acknowledging the contradiction between a commitment to the inclusion of the matriarchs and a caste exclusion of two matriarchs. In addition, for feminist liberal Jews invisibility hides two women whose only known attributes, as they are presented in the Torah, are silence, subservience, and obedience.

Bilhah and Zilpah in the Jacob Family

Despite its suppression of their voices, the biblical text in a certain way proclaims the centrality of Bilhah and Zilpah by connecting the first mention of each of their names with the consummation of Jacob's first two marriages. The conjugal union that formally initiates marriage with each primary wife is juxtaposed to the narrative presentation of the servant who will become the secondary wife. Thus, Zilpah is introduced immediately before Jacob's first sexual relations with Leah; Bilhah is introduced immediately after Jacob's first sexual relations with Rachel. Perhaps this temporal and textual linkage is a reminder of the semantic connection between the word for handmaiden, *shifhah*, and the word for family, *mishpahah*.

The handmaidens remain with the family, so the *shifhah/mishpahah* connection continues, and this loads the adoption *derash* with a heavy burden of class insensitivity. It is unlikely that liberal/feminist Jews would find it possible to defend as ethical an adoption arrangement in which a birth mother of lower socio-economic

status becomes a non-mother servant in the adopting family. Certainly issues of exploitation would be raised, and appropriately so. Moreover, it would be difficult to reconcile this situation with Jewish law, which stipulates that adoptive parents never become the legal parents of a child but rather function as agents of the natural parents.⁵⁰

Because Bilhah and Zilpah live with the family, their role is not easily interpreted in terms of the practice of biological surrogacy as we know it today. But even if one insists on defining Bilhah and Zilpah as "surrogate mothers," withholding recognition of their motherhood would seem to be a violation of Jewish law, since most contemporary halakhic authorities hold the view that the woman who physically bears a child remains its legal mother.⁵¹

BarZeL: The Power of All the Mothers

In recent years feminist readings have opened up biblical texts to new meanings by giving voice to silent and powerless female characters. Yet Bilhah and Zilpah, the completely silent and completely powerless servant-matriarchs, remain invisible, canceled out of their motherhood by the adoption *derash*. It is paradoxical that Orthodox Judaism in its most traditional teaching accords honor to two maid-servants ignored and excluded by egalitarian and feminist Jews. The adoption *derash* disregards a long rabbinic tradition which recognizes the personhood of Bilhah and Zilpah. It

reduces them to non-persons who serve only as egg-donors and uterus-providers, and it relies on unclear anthropological evidence as justification.

In a dictionary of Hebrew acronyms, one can find the entry "BRZL," the initials of Bilhah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Leah, all four of the mothers of the sons of Jacob called Israel.⁵² Note that in that acronym Bilhah precedes her mistress Rachel, and Zilpah precedes her mistress Leah. The four mothers make a powerful combination. Together they form the word *barzel*, iron. According to kabbalistic teaching, it is from this connection to the matriarchs Bilhah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Leah that a piece of iron derives its magical protective force. At times of cosmic danger, such as at the solstices and equinoxes, it is said that a piece of BaRZeL in the drinking water keeps it from contamination. And a piece of BaRZeL by the side of a pregnant woman or under the pillow of a dying person can safeguard life's beginning and its ending.⁵³ Perhaps this mystical B-R-Z-L tradition that recognized and valued all of the Mothers of Israel, the servant-mothers as well as the mistress-mothers, could inspire modern Jewish feminists to challenge the ancient caste exclusion we conveniently allow ourselves not to see.

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1. Unless otherwise noted, biblical translations are from *Tanach: The Stone Edition* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1996).
 2. *Kol Haneshamah*, the Reconstructionist siddur, continues to place Rachel ahead of Leah, while the Reform movement's new *Gates of Prayer: A Gender Sensitive Prayerbook* recognizes Leah's age seniority.
 3. Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots,*

and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 69, 27, 84-87.

4. Sondra Henry & Emily Taitz, *Written Out of History: Our Jewish Foremothers*, 3rd ed. (Sunnyside, NY: Biblio Press, 1988), 19.

5. Norma Rosen, *Biblical Women Unbound* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 68-92.

6. Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1996), 57.

7. *Numbers Rabbah* 12:17. Also, *Song of Songs Rabbah* 6:15; *Esther Rabbah* 1:12. *The Soncino Midrash Rabbah*. CD-ROM (Institute for Computers in Jewish Life & Davka Corporation, 1991-1995).

8. Menahem M. Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation* (New York: American Biblical Society, 1959) 4:94.

9. Rashi on Gen. 29:34; Ramban on Gen. 30:9.

10. Ohr Hahaim on Gen. 30:3.

11. *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation* 4:100.

12. B. *Shabbat* 55b.

13. *Zohar* 1:176a. *The Soncino Zohar*. CD-ROM (Institute for Computers in Jewish Life & Davka Corporation, 1991-1995).

14. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1946) 2:191.

15. *Genesis Rabbah* 84:11.

16. *The Legends of the Jews*, 2:27.

17. *The Legends of the Jews*, 2:181.

18. *The Legends of the Jews*, 2:167.

19. Burton Visotzky, *The Genesis of Ethics* (New York: Random House, 1996), 10.

20. *The Artscroll Tanach Series: Breishis*, trans. Meir Zlotowitz, 2 vols. (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1995) 1b:xxii.

21. W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981) xviii.

22. *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah*, ed. Harry M. Orlinsky, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1969) 19.

23. *The Five Books of Miriam*, xix-xxiv.

24. *The Five Books of Miriam*, 57.

25. *The Five Books of Miriam*, 338-40.

26. *The Five Books of Miriam*, 55.

27. *Genesis Rabbah* 45:3.
28. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, comment. Nahum Sarna (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 208n4.
29. *Artscroll*, 1524.
30. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, 111; 1697n7.
31. John Van Seters, "The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 87: 401-8. 404.
32. *Genesis Rabbah* 71:7.
33. *Genesis Rabbah* 71:7.
34. Sforno on Genesis 30:3.
35. Samson Kardimon, "Adoption as a Remedy for Infertility in the Period of the Patriarchs," *Journal of Semitic Studies*. 3: 123-126. 123.
36. The NJV translation seems to attribute to the mistresses foreknowledge of the number of children Hagar and Bilhah will bear. Thus, the translation uses the singular "a son" for Sarah and the plural "children" for Rachel.
37. The changes to "concubine" and the "son" tradition are maintained in the most recent JPS revision, but a note states that the literal meaning of *ibaneh* is "be built up."
38. See Onkelos to Gen. 30:3.
39. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, 202.
40. E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis*, 3rd ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1983), 230.
41. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Patriarchal Family Relationships and Near Eastern Law," *Biblical Archeologist*, 44: 209-214.
42. E.C. Stone & D. Owen. *Adoption in Old Babylonian Nippur and the Archive of man-num-mesu-lissur* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1991).
43. "The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel," 405.
44. A.K. Grayson & John Van Seters, "The Childless Wife in Assyria and the Stories of Genesis," *Orientalia* 32: 485-6.
45. "Patriarchal Family Relationships and Near Eastern Law," 211.
46. Jeffrey Tigay, "Adoption," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972).
47. "Adoption" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*.
48. *The Artscroll Tanach Series: Breishis*, 1190-1203.
49. *The Artscroll Tanach Series: Breishis*, 1202.
50. *The Artscroll Tanach Series: Breishis*, 1190.
51. Elliot N. Dorff, "Artificial Insemination, Egg Donation and Adoption," A responsum adopted by the Committee on Jewish Laws and Standards, *Conservative Judaism* 19:1 (Fall 1996): 3-60.
52. Michael Gold, "Adoption: A New Problem for Jewish Law," *Judaism* 36:4 (Fall, 1987): 443-450.
53. S. Ashkenazi & D. Yarden, *Otzar Rashei Teivot* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1978).
54. Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1961), 160, 313n14.

Mordecai M. Kaplan— Teacher of Midrash

BY MEL SCULT

From a very early point in his life, the classroom was Mordecai Kaplan's essential context and the center of his life. Understanding Kaplan's life as a teacher will not only instruct us regarding his influence but will also shed light on his character, his ideology, and the way in which he functioned. There is no denying that Kaplan's ideology is radical, and yet there is a sense in which he spent most of his life engaged in *talmud Torah*.

In 1909 Kaplan became principal of the newly formed Teachers' Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and inaugurated a course in "Religion." Teaching this course accelerated his own understanding considerably for he was forced to think through the fundamental aspects of Judaism. Without an appropriate text (though later he did use Schechter's *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*), Kaplan began by turning to the Torah. "Besides administering the Teachers' Institute, I was to give in-

struction in religion . . . In the past, the belief that every word in the Pentateuch was divinely dictated was sufficient to make religion an exciting affair for the Jew. With that belief gone, I felt that we had to discover the deep underlying spiritual motives which actuated the final redaction of the Pentateuch. If we could only retrieve these motives, Jews would once again find the Torah inspiring."¹ The great problem was authority. Biblical criticism seemed to put an end to the Torah as a divinely revealed work and as the preeminently authoritative text that it had been in the past. Kaplan wrestled with the question and by June of 1912 had evolved the beginning of an answer. Speaking to the Seminary Alumnae at Tannersville, New York, he confronted the basic issue head on: ". . . does it necessarily follow that if we accept the method of Criticism, we must surrender the possibility of its (the Torah) being authoritative and eternal?"²

The answer was a resounding "no."

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While he accepted the underlying assumptions of biblical criticism, Kaplan nonetheless placed the value of the Torah beyond the realm of the social and textual sciences. By declaring that the function of the Torah was primary in determining its significance, he put the whole matter of origin aside as a religious or spiritual problem. If the Torah could be made to function again in Jewish life, its origin, whatever it was, would not detract from its significance. Kaplan's first major philosophical statement grew directly out of his teaching.³

Homiletics and Midrash

A year after Kaplan established the Teachers' Institute he was appointed professor of homiletics in the Seminary rabbinical school. In this position, Kaplan also supervised the student sermons given at the Seminary synagogue.

Soon after Kaplan began teaching rabbinical students, he added Midrash to his course in homiletics. For the next thirty five years these two subjects (homiletics and Midrash) became the staples of his offering to future rabbis.

In the mid-1940's with a revision of the rabbinical school curriculum, Kaplan ceased teaching homiletics and inaugurated a course entitled "The Philosophies of Religion." From the very beginning he had taught his homiletics class more than just how to write and deliver a sermon. He emphasized the primary religious issues even though officially he was only teaching sermon-giving. Rabbis had to have something to say in their ser-

mons and Kaplan was going to help them find their message. For all their great knowledge, the other Seminary professors never confronted religious problems directly. They were committed to teaching the classical Jewish texts and assumed that, somehow or other, the students would find the answers to their religious problems on their own.

Kaplan's most rewarding course throughout the years was Midrash. Since the Midrash is really a collection of homilies, many of which may have originally been delivered in the synagogue, it was a natural resource for future sermons. Kaplan loved the Midrash because it stood at the center of the traditional attempt to make the text of the Hebrew Scriptures relevant. For Kaplan, the Midrash was a vast storehouse of useful interpretations of the holy text. It was the most important text that a rabbi could study.

Master of Midrash

Here is Kaplan talking about his delight in teaching Midrash:

My most enjoyable teaching hours are those in midrash. My mind effervesces with ideas every time I come upon a passage in the midrash. The most unpromising passages sometimes yield the most exciting meanings. For the first time after having taught the midrash of Shir-Ha-Shirim so many years it occurred to me how much more convincing proof it offers of the fact that in Jewish religion God figures as a God of

love . . . Take for example all the feeling which the sages derive from the text [Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. Song of Songs 1:2] which they interpret as Israel's yearning for the divine kiss like the one they received from God at the Red Sea, or at Sinai or in the Sanctuary . . .⁴

Kaplan's greatest talents were in midrashic interpretation. Robert Gordis, one of his most famous students, characterized him as "Master of Midrash."⁵ Gordis reports that he pleaded with Kaplan to write an introduction to the methodology of Midrash, but he never did. Indeed in all of Kaplan's writings there is very little material which deals directly with the text of the midrash. Kaplan may cite midrashic sources which support a particular idea he is discussing, but his focus is almost never the rabbinic text per se. He was absorbed in the exposition of his own ideology and never found the time or had the interest in writing on the Midrash directly.⁶

We are fortunate, however, in having some fragmentary material which sheds light on Kaplan's teaching of Midrash demonstrating the way he approached midrashic texts.⁷ It is obvious that he has great sensitivity to the text and a real talent for seeing the point the rabbis were trying to make and explaining it in contemporary terms. Some of our examples are from Genesis and some from the Midrash on the Song of Songs. The Midrash was his most essential metier—here is where his genius lies—more than in

philosophy or theology. More than anything else Kaplan was the consummate preacher deriving an exalted message from the sacred text.

Modern Meanings

His notes constitute a kind of running commentary on the midrashic text. Most frequently he is simply explaining the Midrash without any attempt to read in, to change it or to up-date it. On Genesis 2:8 for example, the Midrash voices its opinion that Adam was put in the Garden not because of his own merit but because of Abraham's merit. Adam, having been driven out, cannot serve as a model. Kaplan then goes on to explain:

In our way of thinking the idea involved here is the following: as we contemplate man with all his imperfections, we begin to doubt the meaning and purpose in life. The solution is not to take man with his weaknesses as a standard of life but rather what can come through the full use of ones potentialities (i.e., Abraham ought to be the model not Adam).⁸

Sometimes in explaining, he deepens and expands the message of the text in a way that is not obvious from the text itself. Genesis 2:12 mentions the existence of gold, and the Midrash comments that gold was only created so it could be used in the Temple. Kaplan first tells us that the rabbis frequently used the Temple as a way of referring to the public good. In

connecting gold to the Temple they are thus commenting on the matter of wealth and the way it ought to be used for the commonweal. "Man as an individual does not deserve to use such costly materials (as gold). They are not essential to his life. Their existence is due to their usefulness in glorifying God. Surplus possessions whether of the universe or the individual have a place in the world only as far as they serve God . . ." ⁹

The rabbis sometimes speak in metaphors and the meaning of the metaphor often needs to be nailed down. In talking of the Tree of Life (Genesis 2:9), the rabbis say that it was so large it took five hundred years to traverse it from one end to the other. Kaplan's explanation is that to the rabbis the universe was 500 years long. "The tree of life or salvation was offered to the entire world, not for Israel alone. It coincides with rabbinic universalism that all mankind is eligible for salvation or eternal life." ¹⁰

Eisegesis vs. Exegesis

One key issue in Kaplan's teaching of Midrash is the matter of his reading his thought into the text of the Midrash. Many feel that he did this consistently. In considering the issue we ought to consider the fact that the Midrash itself constantly reads meanings into the text which are not obviously there and that it is only by such a reading-in that the text can be kept alive. The Jewish tradition or any tradition only lives if we make it our own—that is, if we relate it to our world and our experience. This is pre-

cisely what Kaplan was doing when he commented on the Midrash.

In Genesis 2:8 for example we find the word *mekedem*, which means "east." *Mekedem* however could also be read as *mekodem*, meaning "early." The rabbis assert that Eden was actually created early [*mekodem*] on the third day, while Adam was created on the sixth day. We are thus shown that man's reward was there before he did anything to deserve it. The Midrash is explicit when Adam says "the Holy one Blessed be He, prepared a reward for me before I even started to act."

Kaplan then comments on the notion of reward as it may be understood here. "Reward for righteous living is a difficult notion to apply today. We must phrase the concept in its modern equivalent—self realization. We see that self-fulfillment was inherent in the moral order outlined by the rabbis . . . the interpretation of *mekedem* shows us that the world is so conditioned that self fulfillment is inherent in the Universe for one who lives the moral life. The rabbis are saying that reward is built in—that the world is a rewarding place. The interpretation is pure Kaplan and yet it does fit the Midrash.

It is quite clear that Kaplan was aware of the matter of reading in meanings and wanted to be as careful as possible. One indication of his caution is the fact that when he felt he was reading into the text he explicitly said so. The Midrash comments that Adam was supposed to be immortal but that he died because he was disobedient. Kaplan refers to the doc-

trine of original sin but says it is “worn out,” there really is nothing much we can do with it. So he says we may read into the passage: “The Human race was intended to be eternal but it is destroying itself. War and other forms of racial suicide may cause the extinction of the human race . . . the rabbis did not actually mean this idea but it is not contrary to their thought.”¹¹

Deriving Meaning for the Modern Jew

In another example, we see Kaplan’s ability to take the Midrash and apply it as a rabbi and as a preacher. The Midrash, in commenting on the tree of knowledge, gives us several rabbis speculating about what kind of tree it was. The Midrash finally says, “The Holy One Blessed Be He did not reveal (the name) of that tree.” We really don’t know what kind it was so that there should be no constant reminder of man’s weakness every time he looked at that particular tree. It is a matter of man’s honor and self respect, his *kavod* as the Midrash puts it.

Kaplan then deals with self respect and the dignity of the individual. “The honor of the human being must not be impugned. Adam or humanity in general must not be degraded. The belief in God comes through the belief in man. We can not remove the idea of man’s dignity and still have religion (because man is created in the image of God). All those who speak of the humanist movement in religion as irreligious do not appreciate the prob-

lem.”¹² Kaplan is perfectly traditional here in talking about the dignity of the individual but then he makes a significant leap which also radicalizes the whole statement and helps us to understand the essential way in which humanism and religion fit together.

Kaplan on the Midrash on the Song of Songs

Beside *Genesis Rabbah*, the Midrash that engaged Kaplan’s attention was the one on the Song of Songs. He became interested in this Midrash when he was still in his twenties and thought of writing his doctoral dissertation about it. When he went to Europe on his honeymoon in 1908, he spent time copying a manuscript of this Midrash that was in Frankfort.

The Midrash itself begins with a number of questions about Solomon, the purported author of the Song of Songs. His status was not unambiguous because of the rather tarnished record of his reign. The rabbis are concerned to raise his status so as to explain how it is that his writings are included in the canon. Kaplan was quite struck by the contrast between the image of Solomon that emerges from the biblical text and the portrait according to the rabbis. “The rabbis reconstructed history to suit their needs,” Kaplan said, and “because Solomon becomes the spokesman of Jewish history, he’s transformed and idealized.”¹³ Solomon was not the only person whose image the rabbis amended. In commenting on Abraham for example, Kaplan tells us that according to the Torah text he is the

father of the nation, whereas according to the rabbis he is the originator of monotheism and the founder of a new religion.

The Midrash on the Song of Songs is of course very much concerned with the concept of wisdom (*hokhmah*). In his comments on this concept, we see a clear Kaplanian approach, yet he is really not far from the texts which he is reading. The Midrash says that when Solomon got wisdom he immediately understood the language of the animals and birds. Kaplan demythologizes and generalizes this midrashic point when he says that “the rabbis conceived this request [for wisdom] as a means of enabling a person to live well in this world.” In other words, “Wisdom is whatever enables us to live well in the world.”¹⁴

He carries this point further when he brings in the famous personification of wisdom which is found in chapter 8 of Proverbs. Here wisdom is God’s confidant and exists before creation. God seems to use or consult wisdom in creating the world. The rabbis understood this to mean that God consulted the Torah in creating the world. For Kaplan this meant that what is best for us—i.e., Torah—is reflected in the universe. The universe is thus constructed so as to be conducive to man’s salvation. In Kaplan’s words, “Torah is *hokhmah* (wisdom). God created the world by *hokhmah* (wisdom) and man lives according to the Torah. In order to understand Torah and *hokhmah* we must understand that it means equating the world order (of nature) and the order of life at its best, i.e., Torah. Thus the Stoics said

that a person should act rationally. The Stoics equate reason with nature (of the world) the laws by which individual life is to be governed parallels the laws of nature.”¹⁵

What Kaplan is doing in this last example is to demythologize the rabbinic belief that God consulted the Torah when he created the world. For Kaplan the metaphor means that there is a congruity between the way nature functions and the values which ought to govern our behavior. The world was created so that it would be conducive to living according to the Torah (or life abundant as he said later).

