

The Midrashic Enterprise of Contemporary Jewish Women

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For the first time in almost two thousand years of Bible interpretation, Jewish women are composing and publishing their own midrash. They began in the 1970s in North America, their works appearing in alternative religious ceremonies and in marginal publications. While not yet a familiar form of Jewish religious writing, women's midrash can now be found in commercially successful books; printed and analyzed in journals; and featured in public lectures, adult education classes, and midrash-writing workshops.

Women's venture into the field of midrash, one common explanation has it, is due to their "taking the easy way" by avoiding talmudic studies and settling for the more accessible biblical stories. This explanation overlooks crucial points about midrash in general and about contemporary midrash in particular. Midrash is not simply one genre of Jewish literature; it is "the central enterprise of almost all Jewish religious writing until the modern period."¹ Midrash is at the heart of the Passover seder, life-cycle ceremonies, festival and Sabbath sermons, and it is likely to be cited whenever Jewish values, beliefs, and laws are explicated. Midrashic literature is integral to the efforts of religious Jews of all stripes to make Jews more ritually observant and culturally literate. More engaging than lectures on theology and halakhah, stories involving biblical characters serve as a point of entry into Judaism and are particularly effective as a tool in what is essentially an ongoing campaign for adult Jewish remedial education in the United States.² Furthermore, halakhic creativity is often buttressed by links to the biblical narrative. Women who produce new midrash or who repackage the old midrash have grasped the crucial role that it plays in Jewish life. Some clearly want to influence halakhah or the communal rule-makers by presenting an alternative reading of the Torah.³ Most, however, find this battle unwinnable, ill-informed, or simply irrelevant; they turn to midrash as the mode of religious and artistic expression best suited to explore their own identity, their relationship to others, and their encounter with the sacred.⁴

The diversity of contemporary women midrashists and the work they have written should not obscure their shared concerns. First and foremost, all authors present a perspective drawn from their experiences as women. This is no mere addition; their midrashim reconfigure and embellish the biblical narrative and interpretive literature

in novel ways. Second, women midrashists generally ignore theology and are unconcerned with establishing a rationale for the commandments—matters that preoccupied premodern midrashists. Instead, they focus on articulating the dynamics of social relationships. Perhaps because they are so attuned to social issues, they exhibit a strong emotional resistance to, or connection with, the text. Their insights often emerge out of pain or anger and a desire for reconciliation. Finally, while the writers employ different strategies and manifest diverse and competing ideals of womanhood, they all use midrash to raise the self-esteem of contemporary Jewish women. The reader is hard-pressed to find new midrashim that display women in a negative light. Obvious shortcomings of particular women in the Bible are explained sympathetically as a function of the narrow constraints within which women then lived and the double standard of behavior in ancient societies. The reluctance of contemporary women midrashists to criticize the women of the past speaks of a feeling of loyalty across the centuries and of a need for validation.

Classical Midrash and the Inception of Women's Midrash

Midrash as a term refers both to a literary technique and to discrete pieces of literature.⁵ Classical midrash consists of explanations and literary expansions of biblical and, to a lesser extent, postbiblical texts. There are five discernable types of classical midrashic literature. *Exegetical* midrash consists of discrete, short comments on scriptural passages. *Homiletical* midrash takes the form of sermons anchored together by interpretations of scripture. *Narrative* midrash is the body of stories and legends about heroes and events from biblical or postbiblical times. Most of the exegetical, homiletical, and narrative materials are of unknown authorship, collected and edited into volumes by anonymous editors years after composition, and published between the third and thirteenth centuries. In contrast is the genre that first appeared in the High Middle Ages, the *running commentary*. This type of midrash represents a named individual's idiosyncratic perspective on the biblical text, and it invariably incorporates earlier midrashic material reworked for the author's purposes. Finally, there is *midrash halakhah*, which is embedded within rabbinic analysis and commentaries published from the third century onward. All these forms of midrash are being generated to this day.

Midrash as a technique developed as a consequence of the Bible's literary style. Terse, lacking in detail, typically silent regarding the thoughts or motives of its characters, the biblical narrative alone was often insufficient for those turning to it for inspiration and direction. Classical midrash furnishes the details missing from the biblical narratives; explains apparent contradictions and resolves confusions; supplies rationales for God's behavior or that of individuals; teaches values; aligns the Bible's ancient traditions with the reader's contemporary reality; and provides the opportunity for speculation and theology. The imaginative and often fantastical form of narrative midrash offers a safe structure for the presentation of new ideas and for challenges to Jewish norms. Midrash halakhah is designed to justify the promulgation of religious law, biblical or rabbinic, and to provide an opening for related insights or incidents.

Classical midrashists considered the text of the Torah—in its narrow meaning, the Pentateuch, or Written Law (*torah shebikhtav*)—to be Moses' faithful recording of God's words as revealed on Mount Sinai and afterwards during the 40-year trek through the desert. They believed that the details and application of the written law, as well as the teachings conveyed by God that remained in oral form (*torah sheba'al peh*), were transmitted faithfully by the leaders of one generation to the next. Midrash was distinct from this dual Torah. Premodern Jews, however, understood the plain text, or *peshat*, of the Torah through the lens of midrashic writings, in no small measure because midrashists described their interpretations as latent within the Torah. Even when the classical midrashists reformulated laws and introduced new ideas and values, or when they substituted a midrashic extrapolation of a word for its plain meaning, they tended to claim that their midrash was merely uncovering what was already there. Not only did they blur the boundaries between revelation and midrash; they tended to see Scripture and rabbinic literature as an interrelated and seamless whole. Thus, a considerable amount of classical midrash consists of short comments that connect disparate texts to one another; for example, to show that a word in the Song of Songs clarifies a phrase in Exodus describing the power of God in Egypt. In this manner, the midrashist displayed his breadth of learning and the internally consistent message of Torah—in its broadest meaning, God's teachings.

