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# Introduction

ON JUNE 3, 1972, the Reform movement ordained as a rabbi a young woman from Ohio named Sally Priesand. In that one moment, the face of the Jewish community was forever changed. It was, to paraphrase another great event, "one small step for a woman, one giant step for womankind."

Rabbi Priesand's ordination did not occur in a vacuum. She entered Hebrew Union College (HUC), the Reform seminary, during the women's-lib era of the 1960s. She often notes that her motive was never to "rock the boat," but simply to become a rabbi. Yet no doubt at that particular moment in history HUC had decided it was time to keep up with the new demands of women and the new advancements for women in the secular world.

Since the early nineteenth century, the denomination of Reform Judaism had, on paper, ensured the religious equality of women. The introduction of the ceremony of confirmation for both girls and boys in 1846 by Max Lilienthal in New York City attested to the growing religious emancipation of women; it was offered as an "antidote" to the all-boys experience of bar mitzvah, and there seemed no reason to exclude girls from the new rite. As early as 1851, Isaac Mayer Wise had removed separate seating from his syn-

agogue, Anshe Emeth, in Albany, New York. In the 1850s reforming rabbis were arguing for the ceremonial religious equality of women, the abolition of *chalitzah* (a ceremony freeing a woman from marrying her dead husband's brother) and the status of *agunah* (a woman unable to ever remarry because her husband would not or could not grant her a Jewish bill of divorce). All these reforming discussions, however, were based on the assumption that men would continue to govern decision-making bodies in the Jewish world. Since men made the rules, men could bend them, or even break them, to "allow" women's entrance into male bastions such as bar mitzvah or *aliyot* to the Torah. This entrance was limited to what the male leadership felt was still "proper" for "ladies" of that era. It was not until the 1920s that the question was debated as to whether such opportunities for equal religious expression might also lead women to enter the echelons of rabbinic leadership.

In 1919 a woman named Martha Neumark began to study at the Reform rabbinical seminary. In 1921 she was allowed to lead a High Holiday congregation, thus marking her entrance into the professional rabbinic world. It was that move that prompted Kaufmann Kohler, president of the seminary at that time, to form a faculty committee to study the feasibility of ordaining women. When the debate around women's ordination did emerge officially in 1922, at a conference of the faculty of Hebrew Union College, it revolved around three themes. The first was halachic, and the rabbis studied whether Jewish law might permit such ordination. The second was sociological, and the rabbis wondered whether women could retain their devotion to home and family within the difficult and laborious tasks of the rabbinate. The third was communal, and the rabbis worried whether ordaining women would create an irreparable schism within the larger community. Yet despite these

concerns, the faculty of the seminary voted in favor of women's ordination. But a few months later, the lay Board of Governors, upon whom the final decision rested, rejected the vote, and restricted ordination from the Hebrew Union College to men only. Though women attended the seminary as students from as early as 1900, they were not to be ordained. Writing on the history of women in the Reform seminary, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, and looking at its roots in the late 1800s, Rabbi Gary Zola says, "Despite the fact that the presence of women in the halls of HUC goes back to the school's very first days, no one believed seriously that a woman would actually enter the rabbinate. Even though Isaac Mayer Wise, the school's founder and president, had declared publicly that he was ready and eager to educate and ordain women rabbis, no evidence exists to suggest that he ever actively sought or encouraged a woman to pursue ordination."[1]

It was in Nazi Germany that the first woman actually held a rabbinic title. In 1935 Regina Jonas, a student at the liberal seminary in Berlin, was empowered with a special diploma to "hold rabbinic office." She ministered to her people in the Terezin concentration camp, and died in Auschwitz in 1944. Twenty-eight years after her death and fifty years since the seminary faculty had formally agreed to ordain women, Sally Priesand became the first woman to be granted *smichah,* official ordination, from the faculty and lay body of a major rabbinic seminary. It took the merging of the counterculture 1960s, women's-lib of the early 1970s, and the personalities of both Priesand and the HUC faculty of the time to fully move from the idea of religious leadership for women to the practice of it.