These many examples help us to understand Kaplan’s methods of teaching Midrash. Year after year, the rabbinical students passed through his Midrash class and came to appreciate deeply his talent in explaining the Midrash and in helping them to appropriate it in a way that would be useful for their own preaching. As one former student put it, “Kaplan provoked and inspired students to think about things that they had taken for granted before. He was brilliant in the way he handled the text.”¹⁶ In considering Kaplan’s impact on his students, however, we need to distinguish between his value as a teacher of Midrash and the value of his philosophy; many rejected his philosophy but all valued his teaching.

A Typical Day in Kaplan’s Midrash Class

Below is an excerpt from Kaplan’s journal wherein he describes a session

with his Midrash and Homiletics class:¹⁷

Tuesday, March 6, 1934

When I manage to develop interesting and fruitful ideas in the course of a lesson I give to one of my classes all my inner conflicts are resolved. This was the case this morning; during each of the three sessions at the Seminary I succeeded in bringing out one or more significant points.

In the Midrash hour I made the following comments on *Genesis Rabbah* XXIV, 2: The Rabbinic interpretation of Psalms 139¹⁸ constitutes an attempt to find in it the metaphysical conception of man. That conception is associated with the creation of Adam. As developed in the Midrashic passage it is strikingly similar to the idea of man as developed by the Platonists. Not only is the heavenly Adam (Logos) represented as filling all space but we even find an allusion to *hulay* [Greek: wood, matter or substance] in the term *golah* [Heb. unformed substance i.e. in Psalms 139:17].

The significance of the Platonic doctrine of ideas is that Reality is meaningful and not chaos. It is intended to convey the religious affirmation of life's worth.

The statement that the Heavenly Adam had the book of subsequent generations of leaders unrolled to him implies that the leaders give significance to the cosmos of human society.

The notion of *shelma'alah* [Heb. above],¹⁹ *bet mikdash* [Heb. The Sanctuary i.e. Temple], *Yerushalayim* [Heb. Jerusalem] *Yeshivah* [Heb. academy] *sefer toldot shelma'alah*

[Heb. The book of the generations which is above . . .] is again a transfer from the Platonic system of ideas. During the homiletic hour I stressed the point that a world-outlook is incompatible with collective or folk religion. I advanced first the argument based on the analysis of the meaning of world-outlook. A world-outlook has to be individually achieved and freely maintained, otherwise the truths or ideas which seem to express such an outlook are merely symbols or sancta . . . With Maimonides holding a highly rational concept of Reality and Nahmanides a highly mystical, the Jewish religion which they both professed can hardly be said to have had a common world-outlook.

During the sermon hour I interpreted the statement of R. Johanan about the red heifer²⁰ to the effect that the laws pertaining to it should be accepted as divinely decreed to mean the following for us: To pass upon religious rites and observances whether they are to be continued or modified, and to find their inner meaning, we have to come to them with a spirit of piety and national loyalty. Otherwise they will seem superfluous and irrelevant *ki lo davar rayke hu* [Heb. Deuteronomy 32:47 "This is not a trifling thing for you (it is your very life)."]

. . . . considering that I had come to class this morning entirely unprepared and that all these ideas came to me in the process of teaching, this was quite a fruitful day.

1. Kaplan on instruction in religion and the Torah Mordecai M. Kaplan, "The Influences

That Have Shaped My Life," *The Reconstructionist*, VIII, no. 10 (June 26, 1942).

2. Speech to the Alumni, "Paper Read at Meeting of Alumni at Tannersville, July 1912," R.R.C. In an interview in 1972 Kaplan asserted that Schechter did not believe that the Torah was given at Mount Sinai. When pressed for documentation, however, he gave none.

3. Mordecai M. Kaplan, "The Supremacy of Torah," in *Students' Annual, Jewish Theological Seminary of America* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1914).

4. Kaplan journal, December 1, 1952. All material in square brackets is mine.

5. Robert Gordis interview with this author, April 1984.

6. Interview with Louis Finkelstein, March 1974.

7. The Midrash material consists of typed class notes which are found among Kaplan's papers at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

8. "Notes on *Bereshit Rabbah*," p. 8. The text of the midrash is *Midrash Rabbah* XV:4.

9. "Notes on *Bereshit Rabbah*," p. 6 on *Midrash Rabbah* XVI:2.

10. "Notes," p. 3 on *Midrash Rabbah* XV:6.

11. "Notes," p. 5 on *Midrash Rabbah* XVI:1.

12. "Notes," p. 5 on *Midrash Rabbah* XVI:1.

13. Kaplan Manuscript on *Shir-Ha-Shirim Rabbah* p. 10.

14. Kaplan Manuscript on *Shir-Ha-Shirim Rabbah* p. 10.

15. Kaplan on wisdom in Kaplan Manuscript on *Shir-Ha-Shirim Rabbah* p. 17. The midrash about Solomon understanding the animals is in *Shir-Ha-Shirim Rabbah* I 1.9.

Kaplan's comments on *Proverbs* 8 are tied to *Shir-Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 2, 5 where *hokhmah* is compared to food. Kaplan's MSS, p. 33.

16. From an interview with Rabbi Nathan Kollin, a student of Kaplan's from the late 1920's.

17. This entry will appear in the three-volume selection from Kaplan's journal. The first volume 1913-1934 will appear next year and will be published by Wayne State University Press and The Reconstructionist Press.

18. The midrash in question comments on Genesis 5:1 "This is the book of the generations of Adam . . ." and cites a verse from Psalm 139:17 which reads "Thy eyes did see my unshaped flesh, for in my book all things are written . . ." This verse is taken to mean that God saw the future even before Adam was fully formed. This midrash also describes Adam as being as large as the world.

19. Kaplan is referring here to the upper heavenly realm which is supposed to reproduce the earthly realm. He proceeds to enumerate the heavenly Temple, heavenly Jerusalem, heavenly academy, etc.

20. Red Heifer [*Parah Adumah*]: a sacrifice whose ashes when mixed with water removed impurity. Later generations found the ceremony incomprehensible but thought following it is the model for the non-rational law. See Numbers 19:2-10 and Rashi's commentary on this. The reference to R. Yochanan Ben Zaccai is in *Numbers Rabbah* 19:4, where he put off a non-Jew with some lame explanation about the Red Heifer; later, he told his students that they must observe it simply because God commanded it.

Torah As Template

Arnold M. Eisen, *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) xv + 186 pages.

Ellen Frankel, Ph.D., *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1996) xxiii + 354 pages.

Rabbi Debra Orenstein and Rabbi Jane Rachel Litman, eds., *Lifecycles, Volume 2: Jewish Women on Biblical Themes in Contemporary Life* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1997) xxxix + 401 pages.

REVIEWED BY ROBERT GOLDENBERG

The three books under review have two sorts of common features. One of these is external or structural: each volume is constructed as an extended commentary on the Five Books of Moses, or at least as an extended meditation on themes drawn from those five books in turn. The other is substantive: all these books are written by and for people finding their way back to Jewish tradition after growing up in modern, and more or less secular, America. Together these books provide eloquent testimony to the power of Jewish tradition, its ability to recapture errant souls who would seem to have escaped with its gravitational field.

A Personal Perspective: Torah As Midrash

Arnold Eisen's book is the only one to speak in a single voice. Taking his own life as emblematic of modern Jewish alienation and return, Eisen examines the factors that inhibit the formation of Jewish community in the modern world and sketches out a strategy for overcoming these obstacles. The Torah is useful to him primarily as a source of thematic imagery: he acknowledges that no holy book has intrinsic authority any more, but he insists that the Torah contains wisdom and that it speaks with the deepest possible echoes of Jewish his-

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torical experience. Extracting one basic theme from each of the Five Books, Eisen speaks in turn of “taking on tradition” (*Genesis*; or confronting our shared past), “history, faith, and covenant” (*Exodus*; or affirming our roots in that past), “ritual and community” (*Leviticus*; or acting out community in daily life), “politics in the wilderness” (*Numbers*; or figuring out how to do this), and “legacies” (*Deuteronomy*; or ensuring if we can that later generations will enjoy the fruits of our efforts).

In each of his homilies (that is what they are), Eisen shares true wisdom, the fruit of both his scholarly career and own admirable character; there are frequent points when the reader will say (at least, when this reader said) “Yes, that’s right!” and be glad to find some other person who has reached a certain conclusion or achieved a certain insight. Eisen manages to turn his own single life into a model for a whole generation: this is how thoughtful recovery of heritage, how return to loving Jewish commitment without loss of intellectual integrity, can take place. Eisen has already for years been a leading exponent of a particular model of Jewish renewal, and now his readers can sense the person behind the thinking. Now his readers can trace the story that led up to the teaching.

Taking Hold of Torah speaks in the voice of a single person: this is both its strength and its weakness. The book expresses a coherent point of view that only gains in clarity and cogency as the book moves along, but it contains no dialogue: with rare exceptions,

other viewpoints come to expression only as the author allows them to do so, and usually only in the author’s words. The book, and the life story it recounts, are a model for Jewish return, but no model is for everybody, and some readers will inevitably read this book and say, “No, that’s not right; this is not for me.”

Multiple Perspectives: Torah As Prism

The other two volumes under review here avoid that difficulty, in very different ways. *Lifecycles II* is an anthology (the second in a series) of women’s writing pertaining to themes extracted from the *Humash* (Five Books of Moses); the procedure resembles Eisen’s, though the themes are not the same. Where Eisen associates *Leviticus*, for example, with “ritual and community,” *Lifecycles* speaks of “The Sacred Body of Israel” and explores the intensely individual themes of speech, food, health, and sexuality. While Eisen associated *Deuteronomy* with “legacies” or preservation of the past, *Lifecycles* looks for “Second Law [and] New Visions”; this stresses departure from the past and entry into something not previously experienced. The narrative situation of *Deuteronomy* suggests both, of course, and in real life the two are often encountered together, but these different headings suggest striking differences in the books’ perception of what the recuperation of Jewish tradition is all about. A key question thus arises: What is the nature of “return” when one comes back to a Jewish life

one has never known? Is *teshuvah* often a case of “back to the future”?

Lifecycles is an anthology, not the work of a single author, and again this format presents a strength and a weakness. The contributions are fairly brief and highly diverse; on reading through the book one gets a sense of the many possible avenues through which Torah can be approached but not terribly much exposure to any one. This leaves the door wide open to readers eager to chart the course of their own approach (the editors strongly express the hope that many will do this), but there is only spotty guidance to those who feel unready to do their exploring alone.

Dialogue across the Generations

The third book under review enjoys the best of both worlds: it is the work of a single author, but it contains a systematic presentation of multiple points of view. Ellen Frankel has imagined a group study session in which the women of the Torah, starting with Eve (and Lilith even before her) join the women of later generations, up to and including “our daughters.” One grows used to the distinctive voice of each participant as together they work through the Torah portion by portion, summarizing, commenting, challenging, and learning.

The author’s own interests and preferences can be seen most clearly in the relative weight given to various themes and modes (narrative is more closely examined than law; Miriam’s

leprosy as metaphor gets more attention than the Ten Spies, while nothing is ever said about other categories of leprosy as skin disease at all), but each participant has a viewpoint and a persona that emerges from her own experience in the story and is treated with full respect and integrity. Thus the reader meets “Lilith the Rebel,” “Sarah the Ancient One,” “Hagar the Stranger,” and so on, and similarly “our *bubbes*” have one kind of wisdom to share while “our mothers” provide another; meanwhile “the Rabbis” are always somewhere in the room, adding their own explanations, defenses, or counter-charges. The effect is a training-session in empathy: it’s easy to cry “Yes” to the comments of someone whose attitude matches your own, but sooner or later the reader learns to anticipate even the comments of those who seemed irritating at first, and to acknowledge the perspective from which even those annoying comments make sense and have moral power. This reader found the overall effect more instructive, and more exhilarating, than he had imagined he would. To have sustained so many separate but internally consistent approaches to Torah over the full course of the Five Books, and to present them all in conversation rather than fruitless debate, is a great achievement.

Listening and Responding

All three of these books are directed at modern readers who wish to learn from Torah, who wish in some way to ground their own lives in the teachings of Jewish tradition and Jewish

texts. All three books rest on the confidence that Torah has much to teach such people, even as they also share the realization that modern readers do not necessarily know how to find the teaching: it is not always easy to extract lessons from material that first seems alien or even offensive. All three books therefore address process as well as substance: they ask not only *what* the Torah says, but also *how* we can learn to hear the Torah, and how we can learn to respond.

The advice takes diverse forms: Eisen's book starts off with some fairly intellectual observations about method, *Lifecycles* provides an instructive "Afterword" on "engaging with Torah," while Frankel is content to provide a bibliography which readers can explore in their own fashion. It is instructive nevertheless that all three books reflect the conviction that the richest path of return to Jewish living leads through intensive engagement with the oldest Jewish book there is.

Why should that be: have the Jews learned so little over 3000 years that their first teacher is still their best? Not quite: these books don't have the same content, only the same form. They speak in the same voice, but they say very different things, and they remind us that Torah has always worked this way: each generation finds in the Torah what it needs to find, and speaks in the name of Torah the words it needs to hear. What our generation needs to hear, it seems, is a voice beckoning us back home, and reminding us how to get there. Like the Promised Land in the days of Moses, however, our "home" is a

place where most of us have never lived, and which many of those who have been there failed to appreciate. We look for guidance in the Torah because it represents the earliest "home" we Jews have had, but we imagine it, not remember it, because in fact we have never really seen it.

Rooted in Tradition, Reaching Beyond

This ambiguous sense of going-back-where-we've-never-been gives the process of "Jewish renewal" or "Jewish return" (phrases with such different echoes!) its particular mixture of unfettered experimentation and submission to ancient authority: Jewish authenticity is measured by the depth of its roots in an ancient heritage but is valued for its ability to meet the needs of modern autonomous individuals seeking their own personal fulfillment. Many different people justify many different ways of life by claiming those choices are rooted in "Torah," and so they are, for those who make the claim. "Torah" itself speaks in a still, small voice that is easily drowned out by the din of its interpreters, and the story of Akhnai's oven (B. *Bava Metzia* 59b) taught us years ago that things could not be otherwise. The extraordinary thing is that we keep trying to listen, that the very name "Torah" remains so powerful that we still wish to attach it to our own thoughts and choices. The Jewish story can hardly be over if so many people are still writing new chapters.

And finally it remains to note that

women have finally joined the conversation. After centuries of being pushed to the margins of Jewish conversation or being excluded from it altogether, Jewish women have discovered how to exercise their natural right to speak in a voice of their own. The Torah emerged from a part of the world which remains intensely patriarchal to this day, and Jewish life has always approximated its surroundings in its assignment of gender roles and its evaluation of the sexes.

Today Jewish life in the liberal West is updating that approximation, so to speak, by inviting women not only to join the Jewish public sector but to help (re-)shape it: if Jewish re-

newal has a sense of returning to an unknown country even for men, for women the excitement, and the anxiety, must be enormously greater. Two of the three books under review were written by and for women. Men were not asked to leave the room, and indeed “the Rabbis” remain active members of Ellen Frankel’s study-circle. But the discovery among women that despite centuries of silence they have much to say, and that even many men are eager to hear them, has opened up a new angle for exploring Torah that will surely reveal new teaching for a long time to come. We are all the richer for its appearance in our midst.

The Well of Living Waters

BY GILA GEVIRTZ

*Therefore with joy shall you draw
water from the wells of salvation.
(Is. 12:3)*

A word to the wise: Steer clear of God's angels on Friday afternoons. They are busy and ill-tempered. Idle chatter is not tolerated nor fools suffered gladly. But, if you're quiet and stay put, you can watch the angels bring the week's business to a close—tying up the loose ends of their earthly accounts, inventorying the stars, plumping up the yawning clouds and scrubbing the dark side of the moon until it glistens. As they complete each task, the angels quickly move on to their next assignment. There's not a moment to spare before the setting sun heralds the seventh day—the Sabbath—when all work must cease.

No question about it. The sixth day of the week is always the busiest. So it is now and so it has been since the beginning of time.

As it is written in the Bible, on the sixth day of Creation God made cattle as well as every sort of creeping thing

and every kind of wild beast.¹ God beheld the world—the sun, sky, land, oceans, plants, birds, fish, insects, and roving beasts. And God saw that it was good.² Yet, God longed for more—a partner who would treasure Creation and honor God's loving ways. God turned to the angels, who had murmured their approval as each new creature was brought into being. And God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness."³

The angels responded with jealousy and mistrust. They pleaded, "Do not create humankind for it will surely defile the goodness of Creation."

It pained God to hear these words, for there was a yearning deep within God's womb,⁴ an unrelenting ache to birth this final creation. Trembling, God replied, "Without humankind the goodness of Creation can never be complete. But I will heed your words and first create a well of living waters that all who thirst for knowledge of God may be redeemed."⁵

And as God said, "Spring up o well,"⁶ a well gushed forth. And then,

For Gila Gevirtz's bio, see page 5.

the yearning within God emerged, taking human form in the image of God. Male and female God created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fertile and multiply."⁷

Then, God beheld Creation and saw that it was very good.⁸ And as the setting sun announced the arrival of the seventh day, God ceased all work and blessed the Sabbath, declaring it holy.

Generations passed but the angels continued to mistrust humankind. One Friday afternoon, in the generation of the matriarchs Sarah and Hagar, God and the angels met for their weekly consultation. The purpose of the meeting was to assign the angels their Sabbath posts. But, as usual, when God called out the assignments for blessing humanity, the angels begged off, saying, "Your humankind is a wretched lot. They care not for the sweetness of Sabbath peace."

The angels then repeated the litany of each generation's iniquities. There had been the eating of the forbidden fruit by Adam and Eve,⁹ the murderous impulse of Cain,¹⁰ the lawlessness and corruption of Noah's age,¹¹ the arrogant fiasco at Babel¹² and, most recently, the cruelty, lust and greed of Sodom and Gemorah.¹³ But God continued to have faith in humanity and insisted on the angels' forbearance.

Today, however, the meeting dissolved into chaos. Surveying the earth below, the angels spied Sarah and Hagar, both of whose sons were sired by Abraham and thus bound in kinship. Bitter rivalry between the two

women had long ago sparked furious debate among the angels. For they were certain that, at best, the descendants of only one could be worthy of God's love. And that, at worst, their offspring would destroy each other.

"Surely you can see that Hagar is God's royalty," cried the angel Michael.¹⁴ "Born an Egyptian princess, her father entrusted her to Sarah that Sarah might tutor her in godly ways.¹⁵ But woe to her that seeks knowledge of God from Sarah. For though she gave Hagar to consort as wife with Abraham, when Hagar did conceive, Sarah dealt harshly with her. Yet God heeded the Egyptian's suffering and assured the greatness of her unborn child."¹⁶

"What satanic potion have you imbibed that makes your tongue so freely slander mother Sarah?" raged the angel Gabriel. "It was Hagar who brought suffering upon herself, when—her belly full with child *and* malice—she swaggered before her mistress.¹⁷ Sarah sought only to fulfill God's command to be fertile and multiply. And when God finally opened Sarah's womb that she might conceive and bear Isaac, it was a mother's protective love that made her withdraw from Ishmael. For God had warned, 'Ishmael's hand will be against everyone.'¹⁸

"Yes! It's true," responded Michael. "Ishmael will defy all who defy God."