In the premodern era, it was a rare Jewish woman indeed who was formally trained in Torah and its interpretation. Rabbinic leaders insisted that women were obliged to know the biblical and rabbinic laws that applied to them, but they consistently dissuaded men from teaching their wives and daughters Torah (that is, rabbinic law, Bible, and commentaries). There were the exceptional exemplary women who studied alone or who found an instructor, but overall, this directive was overwhelmingly heeded. Consequently there is no piece of premodern biblical interpretation attributed to a woman.⁶ Only when secular education for girls was mandated in the West in the nineteenth century did rabbinic leaders modify the traditional injunction. Educational opportunities for girls—albeit typically based on a different, less text-based curriculum than that provided to boys—gradually increased among all sectors of Jewry except among the most conservative religious circles and secular Jews.⁷

Many girls and women now study Bible and midrash in the curricula of Orthodox and Conservative day schools, supplementary classes, postsecondary seminaries and yeshivot, in adult education, and on college campuses. This by no means represents a majority of Jewish women. Over the past two decades, American Jewry has become progressively polarized: an increasing majority of American Jews offers their children little or no Jewish education, while a passionate minority “has invested a lot of energy in creating and nurturing innovative programs that encourage religious revival.”⁸ Educational programs in synagogues, summer camps, and on the postsecondary level have significantly expanded since the 1960s and 1970s—particularly Jewish day schools. The percentage of girls receiving a Jewish education has increased dramatically, and they are participating in the more intensive forms of education. The current generation of Jewish women probably contains the largest block of Jewish book-learned women in history.⁹

Education alone is not sufficient to motivate women to write midrash; if it were, Hebraically educated religious women would have turned to this medium earlier in

the century. Over time, a number of forces, each of them a rebellion against traditional Judaism, converged and exerted an important impact. The era in which formal Jewish education was extended to girls was also characterized by the growing influence of the critical historical approach to religion. Except in the most insular settings, one could not study sacred texts without being aware that their divine origin had been called into question. Furthermore, in recent decades, second-wave feminist leaders have been pointing out that men alone had shaped, promoted, and perpetuated religious institutions in order to further male interests, often at women's expense. From the early 1970s, the women's liberation movement began to have a noticeable effect on the organized American Jewish community as college-aged women and men began publicly objecting to the patriarchal character of communal institutions.¹⁰ Among other factors, religious texts—particularly the Bible, prayer book, and rabbinic codes—were implicated for sanctioning and perpetuating women's oppression and exclusion.

Yet American Jewry has not dismissed religion, *per se*. Rather, those who have included religion in their lives over the last three decades have done so in a manner that is more individualized, experiential, and outside the established conventions. Creative modes of religious expression, in turn, have influenced the mainstream religious institutions and moved them toward change. Women have been increasingly allowed to attain positions of leadership. Girls taught by female rabbis, educators, and religious mentors who demonstrate facility with Torah interpretation are likelier to venture down that path themselves. The autobiographical references and acknowledgments in women's midrash publications testify to the fact that the contemporary surge of writing owes much to the authors' previous exposure to Jewish education and role models.

Jewish feminism progressed historically through stages similar to those apparent in the larger woman's movement, and these are evident in their encounter with the biblical text.¹¹ The initial phase was an emerging realization that women and women's perspectives were underrepresented or missing. Previously taken for granted or understood without any concomitant sense of exclusion, the near-absence, silence, or powerlessness of women in the Bible was now identified and named for what it was.¹² This declaration was often accompanied by anger at oneself and others for contributing to the centrality of a religious text that perpetuates women's subordination. The first interpretations of biblical texts—most frequently analytical essays, as few actually attempted to write midrash¹³—reflect the outrage and shock of women who have just become aware that they personally (not simply their predecessors) have been ignored and misrepresented. These women struggled between feelings of bitterness at Jewish tradition and gratitude for the myriad gifts it had bequeathed them.¹⁴

Some of the most incisive critiques of biblical literature were produced by Jewish lesbians. The Bible renders them invisible, making no reference whatsoever to an eroticized relationship between women, sexual or otherwise.¹⁵ Unlike heterosexual women, whose experience of violence or oppression at the hands of men often gets tempered by the hope and expectation that they will one day find fulfillment with the right man, most lesbians are not comfortable with the heterosexual ideal promoted in biblical and postbiblical Jewish literature. Those who live freely as lesbians in a like-minded community have few restraints on their critique of the sexism in the Bible and

their creation of alternative material. Clarifying the lesbian contribution to contemporary women's midrash is difficult, though, because many lesbians prefer to keep their sexual identity private, for various reasons—among which is the well-founded belief that publishers are reluctant to support work that is written by an obvious lesbian or that targets such an audience. Although anecdotal evidence indicates that Jewish lesbians were overrepresented among the creators of new women's ceremonies and literature in the 1970s and 1980s, only a minute number of the midrashim recently published have been written by women who are openly identified as lesbians.¹⁶

Whether lesbian or heterosexual, Jewish women influenced by feminism eventually moved away from raw anger to generate more positive ways of relating to Jewish culture. One method was to draw attention to the women of the Bible and Talmud and to raise them to a place of greater honor. Feminist theory taught women to tell each other their personal stories as a means of validating women's experiences and "hearing each other into" existence.¹⁷ The same tactic was applied to the biblical narrative. This effort at inclusion, already evident in the early 1970s, involved greater scrutiny of the literature of classical midrash. Women learned that classical midrash contained details about women named in the Bible, as well as nameless women or women whose existence was never mentioned. The strategy of inclusion is a form of religious expression in which women from all denominations—even those unsympathetic to feminism—could engage, for it involves portraying biblical women as role models according to one's particular understanding of the behavioral ideal. Midrashic study enabled women to integrate stories of biblical women into their Passover seders, Rosh Hodesh ceremonies, and traditional rituals.¹⁸

This task was simplified by the availability of classical midrashic literature in English-language translations and anthologies, either newly published or else reissued to fill the demand created by the growing number of Jewish studies courses at the universities. Quite unlike the verse-centered, choppy writing that was characteristic of ancient and medieval midrashists who linked together diverse biblical texts—often with little clarification—these anthologies exposed American Jews to a narrative mode of midrash that was both compatible with modern sensibilities and accessible to people with limited Jewish education. One of the handiest resources was Louis Ginzburg's multivolume *The Legends of the Jews*. Ginzburg had culled midrashim from hundreds of ancient and medieval commentaries and had arranged them into a single grand narrative. His work was translated from the original German and included two volumes of full citations and an extraordinarily complete index.¹⁹ Books like these, and the stories of Jewish heroes that comprised so much of the Jewish educational curriculum and synagogue sermons, suggested to American Jews that midrash was primarily a narrative genre. Translated hasidic tales and popular Jewish literature such as the works of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Elie Wiesel—writings that gave a place of honor to the quest for religious authenticity—fueled the imagination of Jews seeking to define their own viewpoints.²⁰ Moreover, the American cultural heritage inclined them toward this mode of expression. And even had these influences not been present, Jewish feminists would have eventually taken on the role of story-centered midrashists. They were determined to insert women into the national mythology, and this necessitated a reshaping of the biblical narrative.