Dr. Alfred Gottschalk, the president of the seminary who ordained Priesand, speaks on having been present in person at the

historic change. He writes, "I will never forget that day. . . . After I finished reciting the words of priestly benediction, Sally descended from the *bimah* in order to return to her seat. At that moment, all of her classmates spontaneously rose from their seats and offered their sustained applause. All present felt the significance of that remarkable moment."[2]

The Reform movement knew there would be implications of Priesand's ordination. Indeed, the Reconstructionist movement soon followed suit, with the ordination of Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, in 1974; and the Conservative movement ordained Amy Eilberg in 1985. While the Orthodox movement does not ordain women, it has begun to deal with the demands of its own female leadership. A yearly Orthodox feminist conference in New York attracts thousands of participants. Most notably, in 1998 Lincoln Square synagogue, a modern Orthodox synagogue in New York, hired Julie Joseph as "congregational intern" in a pararabbinic position to offer counseling, classes, and other professional services, just short of preaching or leading worship.

The ordination of women has completely changed the face of organized Jewish life, in all the synagogue denominations, and in many facets of the Jewish community unrelated to the synagogue. Female rabbis often bring their feminist concerns into their work, along with a sense of collective responsibility as women. What were once considered solely women's issues, belonging to the Sisterhood or women's auxiliaries, are now discussed from the *bimah* and at conferences of major mainstream Jewish organizations. In sermons and study groups, the female characters of the Bible are studied, examined, and dissected as never before. The issues of sexual harassment and power hierarchies in organized Jewish life have come to the forefront. Gender stereotyping in textbooks is being analyzed and

corrected. All this might have come about anyway, with the advances of feminism into Judaism. But there is no doubt that the presence of women in positions of religious and communal authority, influence, and decision-making has pushed what have been previously identified as "marginal" issues into the consciousness of the mainstream.

## Women as Rabbis: Some Personal Notes

When you close your eyes and picture "a rabbi," can you picture a young woman, a mother of three, a beardless, short figure who does not bellow or have a deeply resonant voice? We practice our authority differently than most of the rabbis we grew up with. We cry easily on the *bimah.* We hold our babies during Adon Olam. We nurse in our offices. I myself do not know anymore how to define rabbi. Gloria Steinem once remarked that when people would say to her, "Gee, you don't look forty," she would respond, "Well, this is what forty looks like!" "You don't look like a rabbi," I think to myself, as I picture my childhood rabbis, but this is what a rabbi looks like now.

The very notion of a woman rabbi challenges us to recognize that for centuries we thought male rabbis were the norm. We never before in our history referred to our rabbis as "male rabbis." Now that we have "Women in Judaism" courses, we see that we have been studying "Men in Judaism" all along, mistakenly believing that we had been learning "just Judaism." We have assumed that what we received was a neutral form of Judaism. By hearing the same stories retold now by women, by being at the same events now led by women, by simply sitting in the pews and looking up to see women in front of us, we have grown to understand that the "just Judaism"

we inherited was not at all neutral, but filtered through men and the male experience.

When women were first ordained, the early pioneers spent energy trying not to be different, trying to fit in and be just "one of the guys." But as more and more women were ordained, and as women from different denominations with differing religious perspectives joined the Reform ordainees, the focus shifted to a sense of pride in a woman's way of doing things, and especially a woman's way of seeing text. Study groups and classes emerged in synagogues and living rooms as female rabbis were called upon more and more to examine the women of the Torah, or lecture on the issues of women and halachah, or guide women through learning to don traditional garb once reserved only for men, like the tallit or tefillin. Men and women both began to recognize the one-sidedness of the Jewish religious experience. What we considered to be "normative" Jewish thought, Jewish teaching, and Jewish commentary were almost exclusively male. To put it simply, seeing and hearing women from the pulpit has changed the way Jews see and hear sacred text, holiday celebrations, lifecycle events, and almost anything Jewish.

To be sure, there are some women in the rabbinate who do not identify as feminists. There are times when those of us who do identify as feminists just do a wedding or a funeral, or teach a Talmud class, or plan an event, and we don't wear our feminism on our sleeves. Our being female, however, is always apparent.

People are often disappointed when a female rabbi says no to a request because such a request might jar a Jewish sensibility. "But you're a woman," they protest. "We thought you would be different." We do not say yes to every request, even from feminists, and we do not change everything that is based on a patriarchal history.