"And who will be judge of that?" spat Gabriel.

But even as the angels spoke, Sarah and Hagar's bitter rivalry increased. And the hour grew late.

The most recent conflict had er-

rupted earlier in the week while Isaac and Ishmael were at play. Hagar had taunted Sarah, saying, "Circumcision is the custom of *my* people, not yours. It is *my* tradition that marks not only Ishmael and Abraham, but also your beloved Isaac."¹⁹

Enraged, Sarah went to Abraham demanding, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son."²⁰ For the Covenant must be with Eloheinu, *our* God, and Isaac must be the sole inheritor of God's word."

Then Abraham sent Hagar and his first-born son, Ishmael, to the wilderness of Be'er Shevah with bread and a skin of water. And it was at the very hour of the angels' debate, that the water was consumed. Overcome by thirst, Ishmael lay panting and wailing under a dry shrub. And God heard the boy's cry.²¹ And God called to Sarah, "Where are you?"²²

"*Hineni*. Here I am,"²³ she answered.

And God said, "Raise your eyes and look out from where you are."²⁴ You have cast out Hagar and Ishmael that I might favor Isaac. But I will not abandon one son for love of the other. Can a woman forget her nursing child that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?²⁵ Though she may forget, I will not."

"Sarah, My daughter, surely you understand! Like Isaac, Ishmael was born of Me—in My image—and I cannot leave him to die in the wilderness. If your Covenant be with Me, show compassion and mercy now."

And Sarah heard God's voice. And she answered, "Everything God has

said, we will do."²⁶ For my descendants and I will honor the Covenant, and each generation shall be taught compassion from the womb."²⁷

"Come quickly then," God beckoned. "For I will carry you on eagles' wings"²⁸ that you might help save Hagar's child."

And in the hour before sunset, God commanded the angels Michael and Gabriel to carry Sarah to Hagar and Ishmael. As they soared above, Gabriel called to Hagar, "Rise, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand. For God will make a great nation of him."²⁹

But Hagar's body was parched and she could not raise herself. So it was that Sarah lifted Hagar up. And God opened her eyes. And she saw a well of water.³⁰ Trembling with joy, Hagar drew water from the well. And Sarah held Ishmael in her arms as his mother gave him drink.

When the child's thirst was quenched, the matriarchs served each other from the well of living waters. And, in that moment, Shabbat arrived and the angels sang God's song of peace.

1. Genesis 1:24-25.

2. Genesis 1:18.

3. Genesis 1:26. Querying the phrases "let us," and "in *our* image, after *our* likeness," the rabbinic sages asked, "To whom was God speaking?" and responded with midrashim that describe God as speaking to a group of ministering angels. The midrashim project the angels as opposing God's intention to create humankind. (B. Sanhedrin 38a and *Genesis Rabbah* 8:5, as per Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends* (New York: Schocken, 1992), 12-13.

4. In Hebrew, one of God's names is *Ha-rahaman*, meaning "The Compassionate One." *Rahaman* is traditionally associated with *rehem*, meaning "womb," with which it shares the same root letters—*resh*, *het*, *mem*. This linkage affirms the vision of God as Creator.

5. Rabbinic midrash teaches that a well, possibly Miriam's Well, was created at twilight on the sixth day of Creation and that this well provided water for Ishmael and Hagar when they wander through the wilderness of Be'er Shevah, and also for the Israelites when they wandered through the Sinai wilderness. In "The Well of Living Waters," Miriam's Well is projected as the birth (and rebirth) waters of humanity. Thus, it emerges from God's womb *before* Adam and Eve.

6. Numbers 21:17.

7. Genesis 1:27-28.

8. Genesis 1:31.

9. Genesis 3.

10. Genesis 4.

11. Genesis 6.

12. Genesis 11.

13. Genesis 18-19.

14. The Talmud refers to Michael and Gabriel as angels who serve God.

15. *Genesis Rabbah* 45:1 identifies Hagar as the daughter of a pharaoh. It tells of how, during Sarah and Abraham's sojourn in Egypt, the pharaoh gave Hagar to Sarah as a slave because he was greatly impressed by Sarah.

16. Genesis 16:10-11. The story of Sarah and Hagar can be seen as prefiguring the Exodus story. Compare Genesis 16:11: "Adonai has paid heed to your [Hagar's] suffering," with Exodus 2:24: "God heeded [the Israelites'] moaning."

Similarly, compare Genesis 16:6, "Saray [Sarah's original name; see Genesis 17:15] oppressed [Hagar]," with Exodus 1:11, "So they set *sarey missim* [taskmasters] over [the Israelites] to oppress them . . ." The same root for "oppress" (*ayin*, *nun*, *hay*) appears in both verses and, in Exodus 1:11, *sarey missim* (taskmasters) incorporates the name Saray—*sin*, *resh*, *yud*.

Furthermore, Hagar and Ishmael's path to freedom brought them through the wilderness as did the Israelites'; and, according to rabbinic tradition, both were sustained by Miriam's well.

17. Genesis 16:4-5: When Hagar became pregnant Sarah was lowered in her esteem.

18. Genesis 16:12.

19. In Savina Teubal's discussion of why Sarah wanted Hagar and Ishmael banished from her home, Teubal points out that circumcision was an Egyptian not Babylonian custom. This may have been a bone of contention between the two women as Sarah and Abraham were Babylonian. Sarah may have seen circumcision as reflecting Hagar's control over her household (see Savina J. Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1984), 37-41).

20. Genesis 21:10.

21. Genesis 21:17.

22. Genesis 3:9. This question was posed to Adam when he and Eve tried to hide from God.

23. The biblical assertion *Hineni* signifies a readiness to follow God's command.

24. Genesis 13:14. Words spoken by God to Abram (Abraham's original name; see Genesis 17:5) upon promising the Land of Israel to him and to his offspring. The words are said with double meaning, indicating that not only must Abraham look beyond the ground on which he stands but also that he must see beyond his own life.

25. Isaiah 49:15.

26. Exodus 19:8.

27. A play on words connecting God with the womb (see footnote 4). Sarah's statement also refers to a rabbinic story that explains how the depression between our nose and upper lip comes into being. It tells how, as it nests in the womb, each child studies Torah with a visiting angel. In the moment before birth, the child resists life, not wanting to leave its place of comfort and safety. The angel then pushes the baby through the birth canal by touching the spot above the upper lip. The spot becomes indented and the baby forgets all it has learned. As is suggested by the midrash about all Jewish souls having been present at Mt. Sinai, in this midrash living one's life is seen as the process of recapturing sacred memory.

28. Exodus 19:4 " . . . I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me."

29. Genesis 21:18.

30. Genesis 21:19.

לא
ישא גוי
אל גוי חרב ולא
ילמדו עוד מלחמה

Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Ko amar Ha-Rachaman, thus says

**The Compassionate One: As I parted the
Sea of Reeds that you might re-emerge from
My womb, now it is you who must widen
the narrow passages so that justice and mercy
can be reborn. Do not be afraid My beloved. Go
forth into the night and become the light and
the outstretched arm. And on the day when all
the world is set to the rhythm of My timbrel,
dominion and violence will be banished
from the land. And you will know Me,
The One Who Makes Life Holy.**

Midrash on Isaiah 2:4

Gila Gevirtz

Reconstructing Sarah's Circumcision: A Midrash on the Origin of the *Brit Sarah*

BY ARI MARK CARTUN

Question:

*The change in Avram's name was
connected to his circumcision.*

*What is the reason for the change in
Saray's name?*

The deeds of the ancestors are repeated by the deeds of their descendants. With no need for Saray to circumcise herself, the All-Merciful gave both Saray and Avram a deed of equal import to bequeath to their descendants—their naming.

That Sarah was instrumental to the covenanting of Avraham, and to the passing-on of the covenant to Yitzhak and all their subsequent descendants, can be seen from the fact that only Sarah's son inherits the covenant—not Hagar's (who is circumcised along with Avram on that inaugural cov-

enantal day), nor Keturah's sons: "*Ki veYitzhak yikare lekha zara* / For only through Yitzhak will your seed be named" (Gen. 21:12).

Saray's name change poses a puzzle. With Avram/Avraham, the text says, "Your name shall no longer be called Avram, but it will be called Avraham, for I have appointed you *Av Hamon Goyim* / Father of a Multitude of Nations." But with the subsequent account of the Saray/Sarah change, the text differs, in that no meaning is given for the new name, and it is ambiguous as to by whose initiative the name changed: "G0d¹ said to Avraham, 'As for Saray your wife, do not call her Saray, for her name *is* Sarah.'" Did G0d name her (i.e.: Her name *will be* Sarah, and I command you now to call her that), or did G0d

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merely confirm her own act of covenantal naming (i.e.: Her name *is* Sarah, as she already has done, so that is what you should call her now)?

A third understanding is that her name was ever destined to be Sarah. A fourth is that her name was always Sarah, but Avram had nicknamed her “My Princess (Saray)” and now G0d let Avraham know that in her new and expanded role as matriarch of a people, Avraham should give up his pet name for her and let her be who she was—not an appendage of his, but a woman and leader in her own right.

There is another possibility, though, that Saray did, indeed, circumcise herself. But not in body. *Saray circumcised her name and shared it with Avram*. She took the last consonant of her name, S-R-Y, which is a *yud*, a “Y,” the tenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and *circumcised* it into two fives. Thus SaRaY (S-R-Y) became SaRaHH (S-R-HH). She kept one *hey* (the fifth letter of the alphabet) for herself, becoming SaRaH. She gave the other *hey* to AVRaM (Aleph-V-R-M), who, putting the letter into the middle of his name to replace what had been *circumcised* from the middle of his body, thereby became AVRaHaM.

One may raise the objection that since Sarah’s name change follows after Avraham’s in the text of Genesis she could not have changed Avraham’s name by naming herself. However, as our ancestors often said, “*Eyn mukdam o me’ukhar baTorah*: The Torah text is not (always) in chronological order.” This also applies to the other interpretations mentioned above.

Brit and Jewish Girls

As a rabbi, when I speak with parents of a newborn girl about having a *brit*, they frequently say, “No, rabbi. We have a daughter.” They believe that *brit* means circumcision, and they know that girls just can’t have them. They have little or no connection to the concept that *brit* means covenant, not merely traditional ritual surgery. Even if they know that *brit* means covenant, they expect girls to “only” be “named.”

Why was there never a ceremony of covenant for girls? Because our ancestor rabbis, in so many ways, discounted the spiritual experiences and leadership of women. They omitted Exodus’ explicit mention of Miriam and quoted only Mosheh in the Song at the Sea before the *Mi Khamocha*. Of all the women the TaNaKh quotes, not one of their words is included in the traditional text of the *siddur* or *mahzor*. It is, therefore, not surprising that there was no ceremonial way of acknowledging the woman’s role in and birth into the covenant.

Naming a baby girl as a “*covenanting*” ceremony is new to Jews—beginning in the last thirty or so years. Obviously, Jewish females have always been members of the covenant, so much so that traditionally one is only born a Jew if one is born of a Jewish woman. This essential transmission of covenanted Jewish status was, however, only administrative—that is, though the Jewish Bureaucracy of Personal Status considered women to be determinative of Jewishness, this practice did not extend to baby girls hav-

ing a ceremony of covenanting. Only males carried the “symbol of the covenant,” their circumcision, on their bodies, and only males had “*brit*” ceremonies for induction into the covenant. Instead of a formal induction into the covenant for girls, they were “named” in the synagogue. On the Shabbat after their birth, their father would be called up to the Torah for an *aliyah*, and his newborn daughter’s name would be read during the ensuing *Mi Sheberakh Leyoledah*. In more liberal congregations, where women were also called to the Torah, the mother was also encouraged to participate.

Traditional Versions of Naming

Though there were traditional occasions called *Simhat Bat*—Rejoicing in (the birth of) a Daughter, and the Sephardic liturgy of *Seder Zeved Habat*—Service for the Gift of a Daughter², these did not use covenantal language. They primarily focused on the *Mi Sheberakh* for the birth of a girl, as was done in the synagogue. The only extant traditional “covenant ceremony” is called *Brit Milah*, the “Covenant of Circumcision,” and derives from the example of Avraham, who was commanded by G0d to circumcise himself, and the males in his household, when he was ninety-nine years old (Gen. 17). Thereafter it became incumbent to circumcise each newborn boy on the eighth day of life. As part of this ceremony, our ancestor rabbis chose to write the blessing:

*Barukh Atah Adonay Eloheynu
Melekh ha’olam, asher kideshanu*

*bemitzvotav vitzivanu lebhakhniso
bivrito shel Avraham Avinu.*

Blessed YOU Adonay, our G0d, Universal Sovereign, Who hallows us with mitzvot and commands us to enter him into the covenant of Avraham our Father.

New Covenant Ceremonies

When Jews began writing covenant ceremonies for the birth of girls, many concepts were tried out. The pioneering work *Blessing the Birth of a Daughter*³ collected a few: *Brit Kedushah*—Covenant of Holiness (by Ellen and Dana Charry), *Brit Mikvah*—Covenant of Immersion (by Sharon and Michael Strassfeld), and one of the most enduring and popular: *Brit B’not Yisrael*—Covenant of the Daughters of Israel (by Dennis and Sandy Sasso), in other places called *Brit Bat*—Covenant of a Daughter. Others have called it *Brit Hanerot*—Covenant of Candles (Paul Swerdlow), *Brit Am Yisrael* (Reform Rabbi’s Manual⁴), and *Brit Hayim*—Covenant of Life, which some also use to refer to a boy’s *brit* when done after or totally without circumcision. The new RRA Rabbi’s Manual calls this ceremony *Berit [sic] Rehitzah*: Feet Washing As a Covenantal Act.⁵ There are none who currently name the ceremony as a whole a *Brit Sarah*, though some amend the blessing “who commands us to enter (her) into the Covenant of Avraham our Father” with the additional phrase “and into the Covenant of Sarah our Mother.”

What all these contemporary cer-

emonies have in common is a lack of a salient symbol around which to base the event. The *Brit Hanerot* uses the lighting of candles as a covenantal act, replete with the blessing, "Who commands us to light the candles of the covenant." But the association of women lighting candles was always a *de facto* one. All Jews, men as well as women, are obligated to light candles to inaugurate the holy day. It is because women were exempted from service attendance in order to be "freed" to deal with the home front that they frequently stayed home from synagogue on Friday nights, and thus lit the candles as the men walked out the door on their way there; this is why candle lighting became a quintessential female act. Thus, candles are not an entirely positive symbol for women. And, of course, candlelighting as a Jewish act of *kiddush* (sanctification of the day) is not at all biblical.

Mary Gendler tried to find something as powerful and as biblically resonant as circumcision when she wrote her article "Sarah's Seed: New Ritual for Women,"⁶ in which she introduces the ritual perforation of the hymen as a covenantal act.

The Strassfelds, in the *Second Jewish Catalogue*,⁷ argue for *mikveh* over hymen-perforation as a better symbol of women's sexuality, and they base some of it on Meiri's commentary to B. *Yevamot* 46a that when Abraham was circumcised (thus becoming ritually fit to be the progenitor of the nation) Sarah's response (to be equally fit for the task) was to go to the *mikveh*. The new RRA manual uses feet washing as a form of *mikveh*.

None of these approaches has generally caught on in the majority of covenant ceremonies for girls—not *mikveh*, not hymen-perforation, not even the lighting of candles. And there are a smattering of other rituals, such as planting a tree, bringing the girl to the Torah, holding her under a tallit, etc. But none of these are done in a covenantal fashion (i.e., including a blessing praising God for ordaining the act as an entry into the covenant). In fact, the new Conservative Rabbi's Manual, *Moreh Derekh*,⁸ does not yet consider the birth of a girl to be the occasion for a covenanting ceremony or blessing.

One of the reasons for these ceremonies not catching on is the fact that all of these actions are practiced only by individuals and segments of the movements. There is no unanimity of salient symbol among those of us who bring girls into the covenant ceremonially. Unlike circumcision, which almost every Jew knows of, the deep reservoir of lay Jewish awareness persists in calling whatever we do for the entry of a girl into the covenant a "naming." Therefore, maybe we should go with the flow and use the name changing of our matriarch as the symbolic action. Let people continue to call it a "naming," but let us give them a way to do so in a *covenantal* sense.

Naming As Covenant

The Torah's own story in Genesis emphasizes the name changing of Abraham and Sarah as a significant part of their entry into the covenant.

Therefore, naming in and of itself must be seen as a covenantal act. Just as we have the clear biblical command/story to circumcise as we name boys, let the language of the act of naming for girls be, due to Torah precedent, written in the language of covenant. Additionally, following the precedent of our ancestor rabbis' use of the term *Brit Avraham* to refer to circumcision, this covenant should be called *Brit Sarah*, where the covenantal act derives from the example of Sarah's circumcision of her name. The midrash at the end of this article should, in that case, be taken as a halakhic midrash, one whose precedent is binding.

An objection to this midrash being understood halakhically may be raised from the legal principle that no precedents prior to the Sinai revelation are binding unless confirmed by subsequent Torah law. The precedent of circumcision in Genesis is confirmed by Leviticus 12:3. Yet the Leviticus confirmation of the commandment to circumcise a boy on the eighth day of his life merely mandates a surgical act. There is no mention of the word *Brit*, no hint that it is a *covenantal* act. The covenantal aspects of it are revealed solely in the Genesis text of chapter 17, where the naming aspects are similarly revealed. That our ancestor rabbis looked upon the Leviticus confirmation of circumcision as a shorthand confirmation of all the covenantal aspects of circumcision is understandable. But if this is so, then every aspect of the Genesis precedents of covenanting ceremonies should be

considered equally binding, including our mother Sarah's precedent-setting circumcision of her name.

In light of this *midrash halakhah*, here is an appropriate liturgy for use at a *Brit Sarah*:

A New Covenant Of Naming

(In a form appropriate for inclusion into a *Brit Sarah* service):

Shaliah Tzibur / Prayer Leader:
Vayomer Elohim el-Avraham
Saray ishtekha lo-tikra et-
shemah Saray ki Sarah shemah.
Uverakhti otah.

And G0d said to Avraham:
 "SaRaY, your wife—Do not
 call her Saray, for her name is
 Sarah. And I will bless her.

(Gen. 17:15-16)

SaRaY, and AVRaM, as they were then named, entered into a covenant with G0d together. AVRaHaM circumcised his body. SaRaY, as it were, circumcised her *name*.

She took the last consonant of her name, S-R-Y, which is a *yud*, a Y, the tenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and circumcised it into two fives. The fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet is *hey*, an H—thus SaRaY (S-R-Y) became SaRaHH (S-R-HH). She kept one *hey* for herself, becoming SaRaH. She gave the other *hey* to AVRaM (Aleph-V-R-M), who, putting the letter into the middle of his name to replace what had been circumcised from the middle of his body, thereby became AVRaHaM. In body and in

name, they jointly entered into a covenant with G0d.

