

Janet Shafner: Dark Prophecies



HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION MUSEUM, NEW YORK

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Janet Shafner: Dark Prophecies

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum, New York
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Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum, New York

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We gratefully acknowledge the heartfelt support of the Shafner family.

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Front Cover:

Lot's Wife, 1996, oil on canvas, 58" x 50"; Collection of the artist.

Back Cover:

Self in Cloth, 2007, graphite drawing, 30" x 22"; Collection of the artist.

Foreword

Janet Shafner passed away today. This exhibition, which was originally planned as a tribute to her extraordinary oeuvre, has become a memorial to her indomitable spirit and inspiring creativity.

The presentation of Janet Shafner's monumental works at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum reinforces our institutional commitment to fulfill her and our shared mission. Shafner's subject – the difficult situation of women in the biblical world – has resonance in today's world fraught with injustice, as we strive to achieve true equality, advance economic justice, combat violence against women, expand educational opportunities, prevent age discrimination, promote diversity, and end racism.

The visual arts are a potent means with which to illuminate such challenging issues. As the world becomes increasingly inured to rhetoric, forceful images capture our attention and linger in our consciousness. Janet Shafner's works transcend a political agenda and embrace universal life experiences. By addressing the values of humanity, she sheds every pretense of veneer to seek unadulterated truth. And yet, her works are of unalloyed beauty, with a maturity and insight that carry a lasting memory.

One is awed by Janet Shafner's ability to sustain a balancing act of embracing life while facing uncertainty and despair. Shafner's powerful paintings and drawings will endure as a permanent legacy to her artistic, feminist, and humanist vision.

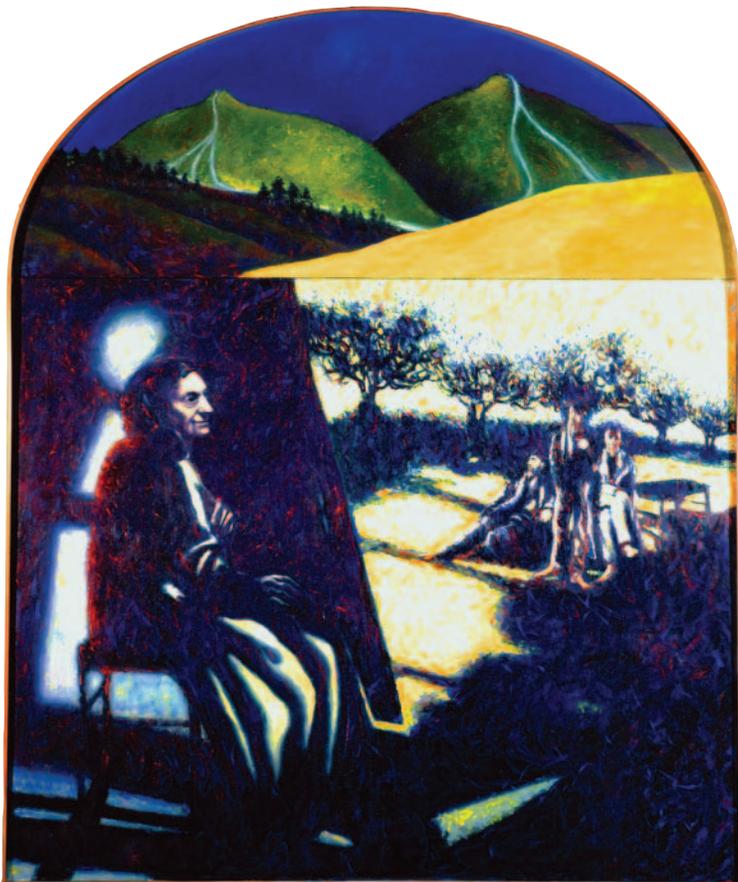
Laura Kruger, *Curator*
August 2, 2011



Flying Lessons 5, 2010
Charcoal drawing, 41"x 36"

The Biblical Women of Janet Shafner

Biblical women are allegedly easy to miss, simply on the margins of the main narratives as submissive helpmates to masculine heroes and products of a hopelessly sexist document. Not for Janet Shafner. Her paintings have critically dissected the role of Biblical women for the last 20 years, finding their stories to be at the very core of biblical creativity. Under her scathing gaze and forceful brush, they are revealed to be no less than the dynamic engines of Jewish history and destiny.



