



year pattern of not attending *sedarim*, but I did tell him the *midrash* about God reprimanding the angels and our custom of spilling drops of wine in sympathy.

It doesn't work with everyone; a fifty-year anger at Jewish parochialism won't melt in the face of a *midrash* no matter how artful and universalistic. But using *midrashim* to show that the rabbis of old were troubled by what troubles us is a very compelling teaching option for parents and teachers. Not only does this approach afford us alternate, perhaps more satisfying, readings of the text, but it underscores the notion that the Bible can be flawed while remaining holy.

Children can handle paradox; they know about people who are good and do bad things. In a conversation I had with a seven-year-old, she com-

mented on a classmate who was a "good friend" because he gave her a Pokemon card, but a "bad boy" because he broke the rule by bringing those cards to school. My little friend may have been precocious; developmental psychologists Sally Donaldson and Michael Westerman report that by the age of ten or eleven children clearly understand ambivalence. To teach Bible stories in a bowdlerized manner is insulting to children and confirms a widespread belief that religion is puerile or trivial. To teach Bible stories without discussing their moral complexities is, as Klepper points out, the loss of a significant teachable moment for both parents and educators.

Carol K. Ingall is Associate Professor of Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

A Ritual to Commemorate Jephthah's Daughter

Bayla Lovens

In 1994 Helen Albertson, Janice Zeltzer, and I became adult *b'not mitzvah*. Our Haftorah portion for that Shabbat, found in the *Book of Judges*, was the prelude to the story of Jephthah's daughter. While we found this story of a young woman killed by her father to satisfy a vow he had made to God to be disturbing, we became even more distressed as we began reading the traditional commentary on the text. We struggled to understand (indeed, continue to struggle with) the significance of presenting such a horrifying image as a sacred text. We continue to be overwhelmed, for example, by the contrast between this story, where this unnamed young woman is put to death, and the *Akedah*, the story of the aborted sacrifice of Isaac by his father, Abraham. There appears to us to be a more callous attitude in the text toward the loss of this young woman, which brings to mind the tragic fate of many other "nameless women" in Jewish texts.

In the process of trying to reconcile these issues, we looked back to the text. The story ends with a reference to the daughters of Israel "lamenting" Jephthah's daughter for four days every year. The actual verb used is *l'tanot*, which translates "to chant," "to celebrate," "to recount." Where, we asked, was this yearly observance, and how exactly

should we understand what the daughters of Israel did to remember Jephthah's daughter? We addressed these questions with our rabbi, Donna Berman. We decided to revive the ritual of remembering Jephthah's daughter, and named the observance *Tanat L'vat Yiftach*.

Writing about the ritual, Rabbi Berman said, "One of the goals of the ritual we have created is to give participants the chance to experience the verb *l'tanot* in all its dimensions; to lament the tragic death of Jephthah's daughter as well as all the daughters of Jephthah whose lives are circumscribed by the nightmare of abuse; to chant and sing and raise our voices in memory of the courage of this nameless woman; to recount her story lest her memory and message be lost to yet another generation; and to celebrate the strength and determination of Jephthah's daughter with feasting, dance and song."

The ritual serves as a springboard for both women and men to explore how Judaism contributes to a culture where battering and abusing women are found, and to suggest means of communal *teshuvah* that addresses that contribution.

The Ritual

The ritual is a four-day observance commemorating the four-day biblical lament. On the first night

a *yahrzeit* candle is lit. A chime, reminiscent of Jephthah's daughter's timbrel, is affixed to the door, and *tzedakah* is collected for a local shelter for battered women. On the fourth night, a "seder" is held, a gathering of women.

The seder ritual begins with each woman introducing herself and naming her "mothers," those women who have made her the woman she is now. This has proved to be a very poignant moment, during which many women are able, for the first time, to acknowledge someone who has touched them deeply. Following the introductions, the story of Jephthah's daughter is read and some commentary studied in order to elicit discussion. All who are present are encouraged to respond to the story, as each woman brings a different understanding to the text.

Following this discussion, we read together a list of unnamed women in Jewish tradition (for example Lot's wife, Lot's daughters, and Noah's wife). As each woman is remembered, a drop of wine is removed from a cup to symbolize how the Jewish community is diminished through the diminishing of these women. A litany of sins against women is then read, as drops of salt water, symbolizing tears, are dropped from bowls.

A ritual handwashing takes place, during which women wash each others' hands in a sym-

bolic gesture of sisterly love and caring. Then a meal is served, accompanied by singing and dancing in honor of Jephthah's daughter. After dinner, women again split up into pairs or small groups to allow each woman to name the blessings she feels she needs at that particular time. The women then bless one another. The evening ends with more song.