Parent(s):

Ever since, we follow in the ways of our ancestors Sarah and Avraham, who inaugurated bestowal of the name and circumcision of the body as symbols of the covenant between G0d and their descendants.

And so, as did our Mother Sarah, we bring this little girl before her people, and gratefully, by publicly

proclaiming her name, enter her into the covenant:

*Barukh Atah Adonay Eloheynu
Melekh ha'olam, asher kideshanu
bemitzvotav vitzivanu lehakh-
nisah bivritah shel Sarah Imenu.*

Blessed YOU Adonay, our G0d, Universal Sovereign, Who hallows us with mitzvot and commands us to enter her into the covenant of Sarah our Mother.

1. Instead of the standard use of a dash (G-d) which some Jews use to evoke the Deity on a printed page without leaving it liable to accidental desecration, I spell G0d as G-zero-d. A zero accomplishes the same task as a dash, because even though a 0 looks like an O, yet it is not an O, so the word is not actually the word in question. Therefore, the page cannot be desecrated by having the word defaced.

Mystically, zero can also evoke the concept of the *Eyn Sof*, the utterly infinite, unknowable no-thing-ness of G0d.

Last, on a practical note, my computer never separates "G0d" onto two lines like it will do to "G-d," recognizing the latter as two words connected by a hyphen!

2. *Daily and Sabbath Prayerbook*, ed. Dr. David de Sola Pool, Union of Sephardic Congregations.

3. Toby Fishbein Reifman with Ezrat Nashim, 1978.

4. *Ma'agley Tzedek*, Central Conference of American Rabbis, (CCAR Press, NY, 1988) 20.

5. *Madrikh Larabbanim*, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Assembly Rabbi's Manual, ed. Rabbi Seth Daniel Riemer. (Wyncote, PA 1997), B-16. There are actually *two* covenantal blessings in the same brit ceremony for a baby girl in this manual. The first is a traditional blessing format: "*Barukh atah . . . asher kideshanu bemitzvotav*—Blessed are you . . . who has made us holy with your mitzvot, and commanded us "*lehakhnisah bivrit am yisrael*: to bring her into the covenant of the people of Israel" (page B-20). The second (page B-22) accompanies the actual footwashing (it is not clear from the manual if this is to precede the act or be done at the same time), and is in the style of Marcia Falk: *Nevarekh et eyn hahayim zokheret haberit birhitat raglayim*—Let us bless the Source of Life, who remembers the covenant through the washing of the feet."

6. *Response*, (Winter 1975).

7. Jewish Publication Society, (Philadelphia, 1976), 36-37.

8. Rabbinical Assembly, 1998.

Jewish Feminism and “New” Jewish Rituals: Imitative or Inventive?

BY ELYSE GOLDSTEIN

Come with me to the Shabbat morning service at the national biennial conference of the Reform movement. Here I am, preparing to put on my tallit. This tallit is definitely not your average black-and-white stripes variety. It is appliqued silk, all blues and greens, a full poncho-style garment that reaches to my knees. I put it over my head and adjust the neck, which has strands of sparkling color and tinkling bells. The atarah comes over my head as a hood. If there ever was a *cohenet gedolah*, a high priestess, surely this is what she wore! I stand silently for a moment, feeling the sensuous raw silk on my back, my front, my arms. I close my eyes. And from behind me I hear a loud, startled whisper, “*What the heck is she wearing???*”

Women and “Defining” Rituals

Rabbis in the liberal movements in general, but specifically women in the rabbinate, are being approached more and more with the challenge of adapting age-old traditions to a more contemporary reality affected by feminism and the feminist analysis of religion. At the same time, we are also being asked to create new rituals to fill the void where an absence is palpable—around birth, fertility and infertility, menstruation and menopause, growing old. The upsurge in interest in spirituality has deeply affected us, and often women in the rabbinate are thought of as “experts” in this growing field of the creation and adaptation of ritual for women.

This call for new ways of looking at

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Jewish ritual is a call many women in the rabbinate have taken personally. After I created a weaning ceremony for my own children, I submitted it to several resource centers, and I know it has been copied, modified, and reused by other rabbis for themselves or their congregants. *Mikveh* ceremonies for miscarriage, rape, chemotherapy, and midlife milestones are being written and shared through personal contacts or word of mouth. Covenantal rituals for baby girls, more creative than the “baby naming” or the egalitarian ceremony in my Rabbi’s Manual, fill my files. Yet, to be honest, some of us experience moments of ambivalence around these creative, invented ceremonies that speak to the soul but seem unconnected to much of Jewish history and shared experience. I imagine us looking at ourselves in the same befuddled way those conference participants looked at my tallit, and asking “*what the heck are we doing?*”

A Framework of Meaning

We have learned through the writings of Lawrence Hoffman, Riv-Ellen Prell, Neil Gillman and others that rituals provide a marking, a delineation, a framework of meaning around normal events. They sacralize moments which at first glance appear to be mundane because they are in fact so universal, so predictable, and so cyclical.

For example, everyone somehow gets born. Those who live to young adolescence reach puberty. In most cultures, people marry or form permanent relationship bonds that create

families. Everyone dies. Mary Douglas writes, “. . . ritual focuses attention by framing; it enlivens the memory and links the present with the relevant past. In all this it aids perception. Or rather it changes perception because it changes the selective principles. So it is not enough to say that ritual helps us to experience more vividly what we would have experienced anyway . . . It does not merely externalize experience . . . it modifies experience in so expressing it.”¹ Participation in a birth ritual, a puberty ritual, a death ritual not only frames this otherwise normal experience, but it defines the experience; in essence, the ritual *creates* the experience.

In Judaism, these central concepts take shape in our rituals. A *brit milah* is a *defining* ritual. It reframes the perception of the birth of a baby boy from a physical moment in time to a reenactment of the ancient covenant between God and Abraham. Standing under a *huppah* at a wedding is a *defining* ritual. It identifies the couple as standing under the roof of their newly-created Jewish home and is a reenactment of the first “wedding”—or coupling—of Adam and Eve. Thus in Judaism not only do rituals create experience by separating and marking moments, they also serve to create experience *in the participant* by moving her from the realm of “spectator” to the realm of “actor.” The baby boy is Abraham. The couple is Adam and Eve. This is achieved not through theories and theologies but through actual drama. Perhaps the best example is the Passover Seder, when we reexperience the bitterness of slavery

through the rituals of eating *maror* (bitter herbs), *haroset* ("mortar" of apples, nuts, and wine), and so on. We reexperience our slavery by *acting it out* in very specific ways.

So Jewish feminists ask: when do women function as actors in this historical drama? How is a woman's life framed and defined through ritual? How is a woman's experience expressed in Jewish ritual?

We have certainly passed the first stage in answering these questions. Baby namings, Bat Mitzvah, egalitarian weddings are the norm and no longer the exception. When I was ordained fourteen years ago, doing a covenantal ceremony for a girl in her home on the eighth day or shortly after birth was almost unheard of. Now, at least in my experience, it is fairly common. Bat Mitzvah is almost standard practice, and some form of it has been accepted in more traditional communities. Women wearing tallitot in synagogues is not the kind of strange sight it was years ago, leading to stares and glares and hostile remarks.

Imitative Ritual

In the progressive movements we have encouraged what I term *imitative* ritual. In imitative ritual we redesign the traditional model, but we do not reimagine it. We imitate it, with a "female" twist on the end. Thus a "girl's tallit" looks no different from a traditional tallit except in color, or material, or size, or specific design. It may have flowers or rainbows instead of black stripes. It may have lace or be made of silk instead of wool. But it is

still a square shawl with fringes on the end. We take the model of tallit and "feminize" it. A Bat Mitzvah still includes the traditional rubrics—the girl reads from the Torah, writes a speech, has a party. A baby naming looks like a *brit*, but without the cutting.

A few years ago I was in Jerusalem, in a Hasidic neighborhood near the Western Wall, surrounded by stores carrying tallitot, *kipot*, and the like. To my utter shock, prominently displayed in one store's window was a *pink* tallit! I went inside and inquired of the owner, "Who would buy such a tallit?" "A Bat Mitzvah girl of course," this Hasid with pe'ot (uncut locks of hair) and knickers said, with no hesitation. "Perhaps not the girls in his community," he added, but he was not dismayed at the thought of selling this pink tallit to some Reform or Conservative family for their daughter to don on her Bat Mitzvah day. The pink tallis is imitative ritual at its best. It adds just a little bit of "femininity" to an established, accepted practice that has been in the male domain for generations. The warning that the pink tallit teaches us, in a crass way, is that "women's spirituality" is not only about the inner needs of women, it is also about a marketing opportunity and an untapped consumer group. Let's face it, in including women into the "national Jewish agenda" there is money to be made. It's one thing when a feminist artisan creates a *Rosh Hodesh* necklace. It's another when *Hasidim* manufacture pink tallitot.

Imitative rituals work best in more traditional synagogue settings. They seem to be the *modus operandi* of Re-

form and Conservative, and most Reconstructionist Bat Mitzvah ceremonies, where the service is sort of a Bar Mitzvah for a girl. At least in the Reform movement, baby namings feel like a *brit* without the cut. Interestingly, because of halakhic considerations, the Orthodox change the “packaging” of women’s rituals the most, so as purposely *not* to imitate. Thus a “Bat Mitzvah” is often called by another name—*Bat Torah*, graduation, etc.—and looks nothing like a Bar Mitzvah.

The question is no longer about whether we need rituals that “balance the scale,” that are “equal” to the traditional rituals which have been celebrated by men. In the liberal movements we have answered, and we continue to answer, that question with egalitarian adaptations of traditional ceremonies. We now look at what I term *inventive* rituals. The second-stage question we will need to address is: do we as women want to merely *imitate* traditional male rituals or ritual objects—*brit*, Bar Mitzvah, tallit, tefillin—or do we want to *invent* our own? If we choose to be inventive, what will our rituals look like? How will they be uniquely our own? Will they include men? Will they focus on our biological womanhood—menstruation, childbirth, lactation—or a more inner sense of womanhood, not defined by physicality? *And how will they become the normative, established, accepted route of the progressive movements in synagogue contexts?*

To be sure, imitative rituals are extremely meaningful and satisfying. They fulfill the need for balance. They

address the exclusive maleness of so much of our traditional life-cycle events. They “normalize” the entrance of women into the public religious life of the community. They make the tradition confront the spiritual need of women and include women on every level into the dramatic and sacred moments of life.

Inventive Ritual

Can we move beyond the pink tallit? For on another level, imitative rituals do not satisfy. They say nothing of us *as women*. They do not mark the unique moments that happen only to women. They do not bond us with other women in a historical way. They wrap us in male imagery, making us “honorary men” for the moment. They express Judaism in ways that still are male ways of envisioning the universe—male ceremonies imagined and invented by men. They are still largely male answers to the question, “How shall we mark this moment?” We do not know how women would have answered long ago, when many of these rituals were in their infancy. I often joke with my students: “If Miriam would have been asked instead of Moses—how should we express being bound up with God? I’m just not sure she would have dreamed up black leather straps wound tightly around the arm and a black box on the forehead!” Inventive rituals may be the beginning of an answer to the question of how to mark the moments of *women’s* lives.

Inventive rituals reimagine, start from scratch, have no historical bounds or expectations or communal sanc-

tions or communal standards. They ask, "Is there something uniquely female about this act, about this object?" By definition, they are probably not traditional. For example, I once took a woman to the *mikveh* after a rape. "What ritual will we do? What prayers will we say?" she asked. There was no ritual to imitate, and so we had to invent. The same for first menstruation, for menopause, for lactation and weaning, for pregnancy, infertility, and miscarriage, for divorce, for children leaving home, for hysterectomy, for mastectomy. The same for rejoining the work force after spending years at home. The same for rejoining in the company of women, for forming bonded friendships, for caring for an elderly parent.

Every year in Toronto over four hundred women come to an event called "Succah-by-the-Water." Under silk banners and branches inside a tent, we form "*lulav* circles"—circles of ten where women introduce themselves by their matriarchal lineage, then shake the *lulav* (palm, myrtle, and willow bough) in honor or memory of women who never could. We make "trees of life"—silk leaves with prayers written on them like papers at the Western Wall, then sewn onto a huge fabric tree that we bring back to the celebration each year. It is reminiscent of a sukkah indeed, but not at all like one. It is an invented ceremony in almost every way. To truly mark not only the significant transitions in our lives as women, the unique moments in women's experience, the drama of womanhood, but also women's perceptions of ritual,

women's specific gifts and outlooks and ways of seeing the world, there simply have to be new rituals.

The Challenges

Inventive rituals are risky. They are not linked to thousands of years of practice. They do not look like what your *bubbe* did. A menstruation ceremony, a menopause *mikveh* celebration, a silk and applique tallis-cape with hood does not look or feel familiar. It's not the "*hey mish*" folksy Judaism from your childhood. One ceremony does not necessarily link to the next, as Purim links to Pesach, as Bar Mitzvah links to *huppah*. And we miss the knowledge that every other Jew in history and at this time is doing this ritual or marking this event.

We will need to be scrupulous so that our new rituals don't "divide and conquer" us; that they do not assume heterosexuality or heterosexual marriage and childbearing as a centrality; that they not exclude barren women or women who choose not to have children and women who do not marry. We will need to be open to the many-faceted ways of being female, so that we do not fall into the trap of defining ourselves as the patriarchy has defined us—as child bearers, child-rearers, care-givers. We are, to be sure, rooted in our physicality, but that is not our sum and total being. Writer Cynthia Ozick speaks of the danger of feminists redefining ourselves right back into the original definition we rejected back in the 1960's: as wombs, breasts, and baby-makers.²

We will need to be sensitive to language, and we will need to invent new

ways of blessing these moments. New rituals that are creative and innovative may feel just weird being spoken in traditional prayer language. On the other hand, new prayer language for old rituals may feel equally out of kilter. Can we say *asher kideshanu*, God “commanded us,” to do a menstrual ceremony? Yet saying that very same *asher kideshanu* gives the moment some historical context and a reference point.

We will need to study and reflect on where these inventive rituals intersect with traditional Judaism and where they do not. We will need to contemplate ways to make these rituals “feel Jewish” so that, while they are not bound to a long history (your ancestors probably didn’t do any of them!) they speak deeply to us as Jews, not only as feminists. In this, we find ourselves in a real “Catch-22” situation: these ceremonies do not feel Jewish because Judaism historically has not included women in the discussion of what feels Jewish. These rituals do not feel Jewish because the rituals that *do* “feel Jewish” have been created exclusively by men. To make them “feel Jewish” we will have to probe into the meaning of authenticity. Why does a tallit look the way it does? What makes any “new” ritual authentic? How do we, in a non-halakhic Judaism, define ritual and its call upon us altogether?

Beyond Gender

These questions can be asked, of course, beyond the gender issue. How do we as non-Orthodox Jews balance the tightrope between accepted tradi-

tional rituals that give us collective context and memory (for example, the Pesach Seder), and new rituals that continue our goal of inclusivity and personal meaning (midlife rituals, renewal of marriage vows, blessing our college-bound children, and others)? We add, we subtract, we change, we adapt, and at what point do we say: enough, this ritual is now exactly the way we want it? Jewish men in the progressive movements may not feel any more bound to traditional forms than do women. Shouldn’t our inventive rituals invent also for such men?

One disturbing dark spot remains to cloud these sparks of creativity. Why do these ceremonies seem so eclectic, so hard to find, promulgated mostly in “women’s” books, *Rosh Hodesh* groups, and among women rabbis? Why aren’t they more mainstream and widely available, widely practiced? Of course, they must be introduced into mainstream congregations and organizations, so that they can reshape and indeed transform the Judaism we have inherited into a feminist Judaism. In those situations, we will have to be prepared to accept that sometimes inventive rituals work, and sometimes they do not. We should not have to “grade” them after only one generation, and if they “fail,” discard them. They need to be collected, published, and promulgated by the lay and professional arms of our movement. Colleagues who now create and perform these rituals need to be invited into congregations and organizations not only to lecture on the subject, but to lead people in these ceremonies. Women in our congrega-

tions and girls in our schools need to be surveyed and asked, "what do you need?"

In the near future, I hope our sons and daughters see and participate in these rituals as normal, predictable, and cyclical Jewish events, defining moments of a Jewish life. They should not be marginalized experiences of women's groups or periodic, frustrating attempts at gaining meaningful spiritual entrée to our congregations, camps, schools, and institutions. In

the much nearer future, I hope our male colleagues will take up the call and become "experts" with us in this new endeavor, that all in our communities may feel fully served.

1. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London and New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1988), 62-64.

2. Cynthia Ozick, "Notes toward Finding the Right Question," in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

Rituals of Return and Re-Affirmation

BY JACOB J. STAUB

It has become commonplace to observe that the affiliation now reported by the majority of U.S. Jews is “unaffiliated.” There was a time, fairly recently, when the image called to mind by that fact was one of rootless, secular Jews-by-birth who had been fully acculturated into American life. With that image in mind, our strategies for reaching out to them involved the rhetoric of *contrast* between the spiritual riches of the Jewish community and the materialistic aridity of the dominant consumer culture.

Over the last decade, it has become increasingly apparent that the situation is far more complex. American Jews who are dissatisfied with *both* the materialism of American mass culture *and* their negative Jewish experiences have turned by the tens of thousands elsewhere. We are all familiar with the nightmare narratives of Jews enmeshed in “cults,” and the organized Jewish community has armed itself

against Messianic Jews and others who claim their Jewish identity and rituals as they embrace Jesus.

In important ways, however, the communal focus on such sensationalist examples has distracted us from a far more widespread phenomenon—Jews who have explicitly rejected their Jewish identities and have embraced, without fanfare, other religious communities: Holocaust survivors who have attempted to protect their children by joining churches in the hope of eradicating all traces of their Jewishness; baby boomers who have found spiritual peace in Eastern religions—while pursuing mainstream careers in law or investment banking; children of intermarried couples raised as Christians.

Historically, those who have left the Jewish community have been invisible—so much so that we have been allowed the illusion that, at least until the Modern era, Jews have not converted out unless they were coerced.

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And so, we might be inclined to dismiss as rare exceptions our personal acquaintance with born-Jews who now identify with other religious communities. The sophisticated techniques of contemporary demographers, however, now give us numbers—staggering numbers—where we once had only anecdotes.

According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, there were at that time 210,000 Jews-by-birth who had converted out and 700,000 children under 18 being raised in another religion.¹ It is reasonable to assume that these trends have continued since 1990. Certainly, a great many of those children are now adults.

It is thus not surprising that our rabbis and our communities are now encountering significant numbers of people of Jewish descent who are not only unschooled in Jewish life but who arrive from other religious backgrounds with an interest in exploring their Jewish identities. This is not a problem. Quite the opposite. To the extent that we are succeeding in creating intensive Jewish communities in which Jews find meaning and inspiration, we hope and expect to attract and include people whose journeys have led them elsewhere.

It is not a problem, but it is a challenge. On the one hand, our impulse is and ought to be one of enthusiastic welcome. On the other hand, a situation of absolutely porous communal boundaries, in which we pay no attention to a person's past history, may not be the best way to serve our communities *or* the individual. I believe that we would do well to explore

whether ceremonies of commitment to and (re-)affirmation may serve as effective experiences of re-integration.