Sometimes we vote for tradition, even with our commitment to feminism.

Women rabbis, like women in general, are not a monolith. This book reflects the flowering of diversity within that body of women in the rabbinate, which may surprise those readers who expected to hear "the voice of women rabbis" rather than "the many different voices of many different women rabbis." One author may suggest the exact opposite of what a second author suggests, which does not signal a failure of consistency. Rather, it projects in clear view the variety of ways that women in the rabbinate read the Torah, which actually imitates the way traditional commentators disagreed on the meaning of any given passage, which in turn mirrors the vast spectrum of ways that Jews have seen any given text through the ages.

Of course, the assumption that men and women see text—or anything, for that matter—differently is still a matter of debate. Feminist social theorists such as Carol Gilligan have posited that men tend to relate to the world in a hierarchical, authoritative and exhortative way, and women in a relational, inclusive way. Whether this is nature or nurture remains unproven.

Whether or not we are actually different from our male counterparts, I believe that most of the women in the rabbinate today would agree that we are *perceived* differently. Put simply, people experience female rabbis differently than they experience male ones. And they experience Judaism, the gender issues of the prayerbook, and the whole question of the male imagery of God differently with a woman rabbi. As Rabbi Ellen Lewis writes, "Women rabbis make things look different without even trying. When I first assumed my present pulpit, I tried to do everything just like my predecessor did. . . . What I found out was that, even if I did the same things

he did, when I did them they looked and sounded different. . . . We still have the idea that, for all that we share with our male colleagues, our experience of the rabbinate is different."[3]

If our experience of the rabbinate is indeed distinct, then our experience of the central role of being a rabbi—teaching Torah—will also be distinct. If we hear the text differently than men, we will interpret it differently than men. How might a Torah commentary by women rabbis be different? I wanted to find out.

## The Methodology of This Anthology

Rachel Adler, writing on feminist methodologies, suggests, "One crucial contribution will be the methodologies feminists have developed for understanding and using narrative. . . . As a method of vision, feminist narratives draw upon fantasies and desires, prophecies and prayers to imagine possible worlds in which both women and men could flourish. As a tool of critique, narrative can expose within abstract theories assumptions about the nature and experience of being human, what people know, how they love, what they want, and what they fear." [4] Other feminist methodologies include a critique of the text from within its social context as that context applies to women both in the biblical period and now; a critique of the traditional ways of "unpacking" the text that rarely "unpacked" it for women; and an analysis of the assumptions we bring to the text, based on a history of our own personal biases we have inherited from a patriarchal Judaism. All these "ways of seeing" are contained in the essays of this volume.

Therefore, a commentary written by women will contain messages of change within a traditional reverence for an unchanging text. Because this volume includes only the voices of women who

have sought ordination, it necessarily privileges the thinking of reform (broadly defined) rather than tradition. This is not to suggest either that fewer women than men care about traditional halachah or that Orthodox/traditional women do not struggle with the implications of Jewish feminism. It is only to point out what is perhaps the most significant tension that these essays represent: the paradox of being agents of change who still maintain tradition.

At the same time, this commentary is a correction of the so-called neutral commentaries that came before, which assumed that women were included somehow, albeit in the margins or when a particular female character or legislation regarding women is introduced. The very existence of a commentary of women rabbis on all fifty-four weekly readings, not only the portions pertaining directly to women, challenges the notion that only those portions about women or containing female characters are relevant to an examination of the Torah and women. A complete feminist commentary on the whole Torah calls into question the marginality of feminist discussion and offers us the opportunity to go back and examine the "neutrality" of what we have learned before.

Will a book of Torah commentary exclusively by women rabbis be all the things that women rabbis are perceived to be? Will it be uniquely female, uncompromisingly feminist, enlightening from a woman's point of view, inclusive and approachable? Each reader will have to answer that question for herself or himself. This book will give you the unmatched opportunity to learn the whole Torah from women rabbis, and then decide. I cannot imagine you, dear reader, being in a place where you could hear every *parashah,* every Torah portion of the year, explicated by a different woman, so I have put you in a room with fifty-four female rabbis. I think you

will agree that, indeed, these commentaries are enlivening, exhilarating, and uniquely different. They are different not only from the traditional commentaries you may have read before, but each one is different from the others. You will find that while we share a feminist vision and a feminist "spin" on our assigned portions, we each bring our unique self to the task.