Sarah, 1998
Oil on canvas/wood, 58" x 48"

Shafner's approach is deeply Jewish, shaping her commentary and elucidation in a Talmudic textual paradigm, insisting on comparisons between straightforward Biblical narratives and midrashic expositions. These juxtapositions are artistically founded on medieval and Renaissance altarpieces and their attendant predellas. Additionally, Shafner uses the postmodern practice of dramatically decontextualizing the narrative to achieve conceptual breakthroughs that are frequently jarring and shocking. It is precisely in these disjunctive spaces and images that Shafner reaps her most salient insights. And in a deeply subversive way, this is exactly the role of the biblical women that she has revealed.

Sarah is indicative of the radical edge these paintings explore. Normally, Sarah is depicted in this episode as hidden away in the family tent, modestly peeking out when the three strangers approach Abraham and proceed to predict that he will miraculously father a child with her at the age of 100. In this painting Sarah, sitting patiently in the mysterious darkness, is in the foreground and Abraham is not to be seen at all. The strangers are lounging in the courtyard, presumably waiting for lunch. But what sets the image on its head is the bizarre lunette depicting a hilly landscape that waxes biomorphic. The two distant hills are verdant green breasts, each spewing creamy white rivulets. The artist is projecting into Sarah's midrashic future that predicts that the 90-year-old Sarah, after having actually given birth to Isaac, is falsely accused of presenting a foundling as her son. To prove her miraculous fecundity she proudly nurses all of her guest's children from her overflowing breasts. An old woman's patience and faith clearly triumphs over the doubters of God's promise.

The long view is similarly espoused in *May You Live Forever: The Assumption of Serach Bat Asher*. Serach, mentioned in the Torah as simply the daughter of Asher, represents the important concept of memory in the midrashic mind. Especially beautiful and wise, she is enlisted by her uncles in the delicate task of telling the old Jacob that his son Joseph is alive

May You Live Forever: The Assumption of Serach Bat Asher, 2010
Oil on canvas, 50" x 50"

and well. Playing the harp, she sings softly to her grandfather as he stands absorbed in prayer. Her message slowly penetrates his consciousness and allows him to survive the shock. He gratefully blesses her; "May death never have a power over you..." Subsequently she goes down to Egypt with Jacob and the rest of her people and witnesses Joseph's death and burial. During the Exodus 210 years later, she remembers where the Egyptians had sunk Joseph's metal coffin in the Nile. She tells Moses where it is so he can bring Joseph's bones out of Egypt. Another midrashic comment records her interrupting a Talmudic discussion and forcefully clarifying the exact path through the Red Sea, since she was present. Finally, Serach is described as one of a handful of individuals who entered Paradise alive, thereby escaping the pangs of death. Shafner portrays Serach as deeply introspective and, facing the viewer, a virtual self-portrait of the artist. Her alter-ego is seen flying high above, attempting to escape fate while the ladder to eternity, paradoxically extending both up and down, beckons. The artist has taken us to the edge of Jewish memory, etching it in the personal, presenting Serach's liminal experiences for anyone who has lived a long life and faces the proximity of the end.

The biblical text is not at all reticent about forceful women and neither is Shafner. One of the most dramatic examples is *The Daughters of Zelophehad* (page 4) found in Numbers 27. These five courageous women in Shafner's enormous three-panel painting have just emerged from the complex and dangerous landscape behind them. Mysterious structures dominate the scene, indicating the hopeful plans of their male counterparts busily designing their new homes in the Promised Land, while the forbidding crimson field behind them alludes to the violent conquest necessary to actually possess God's gift. Nonetheless, these five stand gesturing to one another and toward their leader in the center who will convey their audacious request to Moses. At first they seem inarticulate and uncertain. And yet they come forward to challenge the heretofore male prerogative of inheritance. And God agrees and takes their side!