Contemporary Women's Midrash

Today the term midrash is used very loosely and can refer to any literary embellishment of the biblical text. This may include poetry, scripts of plays, fictional correspondence between biblical characters, Greek choruses, essays, and dialogues of study groups. The appellation has also been applied to the visual or plastic arts—drama, painting, sculpture, dance, textiles, multimedia—when a piece of work includes, expands upon, or refers to biblical characters and themes.²¹ It is noteworthy that often the artists themselves want to designate their creations as midrash. Clearly there is perceived prestige or enhanced merit in the religious designation. For the purposes of this essay, I will utilize a narrower—and, admittedly, a still inadequate—definition: midrash is literature modeled on the classical rabbinic forms that extends and clarifies biblical language and narrative in order to articulate a religious perspective.²² Nevertheless, a measure of confusion is inescapable. For example, it is difficult to clearly define the boundaries between literary studies of the Bible and the writings that, like classical midrash, are situated primarily within a confessional context. Contemporary writers (who, enabled by technological inventions, are far more verbose than their predecessors) have created blended genres. A particularly popular compositional form is the homiletical discourse, which opens with a phrase from the Torah as a starting point for a reflection on the role of religious values in confronting life's dilemmas, and then returns to the biblical text for the conclusion. Many other recent midrashic writings are autobiographical, as a writer recollects her own life and how a biblical character has figured in it.²³

The construction of new styles of midrash may sometimes represent a strategy for expanding the concept and content of Jewish learning and identity to include Jewish women. There is probably truth in the observation that these new literary forms are indicative of acculturation, reflecting the inability of contemporary Jews to deal on a sophisticated level with complex Hebrew texts. They may also manifest the current passion for self-revelation, the democratization of religious authority, and the influence of postmodern literary theory. Exploring these theories lies outside the scope of this essay. Instead, I shall attempt to survey the large accumulation of women's midrash produced over the past 30 years, mainly by American Jewish women, arranged along the spectrum from Orthodox to secular.

Starting at the conservative pole are authors who assume, as did their ancient and medieval predecessors, that the Torah was delivered by God to Moses, who faithfully recorded it in his lifetime. Belief in the divine authorship of the Torah is a defining doctrine of Orthodox Judaism. Modern Orthodox midrashists establish their legitimacy by stressing that when they supply the thoughts, feelings, motivations, and conversations of biblical characters, they derive these details primarily from rabbinic literature—either from the Talmud, classical midrash, mystical teachings, or later commentaries. They may stray from the traditional format, often adding parallel stories from their personal experiences and original meditative poems and prayers of their own. Yet they are careful to distinguish between their own material and authentic midrash. The following is how one such author describes her work:

[This book] is merely a web of my own ideas and thoughts based on Torah commentaries and sources which are meant to be an attempt, among the other valiant attempts, to pro-

vide some food for thought on this subject. I took the pains of adding extensive (although by no means complete) footnotes and sources to emphasize that although some of the ideas expressed in this book are original they are all firmly based on traditional Torah sources.²⁴

To elaborate upon the biblical text by relying primarily upon one's insight and imagination is simply not valued—it certainly does not merit the designation of midrash.

One's view of revelation and the image of God can be correlated to the amount of detail provided in a midrash and the level of intimacy that is established between author, reader, and subject. Modern Orthodox writers generally profess what we might call the classical image of God: a personal deity who is the ruler of the universe, the guiding hand of history, who rewards and punishes, and who is ultimately moral but can appear arbitrary and utterly alien to human sensibilities. When this theology is accompanied by the belief that the Torah is—literally or figuratively—made up of God's words, midrashic elaboration is naturally limited. The midrash functions not as an independent story, but as a vehicle for arriving at a greater understanding of God's will and of people's attempt to live in accordance with it. Biblical characters are made into archetypes. Thus, the Orthodox midrashist may describe Sarah as an old woman, but she would regard a graphic depiction of the physical disabilities and difficulties of the very aged (muscle aches and pains, the intimate details of eating and eliminating waste) as irreverent and distracting; details are allowed only if they are symbolic or absolutely essential for the lesson. There is a strict economy of language and an effort to establish a certain distance between the reader and the character.

This point is made explicit in the book by Tamar Frankiel, author of *The Voice of Sarah: Feminine Spirituality and Traditional Judaism*. Frankiel argues that the matriarchs are archetypes of an expansive notion of motherhood, one that incorporates leadership, a concern for the education of children beyond her own, and an activism based on logical reasoning enhanced by a uniquely female intuitive knowledge:

The first mother, Sarah, reveals many dimensions of this maternal archetype. This woman, who had no children for ninety years, the wife of a respected chieftain and equal to him in rank, did not spend her time milking the goats or mending tent covers. The midrash tells us that, on the contrary, she worked as what we would today call a women's spiritual leader: she taught women about the one God, while Abraham taught the men. The great insight that resulted in the overthrow of paganism was his, but her work was equally important. She was so successful at drawing people to her that, when they worked in a new location, Abraham set up her tent first (Bereishis Rabba, Gen 12:8). She was a "mother" of souls.²⁵

This midrash goes beyond the plain text to explain Sarah's role, but it does not elaborate too much on the details. Frankiel points out that disclosure can never be complete, as the Torah merely speaks in hints and the midrash gives little more than glimpses.²⁶ Clearly, she does not feel that the reader needs much beyond that in order to benefit from the model of religious behavior exemplified by Sarah.

Yet Orthodox women must struggle with the reality of a biblical text that skims over the lives of women. Those who write midrash acknowledge an inadequacy, but they are constrained by their loyalty to exonerate the biblical and rabbinic heritage. This is bound to produce some convoluted reasoning. One midrashist explains that the very absence of women's experiences in the Bible testifies to their worth. A car-

dinal virtue of biblical women, according to Rivkah Zakutinsky, is that they remained “hidden,” precious and treasured as pearls, doing God’s will in the domestic or private realm. In her aptly titled book, *Beyond Pearls and Merchant Ships: Finding the Woman of Valor*, Zakutinsky draws portraits of great biblical women who shunned a public role. The Bible’s reticence with regard to women, while hindering the midrashist’s ability to present them as models, contains a deep message, Zakutinsky writes:

[Women’s modesty] may be precisely why there are so few detailed or explicit descriptions of righteous Jewish women in the Written Torah. To catch a glimpse of the “Woman of Valor,” we have to search for hints that indicate her way . . . our foremothers, *our shepherdesses*, were experts at concealing themselves. Solomon’s words, “*Who will find her?*” is not rhetorical; it is a clue. . . . Fairy tales only dare to hint at what the truly accomplished Jewish woman knows: *invisibility empowers*.²⁷

This statement directly challenges the feminist call for women’s voices to be heard.²⁸ Inexplicably, she ignores the fact that when Orthodox women emerge as teachers of midrash, they are making Jewish women both visible and audible.

