

Hebrew Bible and the Feminist Imagination

Description: Based upon our own close readings of selected biblical narratives (large parts of Genesis, Exodus, Judges, and the Books of Esther and Ruth), we will analyze contemporary feminist responses to the Bible, including poetry, modern midrash, and literary criticism. Considering the Bible as a literary document, we will discuss aspects of characterization, strategies by which meaning is made, and the relationship between a critic's ideological perspective and methodological choices. Students will develop a collection of contemporary poetry for their use in the rabbinate, respond to these new materials, experiment with literary composition, and develop and present original analyses.

Objectives:

- Increase familiarity with biblical Hebrew and biblical narrative
- Develop critical skills of close reading and analysis
- Develop familiarity with and ability to analyze contemporary literary responses to Bible, including poetry, modern midrash, and feminist scholarship
- Explore definitions of midrash and discover how contemporary feminist responses to bible are continuous and discontinuous with classical interpretations

Texts:

Please always bring a *Tanakh* to class.

Course readings are available online or will be provided. The following books are recommended for purchase.

Bach, Alice, ed. *Women in the Hebrew Bible* (1999)
Mieke Bal. *Lethal Love* (1987)
Brenner, Athalya, ed. *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (1993; 1997)
Boyarín, Daniel. *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*
Curzon, David. *Modern Poems about the Hebrew Bible: An Anthology*
Frankel, Ellen. *The Five Books of Miriam* (1996)
Goldstein, Elyse. *Women's Torah Commentary*
Graetz, Naomi. *S/he Created Them*
Jewish Women's Literary Annual
Kates, Judith and Gail Reimer, eds. *Reading Ruth* (1994)
Carol Meyers. *Discovering Eve* (1988)

Ostriker, Alicia. *Nakedness of the Fathers*
Pardes, Ilana. *Countertraditions in the Bible* (1992)
Teubal, Savina. *Sarah the Priestess*
Wenkart, Henny, ed. *Sarah's Daughters Sing* (1990)
Eleanor Wilner. *Sarah's Choice*
Jane Sprague Zones. *Taking the Fruit*
Aviva Zornberg. *The Beginning of Desire: Genesis* (1995)
also relevant: Shulamith Hareven, *Thirst: The Desert Trilogy* and Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*. Both are novel-length contemporary midrashim. Hareven is particularly good.

Classic literary commentaries include:

Robert Alter. *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981)
Northrop Frye. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1981)
Meir Sternberg. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (1985)

Requirements:

- Your presence and participation are crucial to the success of this course and are required. You must have completed the assigned reading for class.
- Each student will present and submit an original midrashic poem or prose text
- Each student will make a ten-minute presentation*
- Writing exercise: one short critical analysis (4-6 pages)
- Two in-class translation quizzes

* The oral presentation should be a talk appropriate for the practical rabbinate, for example: a "dvar Torah" or an occasional address, such as a rabbi's charge at a lifecycle ceremony; the rabbinic contribution to a Martin Luther King Day commemoration; the opening remarks at a session of the Board of Rabbis; a set piece for the communal Seder. The goals are to incorporate course materials for the type of presentation you may need to make in your rabbinate and to launch our week's class discussion. Students will sign up for topics. The class will offer responses.

Tentative Schedule:

Session 1: The Feminist Return to Sinai and Midrashic Possibilities
Genesis, 1-3; Kathleen Norris, "A Prayer to Eve"; Merle Feld, "We All Stood Together";
Chava Weissler, "Standing at Sinai"; Myra Sklarew, "What is a Jewish Poem?"

Backgrounds:

Kraemer, David. *The Mind of the Talmud*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 3-25.

Kugel, James. "Two Introductions to Midrash" from *Midrash and Literature*. Edited by G. Hartman and S. Budick. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1986, 77-103.

Stern, David. *Midrash and Theory*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1966, 15-54.

Session 2: Knowledge and Nakedness: Eve in the Semiotic Garden (Genesis 1-3)

Bal, Mieke, *Lethal Love*, 1-8; 104-132.

Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible*, chapter 2, pp. 13-39.

Ginzberg, Louis. *The Legends of the Jews*. Philadelphia: JPS, 1968. 66-68.

Plaskow, Judith. "The Coming of Lilith" from *Womenspirit Rising*. Ed. by Christ and Plaskow. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979, 206-207.

Dame, Enid. *Lilith and Her Demons*. Merrick, NY: Cross Cultural Communication, 1986, 4-5; 16-17.

George, Diana Hume. "The Fall"

Ostriker, Alicia. "The Lilith Poems." *Women's Review of Books* VIII (12), Sept. 1991.

Simon, Maurya. "Eve and Adam"

Seltzer, J. "Song of a Jewish Feminist"

Whitman-Raymond, Leda. *Overheard in the Garden and Elsewhere and Other Poems*, Providence, 1985, 16-20.

Harrison, Barbara. "A Mediation on Eve," in C. Buchmann and C. Spiegel, eds. *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*. London: Pandora, 1995, 1-2.

Backgrounds:

Bach, Alice, ed. *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, NY: Routledge, 1999, from section one, "The Social World of Women in Israel," 3-45.

Yiskah Rosenfeld, "You Take Lilith, I'll Take Eve: A Closer Look at the World's Second Feminist," in *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism* edited by Danya Ruttenberg (Seal Press, 2001), 131-153.

Lori Lefkowitz, "Eve in the Semiotic Garden," *The Reconstructionist*, Vol. 61, No 2, fall 1996, and/or "Creating the World: Structuralism and Semiotics." In *Contemporary Critical Theory*. Ed. Douglas Atkins and Laura Morrow. Amherst: U Mass Press, 1989.