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah stand alone before us. Neither Moses, the Cohen Gadol, nor the entire Jewish people are anywhere to be seen. Rather their isolated presence becomes a challenge to a contemporary audience for women to engage and interact with received Jewish law.



Lot's Wife (cover) frequently gets short shrift, never more than an object. For Shafner, Lot's wife stands at a crucial juncture in Jewish history, a human tragedy that still offers a generative future. She dominates the foreground, a cool presence ruling a cold future universe. In the background we see her daughters circling their father in an incestuous dance. The entire icy foreground is vividly contrasted with the angry red of burning and a lunette that depicts the midrashic account of why Sodom was so abhorred by God. Cruelty alone defined the city. A woman who dared to offer food and lodging to a traveler was condemned to be bound on the city walls, smeared with honey, and allowed to be stung to death by the enraged bees. Inhospitability and lack of compassion define the Sodomites.

Lot's wife is a martyr; her death opens the way for her daughters' incest that ultimately lays the foundation for the Messiah. The Torah relates that the offspring of this horrific union are Moab and Ammon. The tribe of Moab finally produces Ruth, who is the seminal ancestor of King David, whose descendant will be the Messiah. Meanwhile, the midrash explains that the reason Lot's wife looked back on the doomed city was her concern for her children and the family left behind. In one terrible moment her compassion opens the doors for the ultimate compassion of mankind's salvation: the Jewish redeemer. In Shafner's vision, Lot's wife is transformed from a victim into an enabler.



The Daughters of Zelophehad, 2006
Triptych, oil on canvas, 48" x 84"

The Concubine of Gibeah (pages 8-9) is perhaps the most horrific episode in all of the Tanach. Simply understood, these verses from the Book of Judges: 19, 20 and 21 tell a tale of a world gone terribly wrong. The sordid narrative of gang rape, murder, and mutilation quickly escalates into the virtual annihilation of one of the twelve tribes. Shafner here explores the consequences of lust and violence that reflect on the terrifying nature of blessing and prophecy. As in many of her works, the lunettes effectively set in motion the interior narrative of the three artworks. The vicious wolf-like man presides over the compartmentalized image of a woman: exactly what unbridled male sexuality accomplishes. The next image dissects the ill-fated concubine above the chaos of mass rape, eerily reminiscent of the use of rape as a weapon of war in Bosnia and Rwanda. Finally, we return to the savagery of the gang rape visually ‘blessed’ by twelve hands; a bitter commentary on Jacob’s final blessing to his son Benjamin:

“Benjamin is a predatory wolf; in the morning he will devour prey and in the evening he will distribute spoils.” Here Shafner shockingly characterizes the biblical antagonism and tension between the sexes. She leaves it up to her audience to sort out the dynamic between women as victims and women as heroines.

Female protagonists are a major motif in most of Shafner’s work. The long list includes Eve, the Sister/Brides of Cain and Abel, Hagar, Timna, Miriam, Rachav, the Witches of Ashkelon, Bathsheba, and the Wise Woman of Tekoa. But only Ruth and Esther have achieved the canonical status of having their own books named after them and Shafner takes them both to highly original vantage points. *Ruth and Boaz* totally reinvents the climax of the narrative, presenting Ruth as a lithe feline about to pounce on the slumbering Boaz. Her stealth is especially threatening, outlined in the moonlit field, creating an eerie unease at exactly the point of narrative fulfillment. Ruth has joined the Jewish people and is about

to secure her role as ancestor to David. Pointedly, Shafner is exposing the blatant sexuality in the narrative, never admitted by the text or commentators, but undeniable. But here the sexuality is female aggression driven by a primal urge to exercise a dominant role in the Jewish nation.