This dilemma helps explain the very small number of books on Torah and midrash published by Orthodox women. The study of midrashic texts is made available to girls in Modern Orthodox schools, but not in schools just to the right on the Orthodox spectrum.²⁹ Reservations regarding women’s Torah study persist even in Modern Orthodox institutions, however, and across the spectrum, women who are learned in the field are not offered the same public arena as are men. Women-authored works that manage to be published—with one exception, discussed below—have as a major objective the refutation of feminist criticism. This is an important task not just for external outreach or community relations; it serves the community internally, affirming the wisdom of its adherents and responding to their doubts.³⁰ Perhaps Orthodox women writers nevertheless take on a public role because they feel personally challenged by feminism, and they recognize that a defense of the Torah from the charge of sexism is more credible when delivered by a woman. Women’s public Torah instruction receives greater sanction when it is directed specifically to women and affirms the legitimacy of traditional women’s norms.³¹

The spotlight focused specifically on women in Orthodox women’s midrash, however, attests to the assimilation of at least some aspects of feminism into North American Orthodoxy. Orthodox midrashists stress the autonomy of biblical women and take great pains to show that they were not victims. Zakutinsky draws upon the Bible and midrash to provide contemporary women with models of Jewish womanhood. The twenty sketches in her book depict women of strong piety, determined to advance God’s will, struggling to fulfill their own needs but never at the cost of breaking religious law or stepping out of the restricted bounds of the woman’s realm.

One of her chapters is devoted to Rebecca, a matriarch who falls short of common feminist virtues—she did not confront Isaac about his favoritism for Esau but chose to trick her husband and involve Jacob in the subterfuge, helping him to flee home with a false excuse (Gen. 27). A feminist might point out that ancient women had no choice but to resort to guile in order to assert their independent will in a patriarchal society.³² Zakutinsky, however, defends Rebecca as a woman who possessed tremen-

dous powers of discernment, independence of will, and great discretion. She describes her as one of those women who knows her own mind; indeed, Zakutinsky finds inspiring a midrash that states that Rebecca was only three years old when she determined by herself to accept Isaac's marriage proposal, leave her family, and become a wife. It is to Rebecca's credit that at this age she knew how to be Isaac's wife and how to comfort him over the loss of his mother; moreover, she understood that a man with his personality could not be directly confronted. According to Zakutinsky, Rebecca was the manifestation of the "woman of valor" (*eshet hayil*) of Proverbs 31 because—among other things—she "never criticized her husband. Even when she disagreed with him, she used great discretion."³³ Rebecca was the real master of the household, Zakutinsky implies, and only untutored eyes would regard the matriarch as subservient. Here feminist values have been transformed and integrated into a lesson on Orthodox womanhood.

Similar themes appear in the works of women of Chabad (Lubavitch) hasidic background. Chabad hasidism is exceptional among the Orthodox movements in its institutional support for women's religious writings. This policy is motivated by the belief, fostered by the last Lubavitcher rebbe, that Jewish women have a greater role than men in hastening the final redemption.³⁴ Chabad's messianic enthusiasm and its general outreach effort together fuel the creation of literature by women and for women. One such work is Chana Weisberg's *The Crown of Creation*, a slim volume of midrash assembled from rabbinic and mystical sources and meant to inspire the reader to emulate the heroic bravery and selflessness of seven model women. The women in her portraits err not because they are drawn toward evil behavior, but because they are acting in response to men and for men's sake; they assume the burden of sin and guilt for others in order to advance God's plan for humanity. For example, Weisberg explains why, although both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the prophecy that Sarah would bear a child (Gen. 17:17), only Sarah was rebuked. Abraham's faith in God was weaker than that of Sarah, she explains, and he would have suffered ill effects from God's direct scolding. Sarah, however, understood perfectly well why God chose to rebuke her.³⁵ The matriarch was manifesting the sublime religious value of self-sacrifice (*mesirat nefesh*), a virtue necessary for the attainment of a state of *bitul*—which, according to Chabad philosophy, is the nullification of one's self that is essential for a full experience of one's spiritual purpose and connection to God. As Weisberg explains:

The common denominator of great Jewish women has been bitul, total selflessness. Although bitul was a dominant force in the lives of all great Jewish leaders, both male and female, women have characteristically been endowed with a greater capacity of self-effacement.³⁶

Weisberg teaches that the time of greatest need for women to achieve *mesirat nefesh* is during an era when many Jews abandon Torah and embrace assimilation. That time is now. Weisberg thus appeals to modern liberated women's desire to set an example. They will join the ranks of the Jewish heroines of old by rejecting the idolatry of feminist and secular values and embracing lives of self-sacrifice.

Indeed, Orthodox teachers conducting outreach to secularized Jewish women like to emphasize that a traditional Jewish lifestyle offers the type of supportive women's

environment so idealized, yet never achieved, by feminists.³⁷ Orthodox women have distinguished themselves by their cooperative childcare efforts and by establishing networks of women who arrange for care of the sick, provide comfort to mourners, offer hospitality, and guide and assist brides. The Orthodox midrashists, however, pay little attention in their writings to women's friendships, alliances, and bonds of sisterhood. Biblical women, like men, are held up as ideals and evaluated as servants of God; for women, this "servitude" means acting as wives and mothers and rearing children to follow Torah. Relationships with other women are important only insofar as they facilitate these roles. Orthodox institutions are so indebted to a heterosexual worldview that an emphasis on same-sex female relationships does not make sense and is ultimately subversive.

A rather atypical Orthodox midrashist is Judith Antonelli, author of *In the Image of God: A Feminist Commentary on the Torah*. She shares with other Orthodox midrashists an emphatic insistence on the divinity of the Torah; she goes beyond them to voice utter contempt for biblical critics and their work. Like them, she insists that God and the Torah are perfect, and that to attribute any sexism or misogyny to the Torah demonstrates a lack of understanding on the reader's part. Antonelli, however, believes that sexism infected the oral, not written, Torah because Jewish men were influenced by surrounding cultures. Had Jewish women been allowed to study Torah, they would have noticed this foreign accretion. A considerable amount of Antonelli's commentary defends the Torah text from the charge of sexism while carefully discriminating between reliable and unreliable midrash.³⁸

For instance, in discussing the story of the rape of Dinah (Gen. 34), she states that much of the rabbinic commentary is sexist and then follows with an exposition of a number of rabbinic comments that blame the victim for her rape, rationalize male dominance, and urge female seclusion. "Controlling men by confining women," she writes, "remains the logic of Orthodox rabbis today who, while not going so far as to seclude women in the home, still restrict their participation in the public sphere because of the possibility of male sexual arousal." Antonelli, however, is also unhappy with feminist revisions of the story that depict Dinah as Shekhem's lover rather than his victim: "'Feminist retellings' are even worse, as they deny that Dinah was raped and assert that 'she wanted it!'"³⁹

Further to the left on the theological continuum are writers who believe in the divinity and authority of the Torah text, yet who explicitly admit to inserting new elements into their midrashim. If they draw these from classical midrash, they utilize them in unconventional ways; additionally, they may unapologetically construct a midrash from their own insight, personal experiences, or non-canonical literature. In their free-ranging attitudes to the holy texts, they display motives and use methods similar to those employed by the classical midrashists. This strategy is important for Jews who are committed to observing the laws of the Torah but who cannot abide some of its teachings. For example, the rabbinic prohibition of sexual liaisons between females is derived from Lev. 18:3: "You shall not act according to the deeds of the land of Egypt . . . and Canaan." Lesbians with Orthodox leanings substitute new—and, on the face of it, less inventive—midrashic explanations of this verse.⁴⁰ Thus, the au-

thority of the biblical text is preserved in a way that allows nontraditional Orthodox Jews to feel some measure of wholeness in their lives.⁴¹