Halakhic Precedents

"Af al pi shehata, Yisra'el hu / Even if a Jew sins, he or she remains a Jew" (B. *Sanhedrin* 44a). While the meaning of this maxim is narrow in its original talmudic context, its resonances have expanded far more broadly throughout the course of Jewish history. No matter what a fellow Jew has done—egregious criminal behavior, heresy, apostasy—he or she remains a Jew, deserving of our care, subject to the *mitzvot* and to the authority of the Jewish community.²

Did Jewish communities throughout history, then, welcome back apostates with open arms? Yes and no. In some historical contexts, social and religious boundaries were too confusing to draw such clear demarcations.³ In others, the Jewish community was forbidden from welcoming back someone who had converted to the majority religion. In those situations, however, in which rabbinic authorities were free to decide, the prerequisites for re-integration into the Jewish community varied from place to place. Ninth-century Babylonian Geonim required flogging, with R. Amram Gaon requiring public confession of sin as well. Later, in Spain and France, *tevilah* (ritual immersion), in combination with sincere *teshuvah* (repentance) and a commitment to full ritual observance, replaced flogging and public confession. Some standards were severe: R. Eliezer of Worms required fasting and absten-

tion from meat, wine, and bathing preceding *tevilah*; in fifteenth-century Germany, the returnee was required to shave off all of his (or her) hair. Others were less severe: sometimes a statement of sincere intention sufficed, even without ritual immersion.⁴

There are several recurring principles, both articulated and assumed, that underlie this medieval approach to the returning apostate. First, all of the *posekim* shared the assumption that an apostate had sinned and descended into a state of impurity. They differed only in what was required to effect full *teshuvah*. Second, at times the Jewish community was imperiled by hostile rulers and had reason to fear that a returning apostate might be a government informer. In Christian Spain, for example, where *aljamas* (Jewish communities) were granted much autonomy to govern their members, serving as an informer for non-Jewish authorities was a capital offense, because the welfare of the entire community was at stake. Caution was therefore a reasonable response. On the other hand, the disadvantaged position of Jews in society led many rabbinic authorities to trust the sincerity of returnees, because they had little to gain from re-asserting their Jewish status.⁵

The Challenge for Reconstructionist Communities

There is therefore not a great deal for Reconstructionist communities to learn from these precedents. We do not believe that Judaism is superior to other religions, such that a Jew who

joins another religious community can be said to have sinned or become impure. Nor does it appear appropriate to distrust a returnee as an agent of hostile forces that pose a danger to the Jewish community.

To the contrary, one of our *raisons d'être* is to be inclusive, to reach out to those who have not yet found a meaningful place in the Jewish community. We don't want to create barriers or to act punitively. And yet our unprecedented openness poses an interesting challenge: as demonstrated dramatically in the recent Commission report on the role of non-Jews in our congregations,⁶ we struggle with the question of who is in and who is out. Responding to the unprecedented circumstances in which we find ourselves, we embrace the challenge of building communities that include people who are not entirely identified with us. In the case of a person who *is* interested in fully identifying as a Jew, we can help by providing ritual opportunities that can lead to transformative affirmations.

Ritual Opportunities

There are two categories of cases in which I have personally found it useful to employ rituals of affirmation. I will limit my observations to those circumstances, though I can think of many other situations in which similar opportunities might arise.

The first category is that of patrilineally-descended Jews whose up-bringsings were ambiguous—that is, they were not raised exclusively and consistently as Jews. According to the Guidelines of the Reconstructionist

movement, a child born of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother is unquestionably Jewish *if* the child is raised and educated as a Jew.⁷ Those adults of patrilineal descent whom I have met rarely fit these criteria. They have grown into adulthood, nevertheless, identifying as Jews, often enough practicing rich Jewish lives and raising their children as Jews. By our own Reconstructionist definition, however, they are not technically Jewish.

In some cases, the person *wants* to undergo conversion—either because they are troubled by the ambiguity of their status within Reconstructionist circles, or because they want to be accepted by other Jewish streams that do not accept patrilineal descent. In these instances, I have no hesitation in supporting their wish.

In other cases, however, the person rejects the option of conversion. He or she had a Jewish father and a set of Jewish grandparents, and thus a rich set of Jewish memories and experiences. She or he has been living a Jewish life, has been integrated into a Jewish community, has been subject to varying degrees of anti-Semitism. When I caution them, as I always do, about the fact that Orthodox and Conservative Jews will not recognize their Jewish status, so that they might want to consider halakhic conversion, their reactions range from being amused to taking offense. A ritual that signifies a *change* in status often makes no sense to someone who is *already* living a full Jewish life.

Sometimes, however, this second type of person expresses a concern about acceptance as a Jew within the

Reconstructionist movement, given his or her failure to meet the criteria of our Guidelines. And it is in that context that I have suggested *tevilah*, the ritual of immersion used to remove *hashash* (doubt), followed by a ceremony of affirmation before a *bet din* (religious court). We are not changing them into Jews, but are rather removing any doubts about their status. And my experience is that it is invariably a powerful, moving sequence which heals a host of wounds by removing a nagging shred of uncertainty and allows them to formulate a declaration of their commitment before a *bet din* that stands for the Jewish community. The lifelong ambiguity about their Jewishness is removed as a burden, and their subsequent embrace of Jewish life is that much richer.

The second category is that of people who are halakhically Jewish but who have, in their journeys away from Judaism, embraced another religious tradition and community. I would make a distinction here between Western and Eastern religions. Christianity and Islam make exclusive claims that require of their members, by definition, a renunciation of Judaism. Buddhism and Hinduism do not. Thus, in the case of Eastern religions, I am interested in whether the person considered himself or herself Jewish while embracing the beliefs and practices of the other tradition. In cases where the returnee had renounced her or his Jewish identity, then a ceremony of re-affirmation seems appropriate.

As noted above, I find no resonance in the traditional rationales for

tevilah (ritual immersion) in these circumstances. I'm not interested in a *teshuvah* that signifies a repenting of sin. I *am* interested, however, in providing an opportunity for a *teshuvah* that signifies a full, conscious, and unambiguous return to the Jewish people. Ritual immersion in a *mikveh* followed by a declaration before a *bet din* is again the format I have used. (For moving details, I refer you to the article by David Dunn Bauer in this issue.)

Why *mikveh*? Because it is one of the more effective ritual media to which we are heir. Water cleanses away doubt and pain. It refreshes and nourishes the spirit and invigorates the body. It calls to mind images of birth and rebirth. And on top of all that, it carries with it the sacred power of countless generations of Jews who have utilized it in similar ways.⁸

The creation of new rituals is nothing new for Reconstructionists. But creating new rituals to affirm the entry into our community of people who are, in many ways, already Jews is likely to be less obvious. I suggest them not by way of seeking to create obstacles for those already on the path back, but rather as opportunities to sanctify the culmination of their return. In my mind at least, and in the experience of those with whom I have been involved, such rituals work to amplify and concretize their inner, personal journeys.

I am not advocating the establishment of affirmation rituals as standards for full membership or participation in our communities. Welcoming communities should not seek to ex-

amine the credentials of people who present themselves as Jews. But given the current demographic mix of the American Jewish population, I anticipate that in the years to come, we will find ourselves confronting more and more questions from people about their own status. As we address those questions, we would do well to remember that ritual responses are often more articulate and powerful than words alone.

1. See Barry A. Kosmin et. al., *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey* (New York: Council of Jewish Federations, 1991). For a detailed presentation of the data and an explanation of the techniques of data-gathering and analysis, see Sidney Goldstein, "Profile of American Jewry: Insights from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey," *American Jewish Yearbook*, 1992 (New York, 1992), pp. 77-173.

2. For a survey of the history of this phrase, see Jacob Katz, "Af al pi she-hata, Yisrael hu," in *Halakhah and Kabbalah: Studies in the History of Jewish Religion, Its Various Faces and Social Relevance* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1984), pp. 255-269. More recently, as modern Jews have sought to contrast Judaism with Christianity, the saying has sometimes served as evidence that Jews are Jews by birth, that we don't have the equivalent of baptism or a required assent to a catechism. Christians are sometimes heard to dissociate themselves from those who committed acts of violent anti-Semitism, because, by virtue of their beliefs or behavior, they weren't "Christian." Jews do not have that luxury.

3. For example, see Steven Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis Under Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), for a description of the startling fluidity among Shiite Muslims and Isawite Jews in eighth-century Iraq.

4. For a catalogue of halakhic opinions through the ages, see Boaz Cohen and Max

Drob, "Supplement on Jewish Law: The Repentant Apostate," in *The Bulletin of the Rabbinical Assembly* 4/1 (1/41): 9-11.

5. This was not always the case, however. There were places in which, for significant periods of time, Jews fared much better—both materially and in the rights they claimed—than most of their non-Jewish neighbors who were neither royalty nor clergy. See JRF Task Force, *Boundaries and Opportunities: The Role of Non-Jews in Jewish Reconstructionist Federation Congregations* (Wyncote, PA: Reconstructionist Press, 1998).

6. Please supply.

7. See "Guidelines on Intermarriage," *Reconstructionist* 50/1 (9/84), newsletter insert, p. E. See also my article "A Reconstructionist View on Patrilineal Descent," *Judaism* 34/1 (Winter 1985): 97-106.

8. Though it was created as a pre-marriage ritual, I find the "Ceremony for Immersion" by Rabbis Barbara Rosman Penzner and Amy Levenson to be a rich source of texts and images for immersion ceremonies of all kinds. See "Spiritual Cleansing: a Mikveh Ritual for Brides," *Reconstructionist* 52/1 (9/86): 25-29.

In at the Deep End: Immersion and Affirmation of Jewish Identity—A Personal Account

BY DAVID DUNN BAUER

As I begin my second year as a rabbinical student at RRC, I am so steeped in the community, the studies, and the process, that I sometimes forget that I have only claimed my Jewish identity for a very short time. As recently as 1995 I approached different rabbis with much uncertainty to ask if I had the right to call myself a Jew.

My journey from that period of doubt and ignorance is far from over. There are still times when my lack of a lifelong personal history of Jewish identification and practice hampers

me like the short suit in a hand of cards. But these last four years have been packed with Jewish ritual, study, and service to the Jewish community, while at the same time receiving its benefits. I now claim and proclaim my Jewish identity loudly and with pride. But I would be hard pressed to answer definitively and to my own satisfaction, “When did I become a Jew?”

There may be more responses, but two very different and potentially conflicting answers come most easily to mind: January 6, 1960, the date of

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my birth; and June 4, 1997, the date of my Ritual of Affirmation of Jewish Identity. Had the first date no validity, I would not have pursued spiritual enrichment and fulfillment through Judaism at all. Yet had I not undergone the ritual nearly 40 years later, I could never have owned my Judaism with the assurance I do now. I feel a dual pride in being Jewish—pride in my inheritance and pride in my own efforts to seek it out, come to terms with it, and call it mine.

Family of Origin

My parents were both born Jewish—my mother in Detroit, Michigan, and my father in Nürnberg, Germany. As their son, I have halakhically always been a Jew. Yet by the time I was born in 1960, both my parents had given up any Jewish practice, finding no spiritual enrichment from Reform Jewish life in Detroit at that time. Along with many other disappointed Jewish families in their community, they joined a Unitarian Universalist Church with a dynamic intellectual and spiritual life and a commitment to the liberal social causes of the time. That church was my first religious home and the only religious school I ever attended.

My parents never denied their own very different histories as Jews. I knew about my father's evacuation from Germany to England in 1939, and I once accompanied my mother and my maternal grandmother to synagogue on my grandfather's *yahrzeit* (anniversary of his death). Yet our Jewishness was present as our heritage, not as our

identity. We celebrated no Jewish holidays and made much of both Christmas and Easter. Yet these were for us family festivals and American ones, not religious ones. They were opportunities to sing together, eat together, play games, and give presents. I sang every verse of every Christmas carol imaginable, but never once thought or was told that the story was true or that Christ was indeed my savior. Santa and the Bunny were more real to me than Jesus.

At age 10, I moved with my family to Philadelphia and we tried with no success to find the home in the Unitarian Church there that we had enjoyed in Birmingham, Michigan. None of us lasted long there, and I remember being unpleasantly struck by how *Trinitarian* the building looked. I didn't think I was Jewish, but I knew I wasn't Christian. Nor did I ever feel Quaker, despite my attending Meeting for Worship throughout my seven years at Germantown Friends School. Perhaps not surprisingly, all the friends I collected during my high school years—many of whom, *barukh hashem*, remain my friends today—were Jewish. I would sometimes claim some form of Jewish identity in order to feel more closely connected to them. But since I ultimately considered Jewishness to be a matter of religious faith, my conscience would never fully allow me to say I was a Jew.

Seeking a Spiritual Home

During my adolescence, I began to feel my own spiritual need and I ini-

tiated a non-denominational prayer life of my own. Both the practice and the urge behind it continued through my college years and into my early twenties, when I briefly attended Episcopal services in Washington, DC, where I started my first career as a director for theatre and opera companies. I attended Sunday morning mass and went to various priests for consultation, especially looking for the assurance that my feelings and lifestyle as a gay man would not be an obstacle to my connection with God. My choice of the Episcopal church was based in aesthetics rather than in theology: I knew the strong Episcopal tradition of sacred music. The “tastefulness” of urban Episcopal churches somehow seemed to match that of my home and family. Besides, I had heard somewhere that there was a prominent gay presence in the Episcopal community.

What I couldn’t do, though, was believe. The leaps of faith and the acceptance of the miraculous were extremely problematic for me, and finally the exclusivity of Christian faith drove me away. The one belief, one path, one savior, and one standard of virtue felt unfair and incongruous with the creator God of my imagining. Why would anyone create so much if only to embrace a part of it all?

After retreating from that venture, my spiritual life remained private to the point of secrecy for years until I began in my later twenties to find New Age gatherings and congregations in whose company I could pray

in what seemed the general direction of the Divine. Nothing felt fully like home, but I felt reinforcement for my own individual beliefs and rituals.

Discovering Jewishness in Germany

My personal identification with other Jews in my life and in history began with my move to Cologne, Germany in 1992. I moved there to add international credits to my opera directing résumé and for the sheer adventure of living abroad. I was fortunate enough to achieve both goals, but the most lasting benefit was the decisive confrontation with my Jewish heritage. For greater freedom to live and work in Europe, I claimed the German citizenship that was my legal right as the son of a refugee. In locating and filing copies of all the pertinent documents from the time of my father’s departure (some of which were on swastika letterhead), the reality of my family’s persecution and of their lives as German Jews became three-dimensional and palpable to me as never before. The irony of becoming more Jewish by becoming German was not lost on me.

When I worked at the Prague State Opera in 1994, other Jews both in the opera house and elsewhere approached me furtively to ask me if I were Jewish and to claim kinship. In the moment I felt non-plussed and bewildered, but I retain the memory of their need to connect. So early in my conscious life as a Jew, I did not know what I legitimately had to offer another Jew. Their

apparent fearfulness testified to what I imagined to be a personal history of oppression, and having ignored my own identity throughout my life, I could only begin to guess what being Jewish meant to them. But clearly, it carried weight.

I returned to the States at the end of 1994 newly confident in and excited by my Jewishness, wanting to give it substance, and eager to find out what the Jewish religion could offer me. In all of my searching till then, it had never occurred to me that I would find in Judaism any resonance for my feelings about God and all things spiritual. I associated faith with *shukeling*, unwelcome dietary restriction, and dull Saturdays when telephone calls were prohibited. No one in my immediate family or circle of friends had ever shared how Jewish faith or practice could be a source of strength or satisfaction to me.

Finding a Home

In attending services at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York City, I had a sudden experience of homecoming, a feeling of familiarity with the text of the siddur. The English prayers as printed seemed to echo the private, personal prayers I recited on my own. I was captivated by watching families celebrate together and had my first inkling of what a Jewish life might mean. My family had shared many loving rituals, and I believe the aesthetic and social values of our home were fundamentally Jewish ones; but we had not experienced the reflections of community and his-

tory that characterize conscious Jewish living.

My investigation of Congregation Beth Simchat Torah brought me into contact with RRC graduate Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, who became both an inspiration and guide for me as I pursued my goal of fuller understanding, knowledge, and Jewish identity. I was relieved when she told me how Reconstructionism had abandoned the traditional, exclusive concept of chosenness.

I read, I attended *shul* (synagogue), I started studying Hebrew. Job opportunities with the New Israeli Opera brought me repeatedly to Tel Aviv, and my need to find a place to *daven* in a non-Orthodox and English-speaking congregation took me to the Hebrew Union College (HUC) campus in Jerusalem. The beauty of Shabbat in Jerusalem, the warmth of a whole neighborhood filled with *zemirot* (songs) from every dining room, enchanted me. As I became friends with the HUC students and a faculty member there, the idea of rabbinical education first entered my mind. I had long since realized I was ready to leave the theatre and opera world. The work, which had for years held a sacred quality for me, had become uninspiring, and I wasn't getting the opportunities to create and interact with people on a level that satisfied me emotionally, spiritually, or intellectually. In the studies and eventual careers my HUC friends anticipated, I saw the medium to enrich my own life and to reach others more surely than my theatre career permitted.

Approaching the Rabbinate

Even as I write this, three years later as a second-year rabbinical student, my fear of being thought a “flake” becomes strong again. I knew I had found the career that would offer me the engaged and dynamic life I wanted, and yet I was embarrassed at the swiftness with which I had traveled from being an inquisitive neophyte to aspiring towards being leader and teacher in the Jewish community. As I tentatively began to share my dream with Rabbi Kleinbaum and others, I expected with every moment to be told, “Sorry, this just doesn’t make sense.” No one—not Rabbi Kleinbaum nor anyone at either HUC nor RRC—ever tried to stop or discourage me. I can only believe that they trusted my sense of mission and felt that my assessment of the role of the rabbi was good and that I might bring something worthwhile to it.

While no one tried to stop me, everyone was careful not to make it easy for me either. The next year and a half were exciting, but they were extraordinarily lonely. The message I received from everyone was pure Hillel, “Go and study.” I longed for someone to reach out a hand and pull me on-board, but, appropriately, the guidance I received left the responsibility for the success or failure of the endeavor entirely with me. Either I would learn what I needed to learn or I wouldn’t. Either my enthusiasm would grow with my labor, or it would fade.

I studied in New York and Jerusalem. I eventually informed the Israeli

Opera that I was withdrawing from the profession and would not be available for future productions. I took the GREs and completed my RRC application. The admissions interview was a very moving hour for me. It had been exactly eighteen months since I first considered pursuing the rabbinate, and a lot of emotional weight was centered on that moment. I had, at that time, no “Plan B” and had staked a great deal on that one dream.

Confronting Commitment

Some hours later, in the daze that followed both the interview and RRC’s Hebrew skills test, I was called upstairs to Jacob Staub’s office. He assured me that the interview had gone well, but that the committee was concerned at the lack of ritual affirmation of my Jewish identity. “You were a practicing member of another faith,” he said in a voice that made clear this was of no small importance. My response, colored by my punchiness at the end of a draining day, was bewilderment and confusion. All along I had been waiting for someone to tell me I needed a bar mitzvah—the only Jewish ceremony I knew of—in order to proceed, but no one had. Why was I only hearing about this now? How had my advisors and teachers let me get as far as my rabbinical school interview without telling me that I needed ritually to establish myself as a Jew?

I understand his answer now better than I did then, when I felt simultaneously a little foolish and a little resentful. As he explained, synagogues

are open and welcoming to any Jews who want to attend, *daven*, learn, and participate. However, for a rabbinical school, the absolute status of the applicant assumes much greater importance.