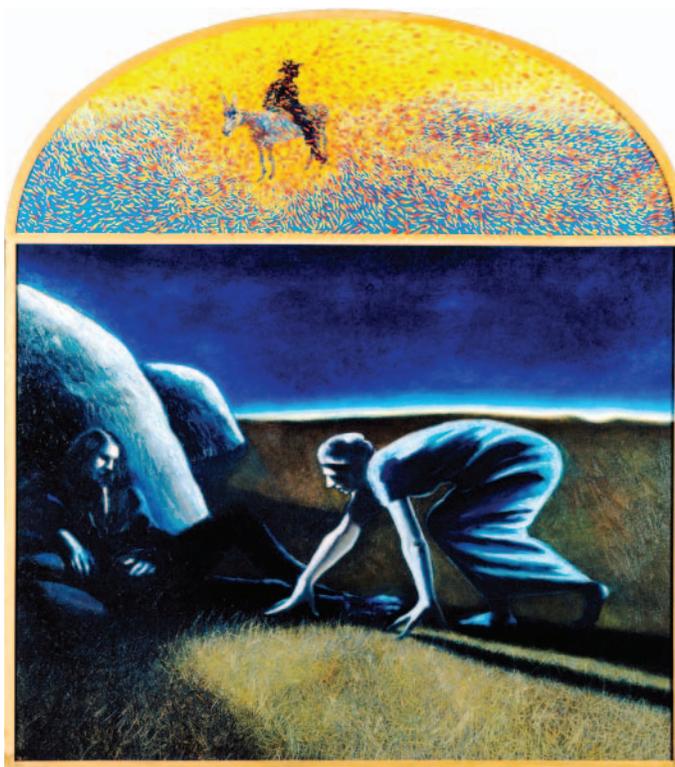
In keeping with Shafner's Talmudic methodology, the lunette above shows the Messiah on a donkey in dramatic contrast with the scene below. Divine sparks radiate in a way that recalls both Creation and the End of Time. This juxtaposition echoes one of her earlier paintings, *The Tenth Hour*, that depicts the moments right after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. This moment, long associated with sin and human sexuality, i.e. the loss of innocence, is here transformed into the birth of free will and thereby the creation of the fully human being. This free will and freedom, now seen in the context of Ruth and Boaz, recasts Ruth's sexual aggression as a creative force central in the evolution of the Jewish people. It is truly inspired.

Similarly, *Esther and Mordechai* (page 10) reinterprets the core meaning of the Book of Esther. Nominally understood as a tale of Jewish salvation in which Mordechai admonishes Esther to save the Jewish people from the wicked Haman, here Shafner puts Esther in control, poised in the palace colonnade while Mordechai is a helpless outsider. But more significantly, she drives the ancient tale into the 20th century with yet another mysterious lunette. A field of abandoned shoes brings to mind the piles of shoes outside crematoria when Haman's descendant, Hitler, attempted to yet again annihilate the Jewish nation.

Janet Shafner's biblical women are not easy to ignore. They test our understanding of familiar texts by making them unfamiliar, strange, and ultimately, wonderfully revealing. It is as if we had never really understood their role in our Jewish texts, but now we can't take our eyes and minds off of them: their determination, courage, and creativity. She approaches her subjects with a combination of artistic and analytical invention that always ends up as a reassessment of their normative interpretation. Her feminism is never strident,

simply presenting us with a new perspective that we can't ignore. Her insights never do violence to the original texts, they just seem fresh and new, and frequently, bracingly contemporary. Shafner's paintings are extraordinary on many levels, not the least of which is that they are unique in the vast catalogue of biblical images. Neither Serach nor the Daughters have ever been seriously depicted in the history of western art because for most artists, Christian and Jewish alike, most Biblical women are invisible even though they are textually present for all to see. Shafner's work opens our eyes.

Richard McBee, *Artist, Writer*
July 26, 2011



Ruth and Boaz, 1999
Oil on canvas/wood, 56" x 48"

Artist's Statement

These selected drawings were made in the past six years. They are intended as a graphic record of the process of aging.

It is a popular cliché that our culture values youth and adolescent beauty and denigrates old people. But in exchange for youth there is, of course, longevity, and with luck, enduring love and the joys of long relationships.

A few years ago, I brought a photo of myself and my husband, taken when we were in our early twenties, to be made into an invitation to our 50th wedding celebration. The young man at the print shop looked at me and then at the photo and said, "Lady, is this you?" When I told him it was, he impulsively said, "I hope I never get old."