Each contributor to this anthology has presented a *dvar Torah,* a homiletic explanation of the weekly Torah portion, from a feminist viewpoint. Each has given you her personal interpretation on the portion. Some have chosen one aspect of it while others looked at it as a whole. They are trying to teach you something new that comes from within their experience of being female.

The fifty-four rabbis writing in this volume were ordained from the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist seminaries. It is my great sorrow that there are no Orthodox women rabbis represented, because there are, as yet, no Orthodox women rabbis at all. That is not to say that there are not great Orthodox female scholars and teachers. There certainly are, and you can find many of their writings listed in the bibliography at the end. They have much to teach us. But for my specific purposes, I present only ordained women who have been working as rabbis in the Jewish community.

They function as congregational rabbis, Hillel directors, professional academics, chaplains, and in a variety of other interesting rabbinic positions. They serve in the United States, Canada, Israel, and South America. Their biographies are at the end of the book. You will note that in the biographies, each has included a short statement of when and why she decided to become a rabbi—a question still asked very often of women in this field.

I am particularly honored that the first woman ordained in each seminary has agreed to be a part of this volume. Those three path-

breakers made it possible for the rest of us to earn the title rabbi, which we cherish so dearly. Other pathbreakers are included: the first woman president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, the first female rabbi to serve in Israel, the first Orthodox-trained female rabbi. The first generation of daughters of male rabbis is represented. (We are still waiting for the first daughter of a female rabbi!) Sometimes we joke that we will become truly normalized when we won't be the first woman rabbi to do *anything.* I include these "firsts" not only out of pride, but also out of a sense of duty, so that our children may have the role models that we did not have.

I hope, dear reader, that you will use this book. Bring it to synagogue or church with you as you hear the Bible read and explained. Write your own *divrei Torah* quoting the women within, their scholarship and their personal insights. Use it for your bat mitzvah or bar mitzvah as you try to tackle the portions you read on your special day. See this as a treasury of the Torah you have inherited—the traditional Torah—together with a new Torah, or teaching. Then together we can sow seeds of a truly egalitarian Judaism where, as Abraham Geiger said in 1837, "our whole religious life will profit from the beneficial influence which feminine hearts will bestow upon it."[5]

# What You Need to Know to Use This Book

TRADITIONAL TORAH STUDY must certainly seem daunting. Where, and how, does one begin to understand the many layers of a story? Even seemingly simple stories open up a host of questions when the reader begins to uncover how much material is missing, or repeated, or inverted, or detailed. Wordplays are common in the Bible, and a person who doesn't read Hebrew may well miss them altogether. One text may remind the reader of another text in a completely different place, have echoes of another story, or include references to an earlier or later event. Readers in a Diaspora context most certainly bring with them Christian connotations, inculcated by the general milieu, into the Jewish Bible. And all readers bring with them their own prejudices about the text, childhood memories, and "received wisdom" from a lifetime of sources.

A feminist will bring yet another whole set of questions. Where are women in the story? Are they visible, and if not, why not? Does this story teach us anything about the "character" of women? Or does it perhaps teach us about the biases of the male lens through which the story is viewed?

On the one hand, feminists can choose to reject the Bible outright as hopelessly sexist, unsalvageable for the modern woman. As

Naomi Goldenberg has written, "Although I admire the efforts of the reformers, I see them engaged in a hopeless effort. . . . Many feminists recommend ignoring parts of the Torah, but still claim the book as a whole is God-given. It is hard to deny that an eventual consequence of criticizing the correctness of any sacred text or tradition is to question why that text or tradition should be considered a divine authority at all. . . . In order to develop a theology of women's liberation, feminists have to leave . . . the Bible behind them." [1]

On the other hand, we can become skilled apologists with the claim that if we just understood the Torah better, we would see how our original concerns about women are simply unfounded. There may be some instances where women "seem" to be aggrieved or "seem" to be depicted in a negative light, but these few instances can be easily "fixed" by traditional commentators. Apologists usually claim that the problem lies not in the text but in the reader.