Shortly I went from stunned to enthusiastic. Jacob provided me with what background materials he could locate that addressed my situation. Halakhically I was Jewish, and I had been living and practicing as a Jew for over a year; I was not, in the committee's mind nor in my own, a candidate for conversion. But he sent me conversion rituals from both the Reform and Conservative rabbinic manuals as resource texts. I found medieval responsa on the returning apostate in turn hilarious (rituals of shaving and whipping), moving (acknowledging the pleasures of a Gentile life that were being lost), and troubling (the need for repentance). I certainly rejected the title "apostate"—nor did RRC mean to apply it to me. I knew my spiritual search have been sincere, even though it had taken me 25 years to open the right door. I felt no obligation to repent any part of it.

A Ritual of Affirmation

RRC set simple parameters for the ritual: that I go to *mikveh* with a *bet din* and that I compose a statement of affirmation of Jewish identity and recite it there. Beyond that, I was free to add whatever would be meaningful for me.

The first challenge was to square off with the symbol of the *mikveh*. Even though it had been my exposure

to another faith that necessitated a ritual bath, I was adamant that this particular trip to *mikveh* not be to wash anything away. I could, however, accept it as symbolic of immersing my whole self—with all the scars and strengths from my journey—in the Jewish world. I might well change through the process, but I was not consciously shedding the effects of any previous decision, as if I could.

I wanted to be a participant and co-creator in the event, not just its object. At the same time, Jacob encouraged me to let Rabbi Kleinbaum take much of the control over the ceremony, and to let myself experience it rather than manage it. Looking back, the significance of that directive is deeper than I understood. This was to be my first exposure to the catalogue of Jewish rituals, whose power and history make them larger than any individual participant. The joy and excitement of ritual for me is in accepting and trusting the wisdom at its core and the mechanical process it imposes, like being strapped into a spiritual roller coaster. I needed to let the ritual do its job. Rabbi Kleinbaum indulged my requests and let me tap the other two members of the *bet din*. The ritual would be foreign enough; I wanted the witnessing Jewish community to be represented by familiar faces.

Composing my Statement of Affirmation involved addressing the significant issues raised in both the Reform and Conservative conversion rituals. Some were easy to absorb unchanged, for example that my choice was free and independent and that I

anticipated not only individual status as a Jew, but the rights and responsibilities of a member of the Jewish community. But as a newly-hatched Reconstructionist, I needed to express my commitment to Judaism through some way other than strict observance of *mitzvot*. Where the Reform text asked for severance “from all other religious affiliations” and “loyalty to Judaism and the Jewish people amid all circumstances and conditions,” I needed to expand the concepts to allow for inspiration from any true spiritual source I might encounter and to ensure that “loyalty” did not mean disengaging my critical faculties.

Finally, I wanted to incorporate into the ritual some of the prayers I had been studying and using daily. *Birkhot Hashahar* (Morning Blessings) best fit the event as I imagined it. Ours would be a morning visit to the *mikveh*, but more importantly it was the inauguration of a new life for me as a Jew and a rabbinical student. The *Mah Tovu* prayer addresses the designation of sacred space through worship, and I wanted to use it as a way of claiming the *mikveh* as ours that day.

Ceremony at the Mikveh

Never having been to *mikveh* on the Upper West Side of New York City (or anywhere), I didn’t know how much I would need to work to create an atmosphere of the sacred. My mind recorded the whole experience that day on two tracks, one of profound spiritual content and one of contrasting atmospheric absurdity. It is important to report both lest the

story read more sentimentally than it transpired. I discovered that the *mikveh* stands directly adjacent to a stand-up comedy club which I thought would make a fine alternative venue should the *mikveh* be unavailable . . . perhaps better. The building itself had nothing of the mystical about it: random furniture in the waiting room, the sound and smell of laundered towels in the dryer, a make-up room lined with vanity mirrors and outfitted with blow-dryers. As soon as I emerged still damp from my dressing room after the immersion, before I could rejoin the *bet din* and say the *Shema*, I was apprehended by the bustling “*mikveh* lady” who asked me for my \$125.00. The penetrating mundanity of the facility forced the four of us to move deeper into our own intensely spiritual agenda.

Given the heat of emotion I felt that morning, I suppose the immersion itself could only have been cooling and anti-climactic. I half expected some shock or change in my physical being to match the change in the rest of my life. No, the *mikveh* was just a white-tiled pool of water, with a slight algae-green tint. While through the door I heard Rabbi Kleinbaum’s own strength in the emphatic “Amen” she offered to each of the *berakhot* I recited, no, I didn’t hear the echo of Jewish voices throughout history. In plainspeak, the earth did not move.

And then it did. As I read aloud my Statement of Affirmation, my voice began to shake, as did my hand. That statement brought forth the best in me; writing it had challenged me to examine microscopically both my in-

tentions and my expectations and to be simultaneously realistic and ambitious. I don't know how often in life, if ever, I will again get the opportunity in one moment to embrace my past and to shape my future.

We followed the ritual with a pilgrimage to a local coffee house. After that I walked with Roderick Young—an HUC student, friend, and member of the *bet din*—to West Side Judaica, and the walk felt different. Entering

the store felt different. The feeling of uncertainty about my Jewishness that I had experienced since childhood was gone. Whether or not I had always had a right to move as a *landsman* in the Jewish world, that morning I felt I did. As I now immerse myself in the studies and work of a student rabbi, the feeling intensifies and my sense of belonging buoys me up.

Below is the statement I composed for my ritual of affirmation.

Statement of Affirmation

With joy I embrace my identity as a Jew and the worldwide community of Jews as my own. Wherever I live and travel in this world, I will never renounce this identity, this membership. I turn confidently to you, my community, for support and company throughout my life and I am eager that you should look to me for the same.

I see our heritage as mine to honor, mine to confront, mine to study, mine to teach. I cherish the sacred texts composed by Jews in the past as my birthright to read and ponder. I value them as a source of inspiration and of challenge. They serve to transport and console me and sometimes to trouble me, but they always retain their claim on my attention. The variety of my response to them in no way mitigates my right to call them mine.

While I do not forget or close my eyes to the wisdom and insights of other traditions, I call the Jewish religion the core of my spiritual life and practice. Any true light from another corner of the world will only illuminate it the better.

I believe that the received traditions of Jewish life and worship require of me both study and respect. I will live conscious of them and with sincerity assess their value and usefulness in my life. I look forward to building a Jewish home for myself and to a life marked according to the Jewish clock and Jewish calendar.

As I am grateful to the Jews of all generations who continue to transmit our traditions and wisdom to me, so am I committed to teaching what I learn and discover to other Jews, my contemporaries and those of generations to come.

The *Yetzi'ah* Ceremony: Rethinking the Jewish Coming Of Age

BY JILL JACOBS AND MIK MOORE

The institution of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony indicates the Jewish belief that a life passage as monumental as the transition to adulthood should be commemorated with a religious ceremony. Today, the real transition to adulthood comes when students leave home for college, yet there is no ritual that helps students to approach this transition within a Jewish framework. In this piece, we propose a ceremony, which we have named the *Yetzi'ah* (going out) ceremony. Loosely based on the *Ushpizin* tradition (the ceremony welcoming spiritual guests to the Sukkah), the *Yetzi'ah* ceremony allows students to affirm a connection to tradition while reflecting upon the transition they will soon undergo.

The Bar Mitzvah was originally

conceived as a ceremony marking a boy's assumption of the religious obligations of a Jewish adult. To demonstrate his entrance into adulthood, the boy was called up to the Torah for his first *aliyah*, an honor customarily reserved for males over the age of thirteen. In the twentieth century, synagogues introduced the Bat Mitzvah ceremony for girls. While it varies from congregation to congregation, in most non-Orthodox synagogues the Bat Mitzvah has become virtually identical to the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. In many non-Orthodox synagogues, tenth-graders also participate in an egalitarian confirmation ceremony, a class graduation derived from the model of the Christian Confirmation.

In the past, the Bar Mitzvah also

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coincided with the boy taking on adult obligations in the secular world. Until this century, it was common for boys to begin working full-time at thirteen, and to marry and start a family a few years later. Children were those younger than thirteen; adults were those older than thirteen. As a distinct age group “teenagers” did not exist. Although boys and girls undergo many physical changes at this point in their lives, society no longer recognizes thirteen as the age at which young people become mature adults. Children do not acquire additional rights when they turn thirteen; most do not even move from junior to senior high school until the following year. Today, children make their real transition to adulthood four or five years later, when they prepare to leave high school and go to college. A second Jewish rite of passage, parallel to a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, would help students to frame this transition within the context of Jewish tradition.

Determining the Contemporary Age of Adulthood

According to the Council of Jewish Federation’s 1990 survey, almost 90% of Jews go to college. In previous generations, many Jews attended college; many did not. Often those Jews who did attend college remained at home for the duration of their undergraduate experience. Although eighteen was an important transitional year for many Jews, it has never signified the large-scale granting of independence that it currently does.

An eighteen-year-old’s independence assumes two forms: legal and informal. Legal independence is an important signifier. Eighteen-year-olds can vote, serve on a jury, and be drafted into the army. Perhaps even more significant is the informal independence that students assume. First-year college students learn to handle their own finances, bear responsibility for their nutrition, make sexual decisions, and determine their academic and extra-curricular priorities.

One generation ago, students engaged in a fight that helped to define eighteen as the year of transition to adulthood. In the 1960s, students argued that reaching eighteen brought with it a battery of new responsibilities but offered few new rights. Foremost in their minds was the draft. Eighteen-year-olds were old enough to go to war, but not old enough to vote. The fight against *in loco parentis*, the policy at most colleges in which the school was charged to act “in place of parents,” further defined the age of 18 as the age of adulthood. The students’ success in changing both law and custom cemented eighteen as the contemporary age of transition to adulthood.

Are Two Ceremonies Better Than One?

If children no longer become adults until the age of eighteen, some might argue for postponing the Bar/Bat Mitzvah five years rather than instituting a second ceremony. But holding two ceremonies recognizes that the transition to adulthood does not oc-

cur in a single stage. At the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, a child becomes a teenager; five years later, this teenager becomes an adult. The teenage years are a bridge connecting the two ceremonies; becoming an adult is thereby recognized as a process, not a pronouncement. When a child becomes a Bat/Bar Mitzvah, s/he takes on additional responsibilities within the Jewish community; at the age of eighteen, s/he takes on additional responsibilities within the greater community. Thus the teenage years serve as a crucial time for maturation. The *Yetzi'ah* ceremony concludes a process begun when a child becomes Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

In addition, several biblical figures offer a precedent for the idea that the transition to adulthood takes place through two parallel, transformative events. The first of these events occurs when the figure is too young or inexperienced to question. The second comes about when the figure is older and more capable of making independent decisions.

Jacob and Esther

Two characters who undergo dual transformations are Jacob and Esther. Jacob leaves home twice, and each time struggles with an angel before reaching his destination. First he leaves at the urging of his mother, Rebecca, who knows of his brother Esau's plans to kill him. This is an immature departure in which Jacob unquestioningly follows his mother's orders without a clear sense of purpose or destination. When Jacob leaves his father-in-law Laban's house, he does

so as an adult who bears responsibility both for himself and for a large family. He makes a conscious decision to break away from the confines of Laban's home, to repair his relations with his brother, and to establish himself as the head of his own family. The second struggle with an angel and Jacob's consummate name change indicate his transition to adulthood. While his first journey away from home represents a crucial transformation, he does not become an adult until his second, more premeditated, journey.

Esther also undergoes two "departures." At the bidding of her guardian, Mordechai, she leaves home to marry King Ahashueros. Despite the bearing that this marriage has on Esther's life, the text offers no evidence of her involvement in the decision-making process. Esther metaphorically leaves home again when she exposes herself as a Jew. With this confession, she abandons the comfort and security of her position in the palace and makes herself vulnerable to the king's whims. Again, Esther acts on Mordechai's bidding, but this time, she is mature enough to argue with him and to consider the consequences of her actions. While Mordechai provides the impetus, ultimately Esther takes responsibility for saving the Jews.

Today the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony has become similar to the first departures experienced by Jacob and Esther. Most girls and boys are too young to appreciate fully the meaning of their transition from Jewish childhood to adulthood. Often, like Jacob and Esther, they are merely following

the instructions of a parent or guardian. And while the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony could and should be made more meaningful, it is impossible and undesirable to return to a time when thirteen represented a true transition to adulthood.

The Yetzi'ah Ceremony

The *Yetzi'ah* ritual affirms the participant's connection to tradition and to the home community while allowing the student to contemplate what lies ahead. By performing this ritual in a synagogue, the student solidifies her ties to the Jewish community that nurtured her. The ritual also offers the congregation the opportunity to bid farewell publicly to the student and to wish her luck for the future.

The student should be called to the Torah and may lead part of the service and read Torah or Haftarah. She should also deliver a *Devar Torah* in which she reflects both on the *parashat hashavu'a* (Torah portion of the week) and on the process of leaving home. To help create a participatory environment, the student should choose relevant poems, quotes, or other selections to be read by members of the congregation.

The core of the ritual is based on the *Ushpizin* ceremony, a Sukkot tradition instituted by the medieval Jewish mystics. In this ritual, Jews invite into the Sukkah seven biblical guests—traditionally Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and David—though many contemporary Jews also include biblical women. Each represents a particular set of qualities which

the inhabitants of the Sukkah wish to emulate. In the *Yetzi'ah* ceremony, students call upon biblical characters to offer guidance in different aspects of adulthood. The *Ushpizin* ritual is particularly appropriate for this ceremony because it allows the students to look simultaneously into the past and toward the future. As the students leave home and begin their adult lives, they affirm their commitment to Jewish tradition by requesting guidance from their ancestors.

The student calls upon seven ancestors. We have included a sample text below, as well as questions to guide the student in creating his own text.

Invoking Our Ancestors: Autonomy and Courage

As I prepare to leave my parents' home and begin my adult life, I re-confirm my commitment to my tradition. I know that I will face new challenges and struggles, and I call upon my biblical forbears, whose example will guide me through the upcoming challenges:

I call upon Abraham, who embodies personal independence. The first Jew, Abraham broke away from his home and community in order to follow the God in whom he believed. Although it must have been extremely difficult for Abraham to leave home without exact knowledge of his destination, he knew that he had to leave in order to be true to himself. As I prepare to leave my home community, I look to Abraham for guidance in my struggles to gain independence

and to define myself as a person. Like Abraham, I am not sure what my final destination will be, but I know that I must soon leave home in order to find my own way.

What new responsibilities will I take on when I leave home? What excites me about this new independence? What frightens me? How will I balance freedom and responsibility? How will I determine my priorities? What kind of person do I want to be? How will my new independence allow me to develop into this person? How does Abraham's decision to leave the safety of his father's house provide insight into my upcoming departure?

I call upon Esther, a woman of inner courage and independence of thought, particularly in sexual situations. Through the actions of her predecessor, Vashti, Esther learned the consequences of publicly rejecting the role of passive sex object. It would have been easy for her to follow the models of the other concubines—to submit to the king's sexual whims without demanding anything in return. By approaching the king, Esther demonstrated her courage and her refusal to submit to others' low expectations of her. In the years ahead, I expect to encounter peer pressure, sexual and otherwise. While it may be easier to follow my friends unquestioningly, I take on the challenge of determining and maintaining my own principles of behavior.

What factors will influence my sexual decision-making? What peer pressure do I anticipate facing once I arrive at college? As the only Jew in the king's court, how does Esther maintain her sense of

identity? What can I learn from her example?

Family and Community

I call upon Jacob, who represents the centrality of family. Jacob constantly struggled to resolve family conflicts and to build a strong home. Despite his own conflicts with his parents and those between his wives and among his children, Jacob continually worked to mend his family's wounds. By the end of his life, he had reconciled himself with his brother and had seen his children resolve their own conflicts. As I prepare to leave my family, I acknowledge their importance in my life. I look to Jacob for guidance to maintain and to further develop my relationships with my family, both immediate and extended.

What kind of relationship do I hope to maintain with my family? How can I strengthen our relationship despite our distance? Have I made an effort to bring estranged members of my family together? What can I learn from the struggles Jacob faced regarding his family?

I call upon Ruth, who represents commitment to the Jewish community. She left her home in Moab to become part of the Jewish community and accepted upon herself all of the obligations that accompany membership in this community. As I move outward from my home community, which has nurtured me, I affirm my commitment to continue to be part of a Jewish community. I may, like Ruth, soon find myself stepping into a community very unlike the one to which I am accustomed; I may be

lucky enough to find a community that is immediately comfortable; I may even find it necessary to create a new community. Even if it is not easy for me to find an ideal community, I commit myself to finding and building a Jewish community that will sustain me through college and beyond.

How has my current Jewish community influenced me? What aspects of this community have been the most important for me? What have I learned from this community? How do I see myself fitting into my college Jewish community? What role do I expect to play in this new community? What would my ideal Jewish community look like? How might I create that ideal community? Why is it important for me to be part of a community?

Leadership, Responsibility, Connection

I call upon Moses, who represents leadership. Although not a natural leader, he overcame his personal reservations and physical limitations to become the greatest leader of the Jewish people. He encountered additional challenges in taking on the leadership of a people among whom he was not raised, and to whom he had to prove himself again and again. I am now preparing to enter an unfamiliar and intimidating world. I look to Moses for guidance in learning how to participate in college life, how to contribute to it, and how to become a leader among my peers.

What are personal obstacles that I need to overcome? How might I conquer my fears and insecurities? In what areas

do I see myself becoming a leader? What skills will I need to accomplish my leadership goals? How will my experiences in high school help me to become a leader in college? What can I learn from the example of leadership provided by Moses?

I call upon Joseph, who represents the responsibility to one's country. Joseph understood that his communal responsibilities extended beyond his immediate community, and he therefore devoted himself to the welfare of Egypt. Because of Joseph's wisdom and caring, the people of Egypt did not starve during their seven years of hardship. Upon reaching the age of eighteen, I become legally responsible for American democracy, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Like Joseph, I understand my responsibility to the land in which I live. I look to him for guidance in taking seriously my right to vote, my obligation to serve on a jury, and my responsibility to American law.

What does it mean to be a Jew in the United States? What new legal rights and responsibilities will I receive when I am eighteen years old? How can I make sure that I take these new rights and responsibilities seriously? What does it mean to be a full participant in a democracy outside of Israel? What is my moral responsibility to help America achieve its stated ideals of liberty and justice for all? How did Joseph approach his situation as a stranger in a land not his own?

I call upon Hannah, who represents the individual relationship with God. In developing the art of prayer, Hannah created a new way of speak-

ing to God. As I leave my home community, I look to Hannah for help in maintaining a connection with my tradition and in finding new ways to make tradition meaningful to me. I do not know how I will ultimately relate to Judaism—my relationship with my tradition may resemble that of my parents, or it may take on a new form. What is important is that I continue to maintain and develop a personal and meaningful relationship to Judaism. As Hannah developed an intimate relationship with God, I too will look for ways to infuse divinity into all aspects of my life.

When do I feel the presence of God in my life? How do I connect to divinity? How do I make my tradition speak to me? How has my relationship to tradition evolved? How do I expect it to continue to evolve? How might my relationship with tradition be different than that of my parents and grandparents? How do I bring the divine into my everyday relationships and experiences? What kind of God do I believe in? When is prayer most meaningful to me?

The student may also want to invoke the memory of contemporary Jewish heroes who represent values similar to those embodied by the biblical character. For instance, he might liken his family's journey to America to Abraham's journey from his parents' home. She might relate Joseph's work for his country to that of Louis Brandeis, or compare Henrietta Szold's commitment to the Jewish community to that of Ruth.