"In that case," I told him, "you will die young."

Many of my self-portraits are also a kind of *memento mori* (a reminder of death), which of course is an unavoidable issue when an artist deals with the aging self. The realistic self-portrait requires a rigorous self examination and openness with all the flaws, wrinkles, and signs of decrepitude revealed.



Flying Higher, 2010
Charcoal drawing, 41" x 36"



Woman in a Box #2, 2004
Charcoal and graphite drawing, 30" x 22"

Preparing to Fly, 2011
Charcoal drawing, 30" x 22"





The Concubine of Gibeah 1, 1998
Oil on canvas/wood, 58.5" x 48.5"

The Concubine of Gibeah 2, 1998
Oil on canvas/wood, 63" x 41"

The Concubine of Gibeah 3, 1999
Oil on canvas, 46" x 41"







Esther and Mordechai, 2002
Oil on canvas, 66" x 59"



The Wise Woman of Tekoa / The Death of Absalom, 2007
Oil on canvas, 57" x 60"

BIOGRAPHY

Education

M.A. Studio Art, Connecticut College, New London, CT
B.A. Art History, Barnard College, New York, NY
Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME
Art Students League, New York, NY

Teaching Experience

2007: Scholar in Residence, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ
2006: Scholar in Residence, Harrison Conference Center, Princeton, NJ
2005: "The Audacity of the Sages: Images Inspired by the Talmud," Yeshiva University Museum, New York, NY
2005: Hadassah of Coral Gables, FL; "An Artist's Vision"
2004: Young Israel of Boca Raton, FL; "Approaching Torah Through Art"
2004: Young Israel of Boca Raton, FL; "Approaching Torah Through Art"
2004: Congregation Ahavath Chesed, New London, CT; "Visual Midrash"
2004: JCC Greater Baltimore, Baltimore, MD; "Let There Be Light"
2003: Scholar in Residence, 10th Annual Samuel Krupnick Memorial Lecture, St. Louis, MO; "An Artist's Vision: How Biblical Women Changed the World"
1997-1998: Public Programs Associate, Lyman Allyn Art Museum, New London, CT
1968-1997: Director of Adult Studio Art Program, Lyman Allyn Art Museum, New London, CT
1972-1979: Visiting Lecturer/Visiting Assistant Professor, Connecticut College, New London, CT
1970-1977: Lecturer, University of Connecticut, Avery Point, Groton, CT; Mohegan Community College, Norwich, CT

Solo Exhibitions

2007: "I Hope I never Get Old, He Said," drawings, Hygienic Gallery, New London, CT
2007: "Still Life," University of Connecticut Medical Center Exhibition Gallery, Farmington, CT
2006: "The Divine Ecology," Beth Shalom Synagogue, Chester, CT
2003: "Women of Mystery, Men of Prophecy: Biblical Visions," Lyman Allyn Art Museum, New London, CT 2002 "Women of the Bible," Beth Shalom Synagogue, Chester, CT
2001: Mathewson Street United Methodist Church Gallery, Providence, RI
1999-2000: "Images From Sacred Text," Slater Museum, Norwich, CT
1994: Hoxie Gallery, Westerly Public Library, Westerly, RI
1994: Gallery 401, Providence, RI
1990: Center Gallery, JCC, Stamford, CT
1989: Retrospective Exhibition, Lyman Allyn Art Museum, New London, CT
1989: "Wrestling With The Angel," Yeshiva University Museum, New York, NY
1989: Vanguard Gallery, New London, CT
1986: "Landscapes," John Slade Ely House, New Haven, CT
1982: Kaber Gallery, New York, NY
1981: Housatonic Museum of Art, Bridgeport, CT
1981: Lyman Allyn Art Museum, New London, CT
1980: Purdue University Gallery, Lafayette, IN
1975, 1976, 1978: Pleiades Gallery, Soho, New York, NY
1975: Connecticut College, New London, CT
1966: Lyman Allyn Art Museum, New London, CT
1966: Mystic Art Association Gallery, Mystic, CT