This book, however, takes the middle road. We neither reject nor apologize. Although the inclination of many of us is to say, "If only the text were different . . . ," we accept that the text as we have received it can be reread and understood in a new light. We uncover, recover, and discover. We explore, suggest, and speculate. Most importantly, we reappropriate the rabbinic use of parable, story, and metaphor, creating explications and interpretations called midrash in Hebrew. Midrash—coming from the Hebrew root *lidrosh,* "examine" or "interpret"—is the creative process of filling in the biblical gaps. Midrashim were written as early as before the first century C.E., and continue to be written today. They have been compiled into different collections at different times, from the third century to the sixteenth century C.E. Today's twentieth-century works are often labeled "modern midrash" to differentiate them

from classical midrash, but both fit Barry Holtz's description: "Where the Bible is mysterious and silent, Midrash comes to unravel the mystery. Moreover, there are sections of the Bible that are simply confusing or unclear. Midrash attempts to elucidate confusions and to harmonize seeming contradictions. . . . [T]he Rabbis when examining the ancient texts of the Bible found it necessary at times to reread texts in the light of their own contemporary values and beliefs."[2] As modern midrashists, the authors of these essays look deeply into the biblical texts, and, failing to find women's voices or women's experience, may invent them. Like the classical midrashists, we may wander far from the original to get back to it. We fill in the details of women's lives, their thoughts, hopes, and dreams.

The contributors to this volume believe that with all its problems, the Torah is still, at its core, our spiritual guide. Thus we reject women's marginality as the central assumption, and rather, attempt either to write ourselves in, reinterpret ourselves in, or critique our absence. And when we are not absent at all, we find the strength of our inclusion and ponder its meaning for all Jews today. As Mary Ann Tolbert has written, this is a "conscious effort to retrieve texts overlooked or distorted by patriarchal hermeneutics. . . . [It] focuses its attention on texts involving women characters and explores their functions without the patriarchal presumption of marginality."[3]

We recognize patriarchy in the Torah, but invite you to read the Torah with nonpatriarchal eyes. Sometimes we have to turn a text over to uncover what might have already been there but has been censored out, ignored, or misconstrued by patriarchal bias. Other times we discover what is already there. And sometimes we ourselves cover over a layer of text with a completely new layer of meaning.

But all of these methodologies are quite traditional. Any Bible reader needs tools to "unpack" the text. Midrash is one such tool. Commentary is another. Since it is nigh impossible to ever know the original "intention" of a biblical text, the rabbis began to build a pyramid of interpretations, assumptions, and meanings based on their understanding of the Torah text. Starting with the Talmud in the second century, and continuing most strongly with the medieval rabbis, Torah was explicated from various points of view: the literal, the homiletic, the mystical, the legal. The rabbis who systematically wrote such interpretations are called the commentators, and their works, the commentaries.

To save the reader from having to learn who the commentators are or what the midrashic compilations are each and every time they appear, on pages 41–44 is a list of those quoted in the essays. This list is by no means exhaustive, but merely represents the commentators and collections quoted by the authors of the essays.

In order to bring the Hebrew text to an English-speaking audience, the contributors could have chosen from a large number of translations now available. But since all translations are, in a sense, interpretations, the vast majority of contributors decided to translate the text themselves. Unless otherwise noted, translations in each essay are the products of the contributors.

Finally, we, the essayists, offer our own brand of homiletic, our own feminist sensibility and sensitivity, and our own list of questions. Like the rabbis of old, we innovate while trying to stay true to the text. And like the rabbis of old, we are faced with the tension of creating a new interpretation while safeguarding the sacredness of the text. But that is, perhaps, the greatest beauty of the Jewish way of reading the Bible. Never was a Jew commanded to read the Bible only as an academic, intellectual exercise or as a proof

of blind, unquestioned, unchallenged faith in the literal word. The words "why," "how," and "what if" were never forbidden in the academies of Torah study. And never was reading the text allowed only to the scholar. Learning Torah has always been an act of devotion, a spiritual practice, a holy act. Studying the Bible in a Jewish context has always been a democratic affair. Now, that democracy finally, blessedly, includes all its citizens.