The student ends by reciting *Tefilat Haderekh*, the Traveler's Prayer. At this point, he may also add his own

prayers or thoughts about the journey that he is about to undertake.

The Role of New Ritual

Throughout history, Jews have borrowed heavily from the dominant cultures, both by turning non-Jewish customs—like marriage—into Jewish rituals, and by adapting contemporary characteristics to build upon Jewish traditions, as was done by transforming oral into written law. The *Yetzi'ah* ceremony combines these two Jewish impulses by transforming larger contemporary characteristics (namely eighteen as the age of adulthood) into a modern Jewish ceremony (the *Yetzi'ah* ritual).

In recent years, numerous new Jewish rituals have been created. Many of these rituals are for women and girls, who have been excluded as active participants in so much of Jewish ritual life for so long. These welcome additions are often motivated by an underlying desire to make Judaism relevant to an increasingly modern, assimilated and disenchanted population. Yet neither the Jewish nor the larger American communities makes any substantive effort to address the needs and concerns of young people as they make their transition to adulthood. Undoubtedly this contributes to the problems many students experience during their first years of college, including drunkenness, sleep deprivation and general confusion.

The proposal for a *Yetzi'ah* ceremony is an attempt to fill the gap left by the two communities while taking an honest look at the contemporary role of a traditional Jewish ritual.

Reading the Covenant: A Review of *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism*

BY RIV-ELLEN PRELL

For nearly twenty years Lawrence Hoffman, Professor of Liturgy at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, has both transformed and reformulated a field of Jewish liturgical studies. *Covenant of Blood* not only continues his intellectual project of defining this field, but moves this work along new dimensions that are both challenging and disturbing for participants in Jewish ritual life. Professor Hoffman would have it no other way. Over these decades he has increasingly written not only as a distinguished scholar, but as a rabbi/anthropologist whose contact with Jews, whether speaking

at their synagogues or training them for the rabbinate and cantorate, has allowed him many opportunities to look more closely at how Jews experience their religious lives.

Hoffman has written an elegant study of the liturgy and ritual of circumcision, the *brit milah*. It is the work of a mature intellectual because it beautifully distills the many insights he has gained from scholars in a variety of fields, and trains them with remarkable economy on circumcision. For example, his long intellectual engagement with the field of anthropology continues to provide his most significant interpretive scheme.

Riv-Ellen Prell, an anthropologist, is Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Minnesota and teaches Jewish studies and women's studies. She is the author of the *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (forthcoming in 1999 from Beacon Press) and *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism*.

In brief, Hoffman lays the foundation of his argument on the critical insight that the rabbis radically redefined the meaning of covenant by selecting one set of meanings and associations available among competing ones. Covenant before the exile meant something fundamentally different from covenant after the exile, and both meanings are found in the Pentateuch. The pre-exile experience of *brit* (covenant) is marked in Genesis by elaborate animal sacrifice and is linked to Israel's power and dominion over Canaan. Later in Genesis, however, covenant is marked by circumcision, its most prominent feature, and is linked to the "wholeness" of men and their suitability for a special relationship with God (Hoffman, pp. 34-36).

This interpretation is his starting place for a bold and radical analysis of the *brit milah* as the first in a series of rituals in the life of a man that establish what Hoffman terms, "the male lifeline." He suggests that Judaism is not characterized by "life cycle rituals" that mark the passages of an individual, but by rituals that demarcate the "covenantal life of a man" (p. 81). Hence, there are no parallel rituals for boys and girls or men and women as they move through the phases of their lives. One set of rites alone reinforces key relationships of authority and meaning, and they are those that mark the unique relationship of men to the covenant.

Beyond the Text

Although Lawrence Hoffman has always positioned himself within the

traditional study of Jewish texts, he has transformed their study by understanding ritual—to use the title of one of his most significant books—as "beyond the text." He has consistently argued that ritual cannot be contained by language and must be analyzed along a variety of dimensions. In *Covenant of Blood*, Hoffman moves us toward the understanding of *brit milah* in the context of a culture, the world of rabbinic Judaism. He makes no claim that this is the only culture of its time or place, but that it is a culture, and one that defines Jewish practice, that is central to his understanding of the ritual. He perceptively explores the concept of the "public meaning" of the *brit milah* in order to establish his approach to ritual. The meanings that he seeks to interpret are those widely shared in the culture. They are available in the language surrounding the rite, the order of the ritual, the symbols that constitute it and their place in other rituals. Perhaps most importantly, Hoffman draws on the cultural categories that *brit milah* presents, and how those categories—gender, blood, semen, fertility—are positioned in other arenas of rabbinic culture.

Anthropological theory, particularly the work of the symbolic anthropologists of the 1960s and 1970s, is central to this task. Hoffman has built upon this work, integrating it with textual and historical analysis throughout his scholarly career. In so doing he has created a powerful and creative synthesis that has been one of his most important contributions to the field of Jewish liturgy. This synthesis has al-

lowed Hoffman to breathe life into the rituals of the rabbinic world. He presents them as dramas, spectacles, as rehearsals of cultural identities and as nuanced contexts for rich and multi-vocal symbols.

On the occasion of this important book, Lawrence Hoffman's powerful analysis is inevitably disturbing for readers of this journal as well as the minions of progressive Jews who have fought now for decades for the equality of men and women in Judaism. Hoffman concludes that *brit milah* establishes the fact that rabbinic Judaism is built upon a fundamental distinction between male and female that makes men the bearer of the covenantal relationship with God, a relationship that creates fertility, reproduces sacred knowledge through the study of Torah, and assures the continuity of the Jewish people.

Hoffman writes that he did not set out to tell this story, that he avoided it, and almost lost the manuscript at one point as an unconscious strategy perhaps not to have to confront this fact. As bearers of public culture, rituals communicate social facts; and what Hoffman discovered as an irreducible cultural reality contained in those facts is the centrality of a Jewish male culture to rabbinic Judaism. That version of rabbinic Judaism, one in which Hoffman is daily engaged, is not the one he hoped to find. Nevertheless having found it, *Covenant of Blood* is his most significant contribution to feminist scholarship to date because he is able to demonstrate how *brit milah* not only took on the male lifeline role, but over time excluded

women from some participation in that covenantal experience, just as the rite of the redemption of the first-born son minimized and then excluded women as well.

Hoffman again turns to anthropological theory to help him illumine how male hegemony is established through ritual. Along with Howard Eilberg-Schwartz he has argued that the blood shed in circumcision is constructed as precisely the opposite of the uncontrollable flow of menstrual blood, hence the Rabbis built the exclusion of women on a critical cultural dichotomy between the genders. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Sherry Ortner, showing that the symbolic opposition of male and female parallels that between nature and culture, Hoffman suggests that rabbinic Judaism accepts this opposition as critical to its public culture.

The Power of *Brit Milah*

Lawrence Hoffman is enough of an anthropologist to begin and end this stunning book with a more vexing question. He wonders why *brit milah* has had such a powerful hold on Jews for so many centuries, and poses the question in especially intriguing terms for the pioneers of Reform Judaism in Germany, who, willing to question so much of rabbinic Judaism, drew a powerful ideological line at ritual circumcision. He notes the attachment of many contemporary Jews—even those with the most minimal involvement in Jewish life to this rite of circumcision, and he hypothesizes that issues of Jewish continuity, particu-

larly in the shadow of the Holocaust, may be, in the end, explanatory.

In a balanced coda to the book he lays out the controversy for contemporary American Jews. There are three rationales for questions about *brit milah*—ritual, medical and moral—and in each case Hoffman analyzes the debates surrounding them. He also includes a brief discussion of liturgical alternatives that minimize or eliminate the reason for circumcision.

Hoffman begins and ends this book with a story that continues to intrigue me. Studying with a group of young, male and female rabbis, he learns that many of them continue to experience pain and frustration over the fact that they allowed their sons to be circumcised. Some believed that their infants needlessly suffered; others had ritual circumcisers who did a poor job. They continue to struggle, as they are still having children, over what they will do if they have another son.

I wondered if such an anguished conversation would take place at the Jewish Theological Seminary or at Yeshiva University. There is no way to know that apart from actual research, but I somehow doubt it. As we live in a time of many Judaisms, Lawrence Hoffman raised for me the same interesting questions about ritual that he has in so many other books and articles. What are the conditions that allow ritual to create public meaning? How is normative Judaism realized in the lives of men and women who are conscious or unconscious of those meanings? When *brit milah* is associated with generations of relatives, of

one's own attendance at these ceremonies for cousins, siblings, and friends with whom one has prayed regularly, attended camp, or shared other Jewish experiences, is the effect different? If one regards tradition in one way or another, are the anxieties and fears allayed?

Almost two decades ago an old friend of mine, Jeremy Brochin, described his experience of his son's *brit milah*. Jeremy and I had davened together at the Upstairs Minyan of the University of Chicago with our beloved teacher Rabbi Daniel Leifer z"l. Danny was the master ritual innovator. With his wife he created one of the first feminist baby-naming ceremonies and the first *pidyon habat* (redemption of the first-born child). His unerring sense for the balance between tradition and innovation was a model for all of us. Jeremy and his wife, Reena Spicehandler, had made a number of additions to the ceremony. But as Jeremy later recounted to me, the ritual, particularly the act of circumcision, was so powerful that all the additions were in the end superfluous. Such is the nature of *brit milah*—unlike a wedding, a funeral, a baby naming, or a bat mitzvah. How we square that extraordinary power with a normative Judaism that includes us all is a problem we must continue to confront. What Lawrence Hoffman has done is to give us, as it were, a naked truth. He would be the first to recognize, indeed he has helped provide us the vocabulary to ask, how in the face of that knowledge so many of us—men and women—continue to cast our lot with that ritual.

Madrikh Larabbanim: A Review of the *Rabbi's Manual of* the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association

BY LAWRENCE A. HOFFMAN

Overview: How is this book different from all other books?

Rabbi's manuals have traditionally been liturgical cookbooks for clergy unfamiliar with the rules and content of what we now label the Jewish life-cycle liturgy. At the turn of the twentieth century, when rabbis were still rare here and virtually no one belonged to congregations, Jews depended on free-lancers who traded in life-cycle rites, and who would consult books like *Sefer Berit Yitzchak: A Manual Comprising the Ritual of Marriage, Circumcision, Redemption of the First Born and Confir-*

mation [Bar Mitzvah], and the Usual Prayers for These Ceremonies: Also Speeches Designed for Such Occasions, by "Yitzchak Yehudah Leib Kadushin the Mohel."

The classic work is Hyman E. Goldin's *Hamadrikh: The Rabbi's Guide*, which first appeared in 1933, but which has been revised twice, and is still widely used. Goldin had composed the *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh*, a summary of Jewish law. His handbook follows suit, summarizing life-cycle regulations alongside the texts

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that they govern, and providing homiletical material for untrained preachers, plus handy appendices like a guide to Hebrew and Yiddish names for documents and tombstone inscriptions. Later manuals have generally followed Hyman's model.

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association's *Madrikh Larabbanim: Rabbi's Manual* stands in this tradition, but breaks new ground. It was written, it states in the Introduction, "in response to a need . . . long felt, for readily accessible life cycle resources that we can comfortably use." It was long in coming, beginning in the 1970s, after which it outlived "successive RRA Executive Committees" before the current editorial committee, directed by Seth Daniel Riemer, managed to bring it to fruition.

Readers of *The Reconstructionist* have learned to expect creative ritual from this youngest of our American movements, and this *Rabbi's Manual* is thoroughly Reconstructionist in that regard. It reveres tradition, but offers novelty. True to Reconstructionist social principles, it is overwhelmingly egalitarian; but unlike the *Manual* of the Reform Movement (which is similarly egalitarian) this one is self-consciously feminist. For example, instead of a common "covenant" rite for boys and girls, it provides *Berit Milah* (circumcision) for boys, and for girls, *Berit Rehitzah* (a foot-washing ceremony) and *Berit Mikveh* (a ritual for full infant immersion).

Interestingly enough, there is almost no halakhah here: no talmudic references, no "musts" or "must nots."

Instead of the standard rules of when marriages must not be performed, how to count the days until *Pidyon Haben*, or conditions under which circumcision may be delayed—the usual stuff of *Rabbi's Manuals*—we get the quintessential modern substitute for regulations: advice. Reconstructionist rabbis are advised to provide full burials for infants who die within a month; to develop new grieving rituals for parents of stillbirths and for "women and their partners . . . in cases of miscarriage." We also get helpful homiletical hints for lay men and women who will choose to arrange their own rituals. Like the committees that inspired it, this *Manual* is radically democratic, a testimony to the *havurah* movement that has so transformed traditional Kaplanian Reconstructionism. The hands-on, grass roots, liberal ethos of the countercultural 1960s is alive and well here.

Innovative Format

At last, someone has created a loose-leaf manual, an idea bruited about in Reform circles since the 1970s but regularly dismissed on the grounds that only hardbound books look dignified, or the fear that some harried rabbi might mistakenly bring just the marriage section to a funeral. Prior manuals quickly became dated, since new rituals could not be integrated into a bound book. Rabbis regularly collect new poetry and readings anyway. A looseleaf format allows them to insert their favorite items in the right place, rather than to have to paste them over printed pages, or affix them with paper clips.

Life-cycle material comes color coded on tabs that help you find what you want. Green is for Birth and Infancy; red for Marriage; blue for Death and Mourning. Pages are numbered internally by section (M-7 is Marriage, p. 7, for instance). Within each section, the standard rites are followed by sections called “*Hidur Mitzvah*,” “Personal Prayers and Supplementary Readings,” and “Resources,” which supply ways to intensify the experience of an event, such as *kavanot* (meditative ideas to enhance the ceremony), alternative readings and interpretations, and educational background material to photocopy for congregants.

A purple section provides sample certificates (presumably to show to prospective life-cycle celebrants); a guideline on interfaith marriages (running eight pages, and announcing on page 6 that “traditional rites of the Jewish wedding ceremony should be reserved for the marriage of a Jew to a Jew”); and a very welcome statement on “Breach of Rabbinic Trust: Sexual and Financial Ethics”—again, a sign of the extent to which current concerns tend most readily, most intensely, and most publicly to be addressed among Reconstructionists. Sources for the creative readings are duly acknowledged in the orange section at the end.

Reconstructionists have always prided themselves on their advanced social ethic, continuity with tradition, and intellectual honesty. Their *Manual* ought to be judged on these criteria. In addition, we should ask how functional this book is likely to

be: who will find it useful and who not?

The Reconstructionist Social Ethic

The social ethics of this *Manual* set the liberal standard for the 1990s. I have referred to its feminist cutting edge. Its concern goes farther than just including women as equals. Feminist principles and the lives of women are everywhere. Prayers for “parents who have been assisted in conception” (B-2) provide blessings for surrogate mothers and sperm donors. There are prayers also for learning of a pregnancy, the onset of labor, birth of a child, bringing a child home, weaning, and gay and lesbian marriage. The *Manual* is not complete, however. Again, in true feminist fashion, this is a work in progress. The editors invite people to add their own loose-leaf pages with ceremonies for “a foster child, disability of a child, special life circumstances, gay and lesbian parents and single parents” (BP-47). This book is a manifesto proclaiming that all Jews should celebrate Jewish lives and that what they celebrate should not be limited to the traditional markers that the Rabbis of old established as an ideal man’s (but not a woman’s) life of Torah.

Mining of Tradition

At times, the use of tradition here is brilliant. The last of the seven wedding blessings is translated as, “Blessed are You, who brings groom and bride together to rejoice in each other” (M-13)—an interpretation recognizable

as derived from Rashi's commentary to the Talmud. The *Manual* includes *Pidyon Haben* (Redemption of the First Born Son), reinterpreted as a welcoming ceremony for all first children. *Peter rehem* "The opening of the womb," as the first-born is called biblically, is reconceptualized as *peter rahamim*, "an opening for divine love in the world" (B-33). A weaning ceremony features redeployed phrases borrowed from the *Amidah*: *Barukh . . . mekhalkel hayim behesed*, "Blessed are You who sustains life with *hesed*" and *Borkhenu avinu kulanu be'or panekha*, "Bless us, Source of Being, all of us" (B-48).

Even the rarely used form of the Kaddish reserved mostly for burials, because of its forthright acknowledgment of the resurrection of the dead, is supplied (D-24). The Aramaic is slightly altered, however, to omit actual resurrection but still to include the promise of being "raised to life eternal." Also, God is to uproot idolatry "from our hearts" not from "the earth"; and "the Shekhinah," not "the Temple cult," will be restored to Jerusalem.

We even have the wedding benediction known as *Birkat Erusin*, an ancient (and sexist) blessing where the groom praises God for prohibiting him from having sexual intercourse with his betrothed before she is fully married to him. Here, the blessing is included alongside an editorial advisement that the feminine plural *arusot*, (those with whom intercourse is forbidden) should be understood as gender-inclusive, so that the blessing becomes an egalitarian reminder of the

ban on adultery (M-8). This inclusion of *Birkat Erusin* throws into question the third hallmark of Reconstructionist philosophy: intellectual honesty.

Intellectual Honesty

Mordecai Kaplan left the Reconstructionist movement with a legacy of saying only what is intellectually acceptable. By "acceptability," he included not just scientific statement of fact, but also metaphor and other poetic devices that human psychology requires, as, for instance, the second-person address to God, as if God were a person. But otherwise, in search of honesty, Kaplan excised even the most familiar language—for example, references to chosenness in the Torah Blessings and the *Aleynu*.

Current Reconstructionist liturgy has continued Kaplan's debt to American pragmatism by describing God in a dazzling variety of epithets, which correlate with the different aspects of divine action. In the *Manual*, then, God is RESCUER, NURTURING ONE, SOURCE OF LIFE, HOPE, or just YAH (all obnoxiously written in capitals, unfortunately). Most epithets work well: like VOICE OF JUSTICE, when social justice is the issue (B-40). I can do without SIRE OF ALL FLESH, (B-9) a masculine reference in English, as in "to sire a child," and a poor one at that (as in the medieval "Forsooth, sire"). Similarly, I don't mind God being AUTHOR and COMPASSIONATE FRIEND (B-11), but not in God's capacity of "engraving the covenant" in "this boy's flesh" (a notion I would have expected the Reconstructionists to

omit anyway, in their insistence on breaking down the association of covenant just with men). Be that as it may, we do not have to like all the epithets equally, to be able to applaud the Reconstructionists' attempt to transcend the intellectually dishonest notion that we can ever capture God's essence. God is more than any of the above, which are only ways in which God may be evident to us, given *our* limitations, not God's.

The burial Kaddish here obeys this unstated rule of saying only what the movement can believe. I wonder, however, about including *Birkat Erusin*, even with the grammatical band-aid that asks us to pretend the feminine plural is inclusive. The argument may be that masculine Hebrew plurals include both genders; so, why not the same for the feminine Hebrew plurals? But saying doesn't make it so. The greatest weakness of this *Manual* is that it is driven by an insatiable hunger for traditional ritual wed to feminist ideology, sometimes at the expense of other concerns such as intellectual honesty. This charge is serious, and I need to demonstrate why I think it is true.