A separate ritual is suggested for men on the fourth night. This ritual includes fasting and going to the *mikvah* as a way of purifying themselves from the patriarchal inheritance of sexism and misogyny. The men prepare to rejoin the community in the spirit of building a more loving, caring environment for both women and men.

Our hope is that this ritual empowers women and men to begin to shape a different culture for our Jewish future.

Bayla Lovens, a social worker who lives in Port Washington, New York, is an active member of Port Jewish Center, a small, liberal, Reform congregation. She and her husband, Herb, have two children: Jonah, 12, and Jessica, 14. Helen Albertson, Rabbi Donna Berman, Jennifer Honen, Bayla Lovens, and Janice Zeltzer developed this ritual with help from the many women who attended presentations of the work, which is still in progress.

Sh'ma Book Review

Torah of The Mothers: Contemporary Jewish Women Read Classical Jewish Texts

(Edited by Ora Wiskind Elper and Susan Handelman, Urim Publications, 2000, 510 pp, \$30.00)

The Women's Torah Commentary

(Edited by Elyse Goldstein, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000, 496 pp, \$34.95)

Reading difficult texts? What texts *aren't* difficult if the literature you study was written by men and for men, and you are a woman entering into that conversation?

The Women's Torah Commentary is an anthology of brief *divrei Torah* on the 54 weekly Torah portions

written by women rabbis ordained by the Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform movements. Most of the commentaries deal with female characters or legal issues pertaining to women using a range of feminist methodologies including new feminist narratives; some, like Rabbi Lucy Dinner's



commentary on *Bo*, apply a general theme to an experience of women — e.g., the idea of liberation is applied to the psychological and spiritual transformations wrought by women. These are creative readings, drawing freely on midrashic sources; some, however, are more plausible than others.

Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, who edited the volume, claims in her introduction that “the very existence of a commentary of women rabbis on all 54 weekly readings calls into question the marginality of feminist discussion.” This may be true in general, but a commentary that asks the reader to see Lot’s wife as a pillar of support (*Vayera*) seems to be somewhat on the margin. To my mind, that is the price and the value of originality. These commentaries push the conversation of Torah commentary to new areas and new concerns; it will be the task of the students of these rabbis to continue and extend these conversations.

Torah of The Mothers is a striking collection of 23 essays by Orthodox women on a variety of topics. The essays are divided into four sections: “Students and Teachers,” “Readings of Biblical Texts,” “Readings of Rabbinic Texts,” and “Exile and Redemption.” The first essays, memorializing teachers are strikingly intimate, recalling the personal impact of Rav Soloveitchik, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Nechama Leibowitz, Chana Balanson, and the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The other three sections address “difficult texts” more directly, although, unlike the *Women’s Torah Commentary*, few of the essayists in *Torah of The Mothers* seem to have real personal difficulties with their chosen topics.

On the contrary, these women seem very comfortable with texts that go beyond standard Talmud, Midrash, and Bible commentaries; many also refer to hassidic and kabbalistic masters (see especially Miriam Birnbaum’s fascinating study of the imagery of spiritual exile and Ora Wiskind Elper’s description of hassidic images of the feminine in the Exodus). Following the style of Aviva Zornberg (who is mentioned in the acknowledgments), several of the women draw on the insights of literature (Thomas Mann, Hayim Gouri, Emily Dickinson, John Milton, and Dylan Thomas) as well as non-Orthodox Jewish scholars (Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Rabbi Michael Gold). The commentators’ comfort also allows for the creation of a blend of writing styles that is part academic (extensive footnotes that sometimes seem pitched to a target audience with very little background) and part confessional. Tamara Goshen-Gottstein ex-

presses her own tentativeness in a plea to the reader: “Do not be limited by my current perspective of the texts. Every year, open your life anew; notice details in the text that may never have caught your heart before” (page 124).

Only a few of the essays actually deal with issues facing Orthodox women as such: Sarah Idit (Susan) Schneider’s fascinating piece on the “The Daughters of Tzafchad” draws lessons both from the daughters and from Moshe’s response, delineating a “methodology of attitude” that can allow for empathetic and discerning responses to the halakhic petitions of Orthodox women. And Goshen-Gottstein’s essay on “physical infertility and spiritual fecundity” deals with the spiritual opportunities brought on by the crisis of infertility. While some of the essays deal with biblical women (Deborah, Serah bat Asher, Esther) or feminine imagery, most are simply thoughtful, creative readings of texts in conversation with a broad range of traditional sources. Esther Sha’anan’s concluding essay reflects on the authenticity of the new “Torah of our Mothers.” Emerging in this generation by adjuring women engaged in Jewish learning, a subtext is to focus on social issues and, in particular, the difficulties of single-mother families in the Orthodox community. She writes, “If I am worried about my ritual ... place in the synagogue when I haven’t considered the place of the [marginalized member of the Jewish community] ... I am losing touch with the essentials of Judaism.” To the credit of the 77 contributors, Sha’anan’s conclusion speaks for both of these volumes.