One midrashist of the more creative school is Shoni Labowitz, a nondenominational rabbi (ordained by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi) with evident Orthodox roots. Labowitz's midrashic methodology seems to presume the text's divinity while she nevertheless introduces material from the fields of psychology, archeology, and comparative religion. For example, she devotes a chapter and appendix in her book to a complex reconstruction of a biblical text that has received the attention of quite a few contemporary women midrashists. The text is found in Num. 12, in which Miriam and Aaron scold Moses "because of the Cushite woman he had married" and because they feel that he claims a monopoly on prophetic authority. God scolds Aaron and Miriam, but punishes only Miriam and inflicts her with leprosy. When Moses beseeches God to heal her, God retorts that Miriam, like a daughter so disgraced that her father had spat in her face, should be punished further with seven days of isolation. This episode is disturbing for at least three reasons: it appears that Moses' siblings—Jewish leaders—scorn their sister-in-law because of her ethnic origins; only Miriam is punished; and although Miriam is elsewhere in the Torah described as a prophet, her claim to authority is here roundly rejected.

Labowitz revises the tale into God's vindication of Miriam for her proper intervention on behalf of Moses' wife Zipporah:

. . . the Hebrew word for "anger" and "sparked," *vayechar-af* could also mean "linger" and "glow." . . . Perhaps God wasn't angry at all; rather, God's glow lingered as a lover would who had just heard the song of the soul of their beloved. . . . Miriam was overtaken in a spiritual epiphany, and her skin became white as snow because she had just seen and touched the likeness of God and felt overwhelmed. . . . Some say that in Numbers 12:14 God said to Moses, "If her [Miriam's] father were there he would have *certainly spit* in her face, and *she would have hidden* from embarrassment for seven days." Take another look at the Hebrew. The root letters *yud, resh, kuf*, "to spit," could also mean "a green plant" or "bud that flourishes within itself." And the word for "she would have hidden," *tikalaim*, could also be translated from the root letters *kav, lamed, lamed* to mean "she will complete." With this new understanding we can read Numbers 12:13 as "God said to Moses, 'I will bring the bud that flourishes within her to completeness within seven days; she will retreat outside the camp and then she will rejoice you.'"⁴²

It is important to point out that the liberty Labowitz has taken with this passage to essentially reverse its plain meaning—transforming a rebuke into praise—is not what distinguishes her midrash from many classical midrashim; the premodern interpretations that deviated far from the literal meaning were included in the canon alongside those that did not. What is novel here is having the text articulate women's perspectives on their psychological needs and physiological changes. According to Labowitz, Miriam rebuked Moses because of her brother's neglect of Zipporah as the latter was undergoing the changes of menopause, and Miriam likewise was experiencing the same transformation (the bud "flourishing within her to completeness"). Labowitz has reconstructed this passage so that it can fulfill what she believes is the role of Torah: it is God's guide to life, teaching people to find divinity within their own physical being in all its manifestations. The seriousness with which she engages in cre-

ative wordplay indicates her belief that her midrash is the text's true, immanent meaning.⁴³

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg is by far the best known of the midrashists who employ nontraditional materials. Zornberg, who was born in Scotland and who now lives in Israel, was raised and educated within the Orthodox community and remains socially situated there. She has a fluent knowledge of midrash and exegesis from the classical period through the twentieth century as well as a doctorate in English literature. Her Torah commentaries are novel because they are thick with detailed references to European as well as to rabbinic literature, with insights drawn from psychology and contemporary literary theory. Zornberg assumes the divinity of the Torah text and does not polemicize on this issue; her synthesis of Torah and secular literature, though, speaks loudly about the wisdom of the Torah and its compatibility with modern culture. She features hasidic commentators who focus on the inner turmoil and struggle involved in the human encounter with the divine, an approach that appeals to contemporary Jewish spiritual seekers. Her characters struggle mightily to grasp an elusive God who defies the neat categories of ordinary logic; yet the basic material of their lives is suffused with a symbolism and a meaning that seems to promise the eventual achievement of self-fulfillment and holiness.

Zornberg is unique among the published Orthodox women midrashists because she does not focus on women's matters.⁴⁴ Her audience is not defined as primarily female, nor does she claim a perspective unique to women. (This fact certainly helps to explain the presence of men in her audiences and among her readership, a presence that seems to be missing for most other women midrashists.) Zornberg's contribution to the women's cause lies simply in the fact that she is a masterful teacher and scholar who is doing what no one has done before.⁴⁵

Most contemporary women midrashists do not believe in the divine authorship of the Torah. They regard it as a human product, the work of men⁴⁶ who composed, recorded, and edited their work over a lengthy period of time before the texts were finally canonized. They attribute most repetitions, variations, and contradictions within the texts as evidence of different authors and the editing process. They do not assume that the biblical text accurately reflects women's actual historical reality. But it can certainly offer clues to the reality of women's lives, and it is abundant in data testifying to men's perception of women, as well as to their construction of women's place in men's lives.

Rejection of divine authorship and acknowledgment of a bias in the text, however, does not preclude belief in divine inspiration or the possibility of creating midrash. Modern Jews who accept historical scholarship yet engage the Torah as a source of personal religious meaning are not willing to state categorically that the text is purely a human product devoid of divinity or religious value. They do tend to reject theism in its classical Jewish form. In contrast to the midrashists described above, many of those further to the left incline toward the notion of a personal deity who is less controlling and whose role in the composition of the Torah is less direct. Others hold an immanentist theology and conceptualize the sacred as an indwelling life force. For them, revelation occurs in an interactive dynamic between heaven and earth, or, less

metaphorically, when society or the individual grapples with and ultimately defines religious ideals. Their theology and view of revelation place the locus of control within human society. In their midrashim, one may hear about the regional economy, the laws of neighboring civilizations, the daily tasks of running a household, and the intimate details of a character's life. Some of these details may be supplied as an act of restoring to Jewish culture the data on women that was previously ignored. To the extent that we can tie this generosity of data to a theological message, however, it is that people determine their religious outlook. The sacred is accessed through the self, society, and nature. Because women are now to be included among those who define the religious encounter, their experiences are theologically relevant. Divine inspiration—one might even go so far as to call it revelation—is understood to be a process that did not begin and end at Mount Sinai, but continues whenever individuals immerse themselves in the Torah and its interpretations, and draw their own meanings from the stories.⁴⁷

Freed of the burden of proving that a midrash matches the intention of the original biblical text, and availing themselves of a great storehouse of materials, these authors are creative and prolific. They still do what midrashists have done before—furnish the details missing from the biblical narratives; explain apparent contradictions and resolve confusions; subvert the original text and/or its customary interpretation with an alternative message; supply rationales for the behavior of God or for that of men and women; teach values; align the Bible's ancient traditions to contemporary reality; and supply a theology—but the expanded repertoire of materials results in a very different product. Unlike the classical midrashists and the Orthodox, they are acutely aware of the distinction between the Torah text and midrash; indeed, they revel in the power of midrash to reconstruct and even subvert the recorded text.

