

LISTENING TO OUR MOTHERS: THE WOMEN OF REFORM JUDAISM WOMEN'S COMMENTARY ON TORAH

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We often proclaim, “*Shema Israel*.” It is, of course, the watchword of our faith. “Hear O Israel!” But how often do we really hear? Really listen?

Listening to Our Mothers: The Women of Reform Judaism Women's Commentary on Torah began because the women of Reform Judaism decided to listen to the voices of our mothers.

First it was Cantor Sarah Sager listening to the hidden voice of Sarah, her matriarchal namesake. With a powerful address titled, “Sarah's Hidden Voice: Recovering and Discovering Women's Spirituality,” Cantor Sager charged the WRJ Assembly at the 1993 Biennial to reclaim the Torah. Her very words were, “If we are really serious about women's spirituality, about liberating the concepts of God and community, about integrating the Torah of our tradition into the Torah of our lives, then there is something very concrete that we can do.”

The WRJ Women's Commentary on the Torah takes place in the long line of classical tradition, from Rashi, to Hertz (author of the most influential Jewish Torah commentary in the English language for decades; he also happened to be my great-uncle), to Plaut (the Reform Movement's commentary, which appeared in 1981).

What kind of a commentary is it to be?

Our guidelines identify three important criteria for the commentary:

Contemporary: The commentary will incorporate new approaches not found in traditional commentaries (including literary criticism, sociology, feminism). The commentary will present new research and information about the Bible and the biblical world and will address topics important for our world today.

Jewish: The commentary will focus on issues important to Jews as well as integrate insights from important Jewish sources (along with other available sources)

Women: The commentary will delve into matters that concern women. In addition, the commentary will showcase the scholarship of women, using the insights of women scholars to shed light on the Torah.

While the primary mission of the commentary is geared toward women, we envision this commentary as one that can provide insight and inspiration for both men and women, especially Jews but non-Jews as well.

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The WRJ Women's Commentary on Torah Sisterhood

In addition to the distinguished leadership of WRJ, together with Ellen Rosenberg, Executive Director, and Eve Roshevsky, Staff Executive, Department of Religious Living, the Advisory Board is comprised of prominent figures who share the capacity to explore new ways of thinking about women and Judaism; each of them is a pioneer, shaping her field in fresh, innovative ways.

Dr. Carol Meyers, Duke University – a groundbreaking archaeologist of Zippori in Israel; author of *Discovering Eve*, using social-scientific methods to reconstruct the lives of women in ancient Israel; and editor of *Women in Scripture*.

Dr. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, University of Chicago – a noted biblical scholar specializing also in Near Eastern studies; author of *In the Wake of the Goddess* – the best way to understand the relation of Israel's religious transformation in light of the Gods and Goddesses of the Ancient Near East.

Dr. Judith R. Baskin, University of Oregon – an historian of rabbinic interpretation and author of the landmark study, *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, as well as *Women and Word: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing*.

Dr. Carol Ochs, HUC-JIR/NY, a philosopher whose book, *Women and Spirituality*, was among the earliest to address the need for asking new questions and rediscovering our sources; her latest book, *Our Lives as Torah* not only asks new questions, but helps us envision new, meaningful ways to live our lives in response to the possible answers.

The following members of the Advisory Board, who will also be contributing essays and comments, helped shape the project as a whole:

Dr. Judith Plaskow, who first invited all of us to stand again at Sinai.

Dr. Rachel Adler, HUC-JIR/LA, whose award winning book, *Engendering Judaism*, shows how we can stand at Sinai together as women and men and how transforming that is and must be.

Rabbi Laura Geller, the first woman rabbi to break the glass ceiling and lead a major congregation, who writes on feminist issues for a wide-range of publications.

Rabbi Ruth Sohn, who influenced us through her work with *Sh'ma* magazine, and through many essays, including the marvelous one in *Reading Ruth*.

Dr. Ellen Umansky, best known for her book on *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality*.

Dr. Sherry Blumberg, who brings an educator's perspective to our project.

Rabbi Andrea Weiss, HUC-JIR/NY, who represents the new generation of scholars on the Bible and who, as a student in my first class at HUC-JIR/LA, went on to be ordained and pursue a doctorate in Biblical Studies, is a source of much *nachas* to me.

Andrea and **Rabbi Judy Schindler**, another former student, together represent our future. Both Andrea and Judy have been with the commentary project from its inception, first as students and now as mature professionals ready to keep us attuned to the needs of the younger generation.

Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, who has been teaching and writing about Jewish women's history and feminist spirituality for the past twenty years, directs the Pennsylvania Council of the UAHC, and whose most recent book is *The Open Door, A New Haggadah* (CCAR 2002).

Cantor Sarah Sager, with her heavenly voice and perhaps no less heavenly vision of what we can and must attempt with this commentary.

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi

Eskenazi entered academic life while raising her five children and after exploring other traditions and other sacred texts. Study for its own sake led to an undergraduate degree in Philosophy, a Master's degree specializing in the New Testament and Second Temple text and her doctorate from the University of Denver and its Iliff School of Theology. Citing not only Rosenzweig and Buber, but also Tolstoy, Gandhi, Thomas Merton, and the Catholic worker Dorothy Day as her spiritual mentors, her intellectual and spiritual quest brought her to the Bible, "not because it's the only literature I've looked at, but because I've looked at others. I was able to come to this as the most alive and meaningful text to me, a love that I communicate to my students. I consider it a source for a vocabulary and values with which to construct a world and create communities that have the power to sustain and inspire people."

At a time when scholarly circles apart from the Jewish community are coming to the realization that there is a significant connection between academic concerns and lived lives, Eskenazi reminds us that seminaries like HUC-JIR have never lost the connection between thought and practice. "We have such an extraordinary concentration of scholars specializing in the study, interpretation, and research of Jewish text. We possess an incomparable reservoir for Jewish studies. We have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to express this kind of research and learning that takes place in a context that is so thoroughly Jewish – that is connected not only academically but is connected existentially to the lives of persons and community."

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Our commitment to women means that we primarily attune to the voices of women - in the text and in our community. Throughout history our human family, our Jewish family, has been sorely deprived of half of our ancestors – we are ready to become a more complete community.

In practice all this entails looking most closely at texts where women appear and asking why they do not appear elsewhere where they belong. It means asking who they were and how they lived, where they were and where they were not. It means listening to their words and listening even harder to their silences. Listening also means that we continue to listen as we work on the commentary.

Jews never resorted to a single voice. The very first pages of the Torah resist a single voice: Genesis begins with two versions of creation, two voices that disagree as well as complement each other in describing the origins of the world. The conversation between different voices continues in the Jewish tradition in the way traditional Jewish Bibles were printed over the centuries. The Torah text typically appeared on the page surrounded by commentators who responded to the text and often to each other. Consequently, along with the Torah there were always Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Sforno, and many others.

Our commentary follows this model by incorporating different voices, including those of the rabbinic sages from our past and rabbinic and other sages from the present.

We will always interact with rabbinic traditions. We want to enjoy Rashi's sensitivity when speaking about the five daughters of Zelophehad. In *Parashat Pinhas* from the Book of Numbers/ *Bemidbar*, for example, he compares them favorably with Moses.

These five sisters in the Book of Numbers approach Moses, the leaders of the people, and the entire community. They draw near because they see a problem that needs a solution: the problem is that they have not been given an inheritance that they believe is due to them. They refuse to be left out and demand their rightful share. And so they dare speak to Moses, the priest Eleazar, all the other leaders, and the entire *edah* (congregation or formally constituted assembly). They say: "Give us a holding among our father's kin." (Numbers 27:4) Give us a share of our heritage, why should we be left out.

They get what they want – a share, a large share I should add. Moreover, as a result of their courage, a new Torah law is created, one that intends to benefit future generations long after them.

Their story is the story of *The WRJ Women's Commentary on the Torah*. The women of Reform Judaism said: "Give us a share among our brothers. We are no longer willing to be left out." Instead of land, the WRJ ask for something even more enduring – "give us a share of our Torah." The result is a Torah commentary that we trust will benefit all of us. With this commentary we will continue as sisters to empower the women – and men – who come after us for generations to come.

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"Mining the Jewish Tradition for its Healing Wisdom"

The HUC-JIR Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health and Temple Chai of Phoenix hosted this international conference in May for nearly 300 rabbis, physicians, nurses, cantors, educators, artists, mental-health professionals, and lay people interested in Judaism's health-related texts and resources. For video and text of keynote speeches by **Rabbi Elliot Dorff** – "Mishneh Ha-Briyyot: A New Jewish Approach to Disabilities," **Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi** – "Biblical Reflections on Holiness, Health and Hope," **Dr. Arnie Eisen** – "Choose Life: American Jews and the Quest for Healing," and **Dr. Arthur Green** – "Healing the Self, Healing the Cosmos: Reflections in the Neo-Hasidic Spirit," please click on <http://www.huc.edu/kalsman>