Ritual and Ideology

The hunger for ritualistic traditionalism is evident in the *Manual*'s official incorporation of non-halakhic customs that could have been excluded and left to informal personal preference. The practice of having the bride encircle the groom, for instance, prompts the dubious historical hypothesis that since Jeremiah 31:21

says, "The Eternal has created something new—woman circling man," it must follow that originally "man circled woman." Bride and groom are advised to circle each other now in certain knowledge that "the practice of circling the bride [!] resurrects a lost *minhag* of our people!" This is just plain wrong. Originally, only the groom was encircled, and it was by his groomsmen, probably to protect him from Lillith. The custom is mentioned by Eliezer of Worms (12th century). Later, the bride did the circling, but probably not before the 17th century, when a zoharic interpretation of the verse in the book of Jeremiah was adduced as proof text. Reconstructionists are caught in a conflict between tradition (a sexist circling of the groom) and their commitment to feminism. Rather than bite the intellectually honest bullet of denouncing the custom, or just suggesting that *if* people opt for it, they should strip it of its gendered one-sidedness, they twist the historical facts to imply that the groom's circling the bride is ancient and authentic Judaism.

I wonder also why marriage as *kinyan* ("purchase [of the bride]") is retained. Unwilling to drop a notion that they find offensive, the Reconstructionists reformulate it. Instead of handing over a handkerchief to the *mesader kinyan*, "each partner drapes the other with a garment" (MH-1). This, we are told, is the way for bride and groom to "demonstrate commitments—spiritual, emotional, financial, and material—to each other. But is it? If so, how? Again, saying doesn't make it so. Rituals, however refur-

bished, cannot mean just anything we want them to. Similarly, *bedeken*, a medieval rite in which the groom veils the bride while the bystanders pray that she bears many children, is recast so that bride and groom cover themselves with a tallit and then unveil themselves for each other—a meditation (says the ritual) on discovering one's true love. Retaining tradition at whatever cost can result in an altered ceremony with an altered meaning in which the ceremony doesn't necessarily reflect the desired meaning, or where the meaning may be reflected but unnecessary or even pointless.

The *Manual's* Effectiveness

The *Manual's* strength is its responsiveness to the feminist call to devise new rituals and to make old ones inclusive. It does so well when it drops ideological posturing for poetry—Adrienne Rich on lesbian marriage (M-18) and Danny Siegel on Torah Study (BP-22)—and when it echoes the way real people think and feel. In the *Berit Rehitzah*, the mother holds her daughter and says, “You have been as close to me as my own breath; may I love you gently . . .” to which the father adds, “I hold you close and cradle you with my love.” A child is welcomed with the statement, “Each human soul is conceived in the womb of the Eternal.” Good liturgy is touching because it is in touch with its celebrants' passions, or because its poetry imparts a truth that becomes self evident the moment it is said.

Too often, however, we get didactic liturgy struggling to make a point;

for instance, the abovementioned *mikveh* ritual labors to explain itself: “As circumcision is a physical ritual involving male sexuality, so has *mikveh* ritual come to be associated with women's sexuality—the womb and menstrual flow, remind us of the ebb and flow of time and life.” Well, yes and no. Men go to the *mikveh* also. Be that as it may, didactic ritual rarely works. If what the explanation says were true, it wouldn't have to say it the way it does. If the symbolism isn't clear, explaining it doesn't make it so.

A related problem is the difficulty of sustaining liturgical analogies: Ideologically driven liturgical authors have to explain to their ritualizing audience what the ritual is supposed to mean. If they depend on traditional forms, the forms require reinterpretation, usually analogic: “Just as . . . so . . .” (I call them Liturgical Just So Stories.) Wanting, for instance, to retain *Pidyon Haben* (Redemption of the First-Born Males) but having to convert its context from sacrifice to ethics, the editors have the parents say, “Just as this child's arrival . . . marks a new step and defining moment in *building* a family, so may our family serve as an instrument for *tikun olam*—*rebuilding* the foundations of world harmony in the messianic spirit” (B-39; italics added). The analogy is forced by the gratuitous editorial addition of the common verbs “building” and “rebuilding” to connect the two otherwise unrelated terms, “child's arrival” and “*tikun olam*.” The explanatory sentence is of necessity unpoetic and didactic. Better to have said, simply,

"May this new child be dedicated to the building of a better world."

Another instance is the ritual for first children, where parents admit, "As new parents we are like children. Just as this child new to the world, must rely on us for sustenance and guidance, so we, having no experience of parenthood, must depend on God, as reflected in the patient support of this community." This is a gross overstatement. One kind of dependence is absolute, physical, and determinative of whether you live or die within a day. The second is theological. We all depend on God; becoming a parent does not change one's dependency status in the way that leaving the womb does. Moreover, God's help is said to be "reflective of . . . community"—a nice Reconstructionist twist—but children die if their parents do not feed them, whereas new parents struggle along and usually succeed with or without community support. It's a nice thought, but lengthy prose trying to prove a ritual point subverts the very ritual it wishes to establish. The way to make liturgical points is not through preaching but through poetry.

Pastoral Liturgy

Pastoral liturgy should mirror people's thoughts, not make them feel guilty for not thinking what we think they should. When mourners begin the funeral procedure, saying, "Despite our loss and sorrow . . . we affirm that the world still holds hope and truth, love and beauty" (PD-2), the message rings hollow; that is simply not what mourners feel then. Bet-

ter to have followed the Mishnah's advice not to offer people consolation when their dead still lie before them.

On the other hand, the *Manual* sometimes says exactly what it should. A visitor to a grave (especially at an unveiling) comments "To this sacred place I come . . . I cannot look to you to lighten my burdens, to lend me your strength, your wisdom, your faith [and yet] you continue to bless my days and years" (PD-32). A poignant prayer for stillbirth or miscarriage acknowledges, "Our arms yearned to cradle new life; our mouths to sing lullabies" (D-28). A parent of a dead infant admits "In the spring of our lives . . . fall has come too soon. We are not ready for this" (D-29). Here is liturgy that is honest; unfabricated; uncluttered by pseudo-lessons from Jewish ethics, preachy passion for a cause, and silly analogies that cheapen the uniqueness of a single awe-filled moment.

Who should use this book? Or who is likely to like it? It will be used by average men and women, presumably, with their rabbis helping them. The editors have therefore transliterated the necessary responses. I wish an "e" had not been used both for the short "e" sound of "bed" and for the brief pause of the "e" in "father." An apostrophe for the latter would have helped non-Hebrew readers avoid embarrassing errors: *b'rit* instead of *berit* would have prompted the proper word for "covenant"; "breet" as in "feet" not "ber-rit" as in "merit." But the idea of making life ceremony accessible to the people whose lives are being marked is commendable.

The book will be welcomed by those who share the Reconstructionist feminist urgency; by traditionalists who will do whatever is necessary to avoid jettisoning old forms; and by Jews who want new rituals where old ones are lacking—as long the new ones provided here speak to their circumstances.

A test case is *Berit Rehitzah*, the foot washing ceremony for girls. When the ritual emerged some twenty years ago, it was unceremoniously dubbed “*Breet Feet*” by many in the know. Reactions to it varied then and vary now. In its favor are all the obvious rationales provided in the Reconstructionist *Manual*. If anything can advance its cause, it will be the litany regarding water as a biblical metaphor (B-20). Against its ready acceptance is the fact that washing infants may be perceived by some as too baptismal to be authentically Jewish. I know of at least one family who left a synagogue rather than have to abide it for their daughter.

Or, take the *Mi Sheberakh* for the covenanting of a baby girl. It addresses God as the One who “blessed Sarah and Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, Miriam the prophet, Ruth and Avigayil and Esther the Queen.” A footnote explains that the intent is to include “a mother, and daughter in law, two sisters, a prophet, a Jew by choice and a peacemaker, and a Queen” so as

to “acknowledge the variety of powerful roles that women have played—and relations they have had” (B-23). We have waited a long time to have women duly noted in an official liturgy. But should Esther (a sex object of a foreign king, and a subservient member of a harem) rank as a role model? For some, this and similar prayers bespeak feminism triumphant; for others it will be feminism trivialized.

We can claim the allegiance of our people only if we know the shape of their lives, a matter with which the editors have genuinely struggled. This *Rabbis' Manual* is a breakthrough for its honesty in that regard, especially for many women. It speaks particularly to women as mothers, less so to women (and men) pursuing careers, encountering empty nests and mid-life crises, being fired, or getting divorced. There is also nothing for putting up a *mezuzah*, getting a new job, or retiring from an old one. (Editor's note: The RRA promises that additional life-cycle areas will be addressed in subsequent sections of the *Manual* currently in production.) It is cutting edge and soapbox preachy in parts, but it celebrates lives as no other *Manual* does to date, often in a touching, real, and beautiful way. It is, as the editors inform us all along, a work in process—like life itself, come to think of it.

ואברך
ואברהם מברך
והיה ברכה
ואברך

ואברך
ואברהם מברך
והיה ברכה
ואברך

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית
אֲבִיךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֵרָאךָ וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ לְגֹי גָדוֹל
THE JOURNEY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE BEGAN
THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO WITH THE WILLINGNESS
OF OUR ANCESTORS ABRAHAM AND SARAH TO MOVE
BEYOND THE PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL BOUNDS OF
THEIR CHILDHOOD. THE CHALLENGES BEFORE OUR
MATRIARCH AND PATRIARCH WERE EXTRAORDINARY.
BUT THEY WENT FORTH, SUSTAINED BY THEIR
VISION OF HOLINESS AND COVENANT WITH GOD.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם וְאֶל שָׂרָה וְאֶל יִצְחָק וְאֶל יַעֲקֹב וְאֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אֲרֹנָה
וְאֶל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶל כָּל הָעָם וְאֶל כָּל הָאֲרָצוֹת וְאֶל כָּל הַיָּם וְאֶל
כָּל הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶל כָּל הָאֲדָמָה וְאֶל כָּל הַבְּרִיָּה וְאֶל כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה וְאֶל
כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה וְאֶל כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה וְאֶל כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה וְאֶל כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה
IT IS THIS VISION THAT IS THE LEGACY OF OUR
PEOPLE. PUT MOST SIMPLY, OUR COVENANT—OUR
RELATIONSHIP—WITH GOD IS THE RESONANCE OF
HOPE, GOODNESS AND CREATIVE POSSIBILITY
WHICH GUIDES OUR LIVES AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS
A PEOPLE. IT IS WHAT ENABLES US TO LIVE WITH
LIFE'S UNCERTAINTIES SO THAT WE CAN CONTINUE
ON OUR DAILY JOURNEY TOWARD THE UNKNOWN.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם וְאֶל שָׂרָה וְאֶל יִצְחָק וְאֶל יַעֲקֹב וְאֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אֲרֹנָה
וְאֶל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶל כָּל הָעָם וְאֶל כָּל הָאֲרָצוֹת וְאֶל כָּל הַיָּם וְאֶל
כָּל הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶל כָּל הָאֲדָמָה וְאֶל כָּל הַבְּרִיָּה וְאֶל כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה וְאֶל
כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה וְאֶל כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה וְאֶל כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה וְאֶל כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה
YOU ARE A BLESSING. GO FORTH AND DISCOVER THE
FUTURE. MAY GOD BE WITH YOU AND SUSTAIN YOU.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם וְאֶל שָׂרָה וְאֶל יִצְחָק וְאֶל יַעֲקֹב וְאֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אֲרֹנָה
וְאֶל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶל כָּל הָעָם וְאֶל כָּל הָאֲרָצוֹת וְאֶל כָּל הַיָּם וְאֶל
כָּל הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶל כָּל הָאֲדָמָה וְאֶל כָּל הַבְּרִיָּה וְאֶל כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה וְאֶל
כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה וְאֶל כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה וְאֶל כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה וְאֶל כָּל הַמִּלְכָּה
וּמִקְלָכָּךְ אֵרָא וְנִבְרָכְךָ בְּכָל מְשֻׁפְחוֹת הָאֲדָמָה

ואברך
ואברהם מברך
והיה ברכה
ואברך

ואברך
ואברהם מברך
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Vintage Perspectives

The Founding of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College: A Retrospective from the Pages of *The Reconstructionist*

BY RICHARD HIRSH

From the publication of *Judaism As a Civilization* in 1934, the status of Reconstructionism—as a “school of thought” or “movement”—remained unclear. The author of this path-breaking analysis of American Judaism, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, leaned towards Reconstructionism remaining a “school of thought,” influencing the other movements but not competing with them. Many of his disciples, most notably Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, believed that the organizational structure of a “movement” was essential for the development and implementation of the Reconstructionist vision of Jewish life.

With each development within Reconstructionism (the *Reconstructionist* magazine in 1935; the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation in 1940; the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot in 1954), the debate would again arise. However, with the founding of the Recon-

structionist Rabbinical College (RRC) in 1968 the debate was finally resolved, and Reconstructionism emerged as the fourth movement in American Judaism.

A Quiet Beginning

Curiously, the initial indication of this major step was a rather innocuous statement found in the report on the “Eighth Annual Conference of the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot” published in the July 7, 1967 issue of *The Reconstructionist* magazine. Among other “highlights” of the conference was a “recommendation to the [Jewish Reconstructionist] Foundation, calling for the establishment of a training center for Reconstructionist rabbis and teachers.” Despite the potential significance of such a step, no other information was provided.

Six months later, things had changed. The lead editorial in the

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February 9, 1968 issue of the magazine was entitled "Announcing a New Type of School for Rabbis":

The Board of Directors of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation has announced plans for the establishment of a training school for rabbis. The proposal represents a radical departure from the established methods of preparing men [sic] for the ministry. Instead of creating a new seminary, the Foundation will connect the rabbinical training course with a Doctor of Philosophy program at Temple University's Department of Religion . . . [in addition] students will receive specialized courses in preparation for their rabbinical vocation at a House of Rabbinical Studies to be established adjacent to Temple University.

Despite the affirmative title of the headline, the somewhat evasive language ("instead of creating a new seminary") may reflect residual uncertainty as to the step being taken—or a realistic assessment of the financial prospects for funding a new seminary.

An Innovative Approach to Rabbinic Training

Following a lengthy description of what elder alumni of the RRC recall as the [no longer operative] "dual program" of general and Judaic studies, the editorial speaks directly to the concerns raised by friends of Reconstructionism who were leery of the at-

tempt to launch a fourth movement in American Judaism:

We have decided upon this step after much debate and soul-searching. We are as conscious as anyone of the dangers of 'proliferating' institutions. But we came to the conclusion that the tremendous growth of the Jewish population in the United States, combined with the insistent demand for rabbis here and abroad, render imperative the training of additional spiritual leaders. Reconstructionist congregations, [those] now functioning and those to be established in the future, require not only more rabbis but rabbis who have been trained to teach the conception of Judaism which we believe to be valid for this age.

The conflation of principle and pragmatism which created the original dual program of studies at the RRC was a source of great excitement. The innovative approach whereby Judaic/rabbinic studies would be placed in the context of world religions and social scientific disciplines was heralded in the October 11, 1968 issue of *The Reconstructionist*. Dr. Bernard Phillips, who was at that time chairman of the Temple University Religion Department, with which the nascent RRC program was unofficially connected, contributed a laudatory article. Entitled "Where Religions Meet In Scholarly Dialogue," he described the RRC program as "truly novel . . . more pioneering than anything yet envisaged."

In the same issue, Dr. Maurice Friedman of the Temple Religion Department contrasted his own disappointing experience as a seminarian and later as a faculty member of a rabbinical school with his enthusiasm for the envisioned program of the RRC. The linking of rabbinic studies to broader issues—both academic and societal—struck Friedman as the essential core of a new vision of the rabbinic vocation.

Dedication Ceremony

On the seventh day of Sukkot, October 13, 1968, the dedication ceremonies for the RRC were held on the campus of Temple University—there being no adequate space for a large gathering in the nearby converted brownstone building housing the new rabbinical school. The description of the event found in the November 8, 1968 issue of *The Reconstructionist* is as moving thirty years later as the ceremonies must have been on that day.

Leaders of the Reconstructionist movement and representatives of Temple University, as well as of the American Association of Theological Schools, all offered greetings. The mixture of pride, confidence, and assurance contained in the remarks of lay leader Abraham Goodman, representing the new Board of Governors of the new College, summarize well what it must have felt like to those for whom this moment had been so long in coming:

It has not been a happy experience for our [Reconstructionist] leaders to know that they

have the answer to the problem, but that they do not have the means to implement it. Nor have they been happy to see our Movement, for so many years, limited to being merely a school of thought, an abstract idea, and a soul without a body.

For ever so long a time we have been living in hope for a better day, and the waiting seemed interminable, but today we are convinced of the old adage—that there is nothing as powerful as an idea when its time has come.

Now, at long last, a new day is dawning. This Rabbinical College that we came here to dedicate will finally enable us to carry into practice the ideas and the objectives which have been our cherished inspiration.

Rabbi Kaplan's Vision

Following remarks by the first Dean of the RRC, the late Rabbi Arthur Gilbert, the keynote address was offered by the eighty-seven year old founder of Reconstructionism, Rabbi Kaplan. In his inspirational closing remarks, Rabbi Kaplan stated:

We Jews have never needed as desperately as we do today spiritual leaders who can provide us with a moving and inspiring ideology and with an intelligent and feasible program for the creative survival of the Jewish people. To the religious duty of training lead-

ers for our Jewish people after God's own mind, we dedicate this our Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

The thirteen students (all men) who entered the RRC in October of 1968 then led the participants in a Sukkot procession up Philadelphia's North Broad Street to the new College building, where Rabbi Kaplan affixed the mezuzah and led the participants in the *Shehecheyanu* blessing.

Continuity and Change

The process which brought the RRC into existence was a lengthy one. It included passionate debate about the nature of American Judaism and the adequacy of the existing movements and seminaries to address the issues of Jewish life in twentieth-century North America. There was disagreement from friends and foes of Reconstructionism regarding the appropriateness and advisability of trying to create an institutional infrastructure.

Notwithstanding the debate, the decision to create the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College clearly answered the longstanding question as to the nature of Reconstructionism, which finally emerged as the fourth movement in American Jewish life.

In the thirty years since its founding, RRC has undergone a fairly radical transformation from the program envisioned in 1968. Gone is the dual program of graduate studies, replaced by a full program of rabbinical studies that incorporates courses similar to those once taken at Temple Univer-

sity. Gone as well is the "House of Rabbinical Studies," the small brown-stone structure adjacent to Temple University, replaced by a Georgian mansion situated in suburban Wyncote, Pennsylvania.

But the vision of a new American Judaism, a new model of rabbinic training, an intellectually open and spiritually committed curriculum, and a commitment to serving both the Reconstructionist movement and Klal Yisrael remain. Rabbis Kaplan (*zikhrono livrakha*) and Eisenstein (*yibadel lehayim*) are no longer the daily guiding presences at RRC, but their influence continues to be felt—in the rigorous demands of the academic program, the openness to probing and often provocative questioning and debate, and the spirit of intimacy that pervades the College.

The presidents who have guided RRC since Rabbi Eisenstein's retirement in 1981—Ira Silverman (*zikhrono livrakha*), Dr. Arthur Green, and currently Dr. David Teutsch, along with the faculty and students who have shaped the College during these three decades, have built on the foundation established in the modest yet significant events of 1968.

Reconstructionists as well as all concerned with the creative survival of the North American Jewish community (and, increasingly, with the presence of Reconstructionism in Israel) can be grateful for the vision, determination, and commitment that brought the RRC into existence and nurtured it to stability. May the next thirty years be as exciting, as innovative, and as productive.