Although few of the women midrashists in this category are professional Judaica scholars, the vast majority of them have benefited considerably from the academic research of Bible scholars from the 1970s through the 1990s; in particular, their work is indebted to female scholars who have written about biblical women from a variety of disciplinary perspectives—among them, Phyllis Trible, Mieke Bal, Cheryl Exum, Lyn Bechtel, Carole Meyers, Ilana Pardes, and Nehama Aschkenasy. One of the most obvious and cleverest examples of this approach is Ellen Frankel's *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah*. Frankel presents multiple choruses of primarily female but also some male voices chiming in with their idiosyncratic reactions to the text. These are archetypes, representing variously the perspectives of biblical women, of modern feminists, and of the tough and wise women who came as immigrants to America from Eastern Europe—as well as giving voice to the collective wisdom of rabbinic authority and the Jewish folk tradition. Among these choruses are also “the Sages In Our Own Time”:

We are the rabbis of today, scholars and teachers who continue to search for secrets in the sacred writings. In our quest for truth, we use the most modern intellectual technology—literary criticism, archaeology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, comparative Semitics, feminist theory, social science. We do not fear knowledge; we revere only truth. Our goal is to unravel the tangle of piety and myth obscuring the historical core of the text, to unbind all those spellbound by religion's charms. Yet though we are critics, we are loving ones, for the Torah is our tree of life as well.⁴⁸

The response of these “sages” to dramatic narratives in the Bible vividly illustrates the ingenuity of their contributions, even though there often remains something spiritually unsatisfying in these midrashim. Commenting on the source of Jacob’s troubles in love, the Sages in Our Own Time teach that “romantic love is an invention of Western culture, a modern contrivance like the diesel engine or the ball-point pen.”⁴⁹ The character “Wily Rebecca” points out that the biblical saga of Jacob’s marriage to Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29) was meant to be ironic and to show what happens when a boy is untutored by his clever mother in the arts of love. The conversation continues as follows:

THE RABBIS CLARIFY: The Torah later proscribes a man’s marriage to two sisters, no doubt reacting to this unfortunate *ménage à trois*.

THE SAGES IN OUR OWN TIME COUNTER: No, this law already existed when the Torah was being edited. The story of Leah and Rachel was added here only to explain and justify that law.

LEAH AND RACHEL QUIP: In either case, no one asked us!⁵⁰

Frankel’s presentation of numerous perspectives prevents a rigid, dogmatic reading of the text and showcases a multiplicity of women’s reactions. The Torah is not only what God revealed but also what Jews, in all their diversity, have constructed.

The desire to acknowledge multiple voices is supported by the feminist ideals that course through the writings of the midrashists on this side of the ideological spectrum. Crucial, too, is the feminist concept of sisterhood, the principle that in a male-dominated society, women find authentic understandings of their lives as women only when they freely share their experiences with other women. Women, the theory posits, can then release themselves from the false definitions of womanhood shaped by men’s needs, and, allied with other women, can begin to transform cultural values and institutions for the good of all. Beyond this larger redemptive goal, though, the concept of sisterhood teaches that women’s bonds to each other are potentially nurturing and require no further justification.

Thus it is not surprising that many women inspired by the ideal of sisterhood are disturbed by the biblical examples of conflict between women. The episode that most troubles contemporary liberal midrashists is the conflict between Sarah and her servant Hagar, which results in the banishment and near death of Hagar and her son (Gen. 21: 9–21). Unlike their Orthodox counterparts, the non-Orthodox midrashists tend to ignore the assurance given by God in the biblical text that Sarah’s behavior is appropriate, and they also pass over the midrashim that elaborate on the evil behavior of Hagar and son.⁵¹ Few comment upon the story without criticizing what appears to them to be Sarah’s excessive haughtiness and cruelty.⁵² The following is Ruth Behar’s interpretation:

And Sarah, unforgivably, treats Hagar harshly. More than harshly. The original biblical language reads, “Sarah afflicted her,” the same expression used to characterize the subsequent affliction of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, except here it ironically depicts the suffering of a lone Egyptian slave woman at the hands of a Hebrew woman in Canaan.⁵³

Behar and others extend the story’s message beyond the Middle Eastern arena, hoping that women’s recognition of their own social marginality would sensitize them to the plight of other oppressed and unjustly despised groups.⁵⁴ One of the most tragic

aspects of the episode, according to Behar, is that Sarah and Hagar did not recognize their sisterhood:

It is a story that makes you want to weep precisely because it unfolds between two women, both of whom are ultimately insignificant under patriarchy, both of whom are unable to recognize their mutual insignificance and thereby become truly significant to one another.⁵⁵

Would that women unite with and help each other, she continues, instead of internalizing the social norm according to which their individual worth resides in their ability to bear male heirs.

On its face, the biblical story of Leah and Rachel is also one of competition and conflict. The first generation of women's midrashim elaborated upon this theme.⁵⁶ However, the most recent portraits of the relationship between Leah and Rachel question the accuracy of the text's version of events and portray the sisters as allies. Here is where a more radical approach to Scripture finds common cause with the classical interpretive tradition. There are a number of rabbinic midrashim suggesting that Rachel colluded on the wedding night to protect Leah from shame, that the sisters acted compassionately toward each other throughout the marriage and (along with the concubines Zilpah and Bilhah) prayed for each others' well-being. These particular midrashim speak to the ideals of sisterhood and shared purpose, and they are frequently cited by contemporary midrashists.⁵⁷

Ruth Sohn hints at the reason for the change in the direction of women's midrashim on Leah and Rachel. While competition between women is natural and quite real, she points out, it is more fruitful to elaborate upon the more cooperative model provided by the traditional midrash.⁵⁸ The distance traveled by feminist midrashists in their refusal to accept easy answers, though, is evident in a careful study of the contemporary midrashic treatment of Zilpah and Bilhah by Elizabeth Wyner Mark. She notes that many liberal women eager to raise the image of Leah and Rachel for the purpose of including them in the liturgy of the Amidah prayer do so at the expense of Jacob's two other consorts.⁵⁹ In the name of feminism and sisterhood, Mark suggests that women adopt the stance of traditional commentators that all four women were co-wives, full mothers of their own children, who formed one indivisible unit.