Selected Group Exhibitions

2010: "The Dura-Europus Project," Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art, Philadelphia, PA
2010: "Seduced by the Sacred," Mandell JCC Gallery, Hartford, CT
2009-10: Orchard Street Shul Cultural Heritage Project, John Slade Ely House, New Haven, CT
2009: "Tzelem: likeness and Presence in Jewish Art", Stanton Street Synagogue, NYC
2009: "Visual Midrash," Center for Jewish Art, Lantana, FL
2008: "ART 2008," Biennial Exhibition, Rosen Museum Gallery, Boca Raton, FL
2007: "Art as Midrash, Midrash as Art," Nathan D. Rosen Gallery, Boca Raton, FL
2006: "Art 2006," Biennial Exhibition, Rosen Museum Gallery, Boca Raton, FL
2005: "Being Good: Women's Moral Values in the New Millennium," Alva Gallery, New London, CT
2004: "Let There Be Light," JCC Greater Baltimore, Baltimore, MD
2000: "Concerning the Spiritual in Art," New Bedford Art Museum, New Bedford, MA
1997, 1998: "Bringing Art to the Research Environment," Pfizer, Corp., Groton, CT
1997: "Reading Between the Lines: New Works Inspired by Traditional Texts," Starr Gallery, Newton Centre, MA
1996: "Jerusalem 3000 Arts Exhibition," Garde Arts Center, New London, CT
1996: "Mystic Art Association Retrospective," Mystic Art Association Gallery, Mystic, CT
1995: "Society's Choice," Griffis Art Center, New London, CT
1994: "Cornucopia," Lyman Allyn Art Museum, New London, CT
1993-1998: "Woman of Valor," Yeshiva University Museum, New York, NY (Traveled to Cincinnati, Denver, Phoenix, Chicago, Canada & Jerusalem)
1993: "16 Women Artists," Slater Museum, Norwich, CT

Current Commission

"Women of the Book" - A collaborative scroll of midrashic paintings on parchment by fifty-four international women artists to be exhibited in Israel and U.S..

Public Collections

New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, CT
Pfizer, Inc. Corporate Collection, Groton, CT
Slater Museum, Norwich, CT
Housatonic Museum of Art, Bridgeport, CT
Lyman Allyn Art Museum, New London, CT
The Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, MA
The First National Bank of Boston, Boston, MA
The Williams Memorial Institute, New London, CT
The Skowhegan School Permanent Collection, Skowhegan, ME
Yeshiva University Museum, New York, NY

Grants

1990: Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture
1977: Yaddo Fellow, Saratoga Springs, NY
1986: Falk Foundation for Creative Excellence
Elected Member, Connecticut Academy of Fine Arts

Publication

2002: "Women of Mystery, Men of Prophecy: Biblical Visions by Janet Shafner" (Jewish Heritage Project, Inc., New York, NY)

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

The Daughters of Zelophehad, 2006

Triptych, oil on canvas, 48" x 84"

Ruth and Boaz, 1999

Oil on canvas/wood, 56" x 48"

May You Live Forever: The Assumption of Serach Bat Asher, 2010

Oil on canvas, 50" x 50"

The Wise Woman of Tekoa/ The Death of Absalom, 2007

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Oil on canvas/wood, 58.5" x 48.5"

The Concubine of Gibeah 2, 1998

Oil on canvas/wood, 63" x 41"

The Concubine of Gibeah 3, 1999

Oil on canvas, 46" x 41"

Self in Cloth, 2007

Graphite drawing, 30" x 22"

Preparing to Fly, 2011

Charcoal drawing, 30" x 22"

Flying Lessons 5, 2010

Charcoal drawing, 41" x 36"

Woman in a Box #2, 2004

Charcoal drawing, 30" x 22"

Flying Higher, 2010

Charcoal drawing, 41" x 36"

All works are from the collection of the artist.

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Samuel Simon

Phyllis Sorkin

Helene Spring

Livia Straus

Mildred Weissman

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and Public Affairs; Director, HUC-JIR Museum, New York

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Rabbi Renni Altman, *Associate Dean, HUC-JIR/New York*

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