Jeffrey Spitzer is the producer of JSkyway.com, JFL’s distance education program for Jewish educators and communal leaders.

Living Words III ...

... a collection of some of the best high holiday sermons from 5761 will be available in June. These sermons are timely and timeless, and promise to inspire. They are “open, personal, relevant, and meaningful.” *Rabbi Asher Lopatin, Congregation Anshe Sholom B’nai Israel, Chicago.* To order your copy of *Living Words III*, please send a check for \$17.95 to: *Sh’ma*, POB 9129, Newton Upper Falls, MA 02464, or email Erica@JFLmedia.com for more information.

Everett Fox's commentary unsettles me. I have never considered this verse from the hagaddah so starkly. Left to puzzle over redemption, I wonder how it can even exist in the same world as the Shoah — everything before and since? Is redemption just a reward for suffering, for survival?

I am always drawn to biblical stories involving conversations, debates, and arguments with God. They affirm my sense of reciprocity in relationship; it is the certainty that the relationship exists that frames my thinking about redemption.

If redemption comes from God, why is it given? Is it a gift? From childhood, there are occasions we learn to associate with gifts — gifts that we hope for, then expect. Do we come to expect redemption? Is there a risk that suffering, small or catastrophic, can generate a sense of entitlement to redemption? Redemption is in the mystery of God's purpose for creation that we can only seek but not know. That can be a path of despair or a path of hope. My journey is wrapped in the comfort I find in the mystery.

Phyllis Senese teaches in the Department of History at the University of Victoria, Victoria, B.C. Canada.

I have always thought that the call to remember the persecution of Jews during Passover is also a call for Jews to acknowledge the suffering and enslavement of others on this earth who parallel our history. There have always been those who rise up against the innocent and who massacre men and women who are different and therefore threatening.

I have never thought that we were meant to use our "chosen" status as Jews to be defensive or merely self-protecting. I use this passage to remind myself that the job (or one of the jobs) of a Jewish person is to be vigilant for the freedom and well-being of all persecuted minorities.

Elizabeth Swados is a composer, writer, and director who has been working in the musical theater for nearly thirty years.

The upraised cup. The open door. The food in our mouths, the extra chairs at our tables, the spilled wine, the faces we love and the faces that disappoint us. The promise of redemption.

בכל דור ודור עומדים עלינו לכלותנו והקדוש
ברוך הוא מצילנו מידם
הגדה של פסח

... In every generation (there are those who) rise up against us, but the Holy One, Blessed be He, rescues us from their hand.

— Passover Haggadah

At a dramatic moment in the seder, we raise the cup of wine and recite God's promise of redemption to Abraham's descendants in Egyptian bondage. Then we say the words above — which I can never read, I admit, without a twinge of pain. What does it mean, in the wake of the century that has just passed, to have been "rescued"? True, any period in which the Jewish people have survived pogroms, wars, persecution, and genocide, established a state, and prospered as never before, has to be accounted a smashing divine success.

At the same time — and I don't wish to appear ungrateful for the above miracles — the cost has been appalling. Between the post-World War I massacres in the Ukraine perpetrated by Stalin, the Holocaust, and the losses in Israel's wars, the Jewish people have counted millions of victims. And age-old treasures of culture, from languages to synagogues to living teachers, have disappeared forever. What has replaced them has been sometimes uplifting and sometimes depressing.

Passover asks us to look at the issue of Jewish survival, not only as a simple tale of suffering and rescue, or as a call to be grateful for the mere fact of survival, but also as a challenge to define what exactly comprises redemption. Redemption, as narrated in Exodus, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, is followed by great failures of leaders and the led. Will the new century repeat the biblical pattern, or will we be able to break it?

Everett Fox is Allen M. Glick Professor of Judaic and Biblical Studies at Clark University. He is the translator of *The Five Books of Moses (Schocken Books)* and *Give Us a King: I and II Samuel*.

But the Seder itself is the redemption. Rehearsed, enacted, embodied, eaten and drunk, studied and scoffed at, changed and changeable.

Passover is an exercise in collective optimism, which is another word for faith. Faith is not necessarily the same thing as believing in a God with a muscular arm and outstretched fingers. Faith can be a commitment to the unprovable proposition that it's worth the struggle to cross the next impossible barrier, to seek meaning in our lives, to try, try again to do justly and build another peace.

We raise the cup, we rehearse our enslavement and liberation, we sing, turning disaster into dramaturgy. We craft an event that transforms our children into Jews.

The purpose of Passover is Passover itself.

Anita Diamant is the author, most recently, of *How to Be a Jewish Parent, with Karen Kushner*.

*NiSh'ma is the Hebrew word for "let us hear."