It is worth noting at this point that not all the midrashists on the liberal side of the spectrum necessarily reject the idea of divine revelation. Devotees of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, for example, champion a particular viewpoint that seems to fit on the liberal half of the ideological spectrum because it asserts the human authorship of the biblical text and the very individualized, subjective voice behind midrash. But at the same time, in their view, certain forms of midrashic creativity can awaken one's personal memory of the revelation that occurred at Sinai. This conviction is based on a principle from the Kabbalah, found also in classical midrash, which teaches that the soul of every Jew was present at the time the Torah was given to the Jewish people. Gila Gevirtz explains this principle as follows:

The drama of Mount Sinai, recorded in luxurious detail in the book of Exodus, was embroidered by these [rabbinic] 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 story of Torah *awakens the memories of our souls*, and until each of us has shared those memories of the community, Revelation will remain incomplete.⁶⁰

Writers in this camp seem to blend midrash with meditation, and they can be found describing the revelatory messages that are derived from the contemplation of Hebrew letters.⁶¹ North American Jews who are interested in spirituality, and who desire to become aware of the connectedness of all creation over time and space, seem to be attracted to this form of midrash.⁶² For this reason, it is often taken up by organizations trying to develop Jewish outreach efforts, as it elevates imagination over knowledge of the Bible and its commentaries.

Currently one can find a considerable corpus of literature that develops biblical themes for humanistic purposes, with no effort made to articulate a religious outlook. More imaginative and artistic than literary criticism of the Bible, this genre appears very similar to much of the contemporary midrash described above. The authors in this group write narratives that may include God as a character or as a perceived force, but neither God, religious belief, nor observance are the objects of the authors' inquiry. Their primary concern is to flesh out the lives of the individual characters: feelings, relationships, tensions between the self and the environment. The Bible and midrashic stories are simply good sources from which to spin out a contemporary literary genre. When the novelist Norma Rosen, for instance, fills in the gaps in the story of Rebecca and Isaac, she informs her reader that her attention is riveted on the feelings that Rebecca must have harbored:

How did Rebekah respond to barrenness? And what was the effect on Rebekah of becoming the wife of a man whose father had been willing to kill him as a sacrifice to God? Might not these aspects of Rebekah's married life have contributed to the forging of her astonishing plan to rearrange the order in which her sons, Jacob and Esau, receive their father's blessing, and to her ability to carry out that plan?⁶³

The amount of detail in compositions like these is extensive. The reader hears Sarah discuss her feelings and learns exactly where she was when Hagar and Abraham conceived Ishmael, watches as Rachel tugs a comb through Leah's stringy hair, and listens as Dinah remembers walking barefoot on the sand, sandals dangling, her feet roughening.⁶⁴

Another genre outside the bounds of midrash is the biblical exposition designed to teach psychological self-awareness. The Bible and midrash may be plumbed for examples of, say, parents who behave dysfunctionally, their defective coping mechanisms for rearing children passed down over generations until their descendants finally learn better.⁶⁵ Utilizing biblical literature for psychological purposes or calling the humanistic renderings "midrash" appeals to modern Jews who rebel against a dogmatic approach to religion. Jews who lack a clearly articulated theology, whether theistic or immanentist, or who do not believe in divinity at all, may create an elaborate humanistic midrash to establish their connection with the Jewish people and culture.

While these authors are not necessarily trying to make any religious statement, their compositions may be adopted by others who feel this need. The disjuncture between author and audience is exemplified in the reception of the book *The Red Tent* (1997), a novelistic amplification of the story of Dinah written by Anita Diamant. This book

expands on the sparsely detailed—in Dinah’s case, the nearly silent—biblical tale, supplying a rich picture of the family life, the historical setting, and the emotional life of the main character. Central to the novel is a system of religious ritual celebrating the woman’s menstrual cycle. Diamant regards her book as a work of fiction, and she emphatically denies that her story is meant to show “what really happened.” Yet, this is how many have perceived the story, criticizing her for “desecrating” the Torah or else praising her for “telling the truth.”⁶⁶ It is not surprising that her book has filled a gap in the religious lives of modern Jewish women eager to connect to their biblical heritage. Its plot rectifies some of the Bible’s most offensive sins of commission and omission: it provides the missing mother-daughter and sister-to-sister relationships, and it supplies the women with religious rites and beliefs that teach love and reverence for women’s bodies and blood.

Midrash fills in the blank spaces between the words and letters of the Torah. Women composing midrash negotiate carefully through the openings provided. They recognize that the biblical text is privileged, meriting a regular public recitation in its unadorned, exact form. Yet the myriad interpretive readings from the past also compete to be heard. A person who crafts a new midrash is contesting or augmenting the existing renditions of the text. This is a creative act, but it is also an aggressive one that involves determination and willingness to face opposition. Women, excluded from the conversation in the houses of Torah study for so many centuries, are no longer waiting for an invitation to participate. They have added their voices to the ongoing dialogue, adding new breadth and depth to the ancient story.

Notes

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1. Barry W. Holtz, “Midrash,” in his *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (New York: 1984), 177.

2. Two examples of recently launched educational initiatives are the Perek Yomi project of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, a regimen of daily Bible study; and the Institute for Creative Midrash, a nondenominational organization connected with the movement for Jewish Renewal that (among other activities) sponsors midrash-writing workshops to teach people how to create new midrashim out of their own personal experiences. According to the brochures advertising such workshops, neither knowledge of Hebrew nor a Jewish religious education is a prerequisite, and minimal time is devoted to the study of the classical literature.

3. It appears to me that Rachel Adler, in *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Philadelphia: 1998), utilizes midrash for this end.

4. For an excellent introduction to this topic, see Debra Orenstein, “Stories Intersect: Jewish Women Read the Bible,” in *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Biblical Themes in Contemporary Life*, ed. Debra Orenstein and Jane Rachel Litman (Woodstock, Vermont: 1997), vol. 2, xi–xxviii.

5. Two superb overviews and discussions of midrash are Holtz, “Midrash,” 189–201; and Gary G. Porton, “Defining Midrash,” in *The Study of Ancient Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: 1995), vol. 1, 55–92.

6. It is likely, however, that some women's stories and insights were incorporated into classical writings. For a survey of women's study of Torah according to the evidence of pre-twentieth century Jewish literature, see Shoshana Pantel Zolty, "*And All Your Children Shall Be Learned*": *Women and the Study of Torah in Jewish Law and History* (Northvale, N.J.: 1993).

7. Zolty chronicles the establishment and curriculum of the Bais Ya'akov schools until about 1950 (*ibid.*, 263–300). She also summarizes and references the research on American Jewish education (*ibid.*, p. 303n).

8. Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (New York: 1993), 66, 85–87, 123–126. The absolute number of children enrolled in Jewish educational programs peaked during the mid-1960s and then went into a decline. Only in the 1980s did enrollment begin to increase. Actual statistics pertaining to the number of Jewish educational opportunities are available only for college Jewish studies course offerings.

9. Little research has been done on this subject. I am indebted to Bruce Phillips for providing data analysis based on the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. Phillips has found significant changes in Jewish women's exposure to Jewish education during the past few decades. Women from all denominations who are under age 40 report a much greater participation in Jewish educational programs than the cohort aged 40–59, and even greater than the 60+ cohort. Of those raised in the Reform movement, three times as many females in the under 40 cohort received a day-school education (compared with the 60+ cohort); the increase is tenfold for those raised Orthodox.

10. Ezrat Nashim, a study group organized in September 1971 within the New York Havurah, was perhaps the first group devoted to improving women's status within American Judaism. Several key articles protesting the position of women in Jewish life and culture had already appeared in the 1971 summer edition of *Davka*, a journal produced and addressed primarily to Jewish college students.

11. These stages are ideal constructs. While they are apparent in group consciousness and within individuals, they cannot be fit neatly into the developments of the past 30 years and do not unfold uniformly on a personal level.

12. The most influential expression of these themes focused on women's presence and absence in the description in Exodus of the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai; see Rachel Adler, "The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halachah and the Jewish Woman," *Davka* (Summer 1971); reprinted in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: 1983), 12–18.

13. Judith Plaskow composed a midrash (entitled "The Coming of Lilith") in 1972 that became an emblem of Jewish feminism and was reprinted frequently thereafter. She describes the evolution of the midrash in "The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: 1979), 198–210. Plaskow's work is a concise narrative midrash; there were no comparable ones published or widely disseminated for some time thereafter. An early example of the type of essay that has become a common form of women's midrashic writing is Mary Gendler, "The Restoration of Vashti," *Response*, no. 18 (Summer 1973), 154–160.

14. See Elizabeth Koltun (ed.), *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives* (New York: 1976). Judith Stein, a lesbian activist, rewrote biblical stories for use in Jewish ceremonies, publishing and distributing them (and other works) through her fledgling Bobbeh Meises Press based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her early writings are ingenious, quite creative, and very angry in tone. Her reconfigured Purim story, for example, is a conservative's nightmare version of Jewish feminism: it preserves the plot line of Esther's brave effort to save her people, but it is also a saga about how Esther, who is victimized by Mordecai, joins Vashti in surmounting the violent sexual servitude of Ahasuerus' court and thereby acquires a consciousness of sisterhood. See Judith Stein, *The Purim Megillah: A Feminist Retelling* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1983; rpt. 1986). For a rich sampling of contemporary Jewish lesbian writing, which now tends to be far less confrontational, see the journal *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends*, published twice annually in Seattle, Washington.

15. Gay men, in contrast, find themselves excoriated in the prohibition of sexual relations between men (Lev. 18:22) or, in a more positive vein, may relate to the friendship of David for

Jonathan that “surpasses the love of woman” (2 Sam. 1:26). See Rebecca Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* (New York: 1997), 17–36.

16. Interviews with Yaffa Weisman, Rebecca Alpert, Jane Litman (fall 1999). A recently published survey of women’s *hagadot* includes explicitly lesbian examples in the bibliography but inexplicably ignores or minimizes the distinctive sexuality and concerns of these authors; see Maida E. Solomon, “Claiming Our Questions: Feminism and Judaism in Women’s Haggadot,” in *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. Joyce Antler (Hanover: 1998), 220–241. This erasure of lesbians is not a new phenomenon; see Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, 1–16.

17. See Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: 1980), 7, quoting Nelle Morton’s “hearing each other into speech.”

18. See Arlene Agus, “This Month is For You: Observing Rosh Hodesh as a Woman’s Holiday,” in Koltun (ed.), *The Jewish Woman*, 84–93. Agus provides both a rationale and content material for Rosh Hodesh ceremonies, focusing much attention on the Israelite women who, according to classical midrash, spurned the worship of the golden calf. The first anthology of Rosh Hodesh ceremonies appeared in 1986—see Penina V. Adelman, *Miriam’s Well: Rituals for Jewish Women Around the Year* (New York: 1986). For an analysis of women’s new ritual ceremonies, see Jody Myers, “The Myth of Matriarchy in Contemporary Jewish Women’s Spiritual Writings,” *Jewish Social Studies* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1997), 1–27. Few authors of the new *hagadot* and Rosh Hodesh ceremonies had facility with the literature of classical midrash, although a standard element in the latter ceremony was the recitation of the tales of exceptionally brave Jewish women such as Deborah and Judith. One early woman’s *hagadah* with an impressive array of historical, midrashic, and rabbinic material (entitled simply *The Woman’s Haggadah* and reproduced by photocopy machine) was compiled and written by Lynn Rosen and Rachel Adler. This, like other women’s *hagadot*, was used as a source by others who assembled their own versions. I thank Yaffa Weisman of Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles, for sharing her knowledge of this literature with me.

For Orthodox women’s meditations that incorporate stories of the matriarchs, see Tamar Frankel, *The Voice of Sarah: Feminine Spirituality and Traditional Judaism* (San Francisco: 1990) and Rivka Zakutinsky, *Beyond Pearls and Merchant Ships: Finding the Woman of Valor* (Brooklyn: 1996).

19. Louis Ginzburg, *Legends of the Jews*, translated by Henrietta Szold, was first published in English by the Jewish Publication Society in 1909, and was reissued in 1937 and 1968. Nahum N. Glatzer’s *Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader* was first published in 1948, came out in paperback edition in 1962, and went through four more printings by 1971. Unlike Ginzburg’s book, Glatzer’s does not generally elaborate upon biblical stories, but consists primarily of selections of rabbinic literature that teach Jewish doctrines and folk wisdom.

20. Perhaps the first book of women’s midrash was *Taking the Fruit: Modern Women’s Tales of the Bible*, ed. Jane Sprague Zones (San Diego: 1981). Privately issued in 1981, it was the product of the cooperative efforts of eight women of various ages. Their debt to classical Jewish literature by way of English-language anthologies is acknowledged in the bibliography (ibid., 54–55). The book was reissued in 1989 with some deletions and additions to the original.

21. Jo Milgrom is an artist who has done much to promote this definition; see her book *Handmade Midrash* (Philadelphia: 1992). *Living Text: The Journal of Contemporary Midrash* features work by Jewish artists who engage biblical themes and who might be considered midrashists, such as JoAnne Tucker (director of the Avodah Dance Ensemble who calls herself a dance midrashist); Frances Oelbaum (graphic artist); and performance artists (referred to as “Bibliodramatists”) such as Peter Pitzele.

22. I would reserve the term “religious” for the conviction that a) there is a sacred as well as a material realm of reality; and b) connections should be established between the two spheres.

23. The best collection of “autobiographical” midrash is found in Orenstein and Litman (eds.), *Lifecycles*, vol. 2. Because of space limitations, I have not included examples of this type of midrash.