Session 3 and 4: Eavesdropping on Angels and Laughing at God: Annunciations and the Subversive Matriarchy. Genesis 12-18:16; 21-24; Judges 13; I Samuel 1-3

Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam*, 15-21.

Esther Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew

Bible,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible* edited by Alice Bach, 127-140.

Graetz, Naomi. *S/he Created them: feminist retellings of biblical stories*. 1993, 31-46.

Karzen and Rogow in *Taking the Fruit: Modern Women's Tales of the Bible*. Women's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education, 1989, 49-56.

George, Diana Hume. “Sarah's Wrath.” *A Genesis: Poems*. New York: Britto and Lair, 2000, 1.

Kaufman, Shirley. “Déjà vu.” *Claims*. New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1984, 22-23.

Ostriker, Alicia. “The Opinion of Hagar.” *Tikkun* 5 (5), 1990, 52-53.

Papell, Helen. “Sarah and Isaac Her Son: A Midrash.” In H. Wenkart, ed. *Sarah's Daughter's Sing*, Hoboken: KTAV, 1990, 13-14.

Wilner, Eleanor. “Sarah's Choice,” *Sarah's Choice* (Univ. of Chicago Press), 21-24

Backgrounds:

Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginnings of Desire*, 72-143.

Lori Lefkowitz. “Eavesdropping on Angels and Laughing at God: Theorizing a Subversive Matriarchy.” In *Gender and Judaism: The Transformation of Tradition*. Ed. T.M. Rudavsky. New York: NYU Press, 1995.

Lefkowitz, “Hannah's Prayer and Reconstructionist Principles,” *Reconstructionism Today*, fall 2002

Weeks 5: Passing as a Man: Jacob's Hair and Narratives of Jewish Gender Performance
Genesis 25-28, 32-33; I Samuel 16-18 (anointing David; Goliath) AND

Week 6: Coats and Tales: Joseph and Myths of Jewish Masculinity. Genesis 37-50

Readings for weeks 5 & 6:

Nelly Furman, “His Story Versus Her Story,” in Bach, ed. *Women in the Bible*, 119-126.

Background:

Zornberg, 144-179

Lefkowitz, “Passing As A Man: Narratives of Jewish Gender Performance,” *Narrative* Vol 10, No. 1 (January 2002)

“Coats and Tales: Joseph Stories and Myths of Jewish Masculinity.” In *A Mensch Among*

Men: Explorations in Jewish Masculinity. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1988.

Week 7: Leah Behind the Veil: Sex With Sisters. Genesis 28-32

Pardes, "Rachel's Dream," chapter 4.
Bal, 66-88.

Loots, Barbara. "Genesis xxix." *Jewish Women's Literary Annual* 1 (1), 1994/5, 20.

Lefkovitz, Lori. "Leah At the Altar," *Living Text: Journal of Contemporary Midrash*, 1 (1997), 23.

Oehlbeck, Avis J. "Leah Rebukes Jacob," *Jewish Spectator* 42 (1), Spring 1997, 53.

Ostriker, *Nakedness of the Fathers*, 35-64.

Holender, Barbara D. *Ladies of Genesis: Poems*. New York: Jewish Women's Resource Center, 1991, 14-17.

Henny Wenkart, ed. *Sarah's Daughters Sing: A Sampler of Poems by Jewish Women*. National Jewish Women's Resource Center, 1991, 14-17. Includes: Saul, "Leah Tells Rachel..."; Papell, "Rachel's Hunger"; Holender, "Rachel"; Rosa Felsenburg Kaplan, "Sisters";

Papell, Helen. *Talking With Eve, Leah, Hagar, Miriam*. New York: Jewish Women's Resource Center, 1996, pp. 23, 29, 32.

Saul, Lynn. "A Midrash on Leah, No. 2." *Jewish Women's Literary Annual* 1 (1) 1994/5, 65.

Blank, Amy. *"I Know Four" and Other Things*. Cincinnati, Oh, 1981, 45-46.

Background:

Lefkovitz, "Leah Behind the Veil: The Divided Matriarchy in Bible, Midrash, Dickens, Freud, and Woody Allen," *Hebrew University Studies in Literature and the Arts* (vol. 18, 1990). Or:

Lefkovitz, "Leah Behind the Veil," in *Sister To Sister*, ed. Patricia Foster (Doubleday, 1995).

Weeks 8 and 9: Bedrooms and Battlefields. Genesis 38 (Tamar and Judah); Judges 4-5 (Deborah and Yael) & 14-15 (Samson & Delilah); 2 Samuel 11:2-27 (Bathsheba); Book of Judith

Bal, pp. 10-11; 28-67; 89-103

Lori Rowlett, "Violent Femmes and S/M: Queering Samson and Delilah" in Ken Stone, ed. *Queer Commentary and The Hebrew Bible*. pp. 106-115

Week 10: Miriam: A Reconstruction

Selections, *Exodus and Numbers*

Pardes, chapters 1 & 5;

Frankel, 93-148.

Eleanor Wilner, "Miriam's Song," in *Sarah's Choice*, p.

Schnur, Susan. "Gaiac Healer, Goddess, Ecstatic Rock'n Roll Mama: The Cult of Miriam," *Lilith* 17 (2), Spring 1992, 16-17.

Midrash Rabbah, Exodus p. 28; selections from Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer (pp. 433-434) and Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael (p. 81)

Ostriker, "The Songs of Miriam" and Papell, "Prophet Miriam at Mt. St. Helens," in *Jewish Women's Literary Annual* 1 (1), 94/95, 5-6.

Backgrounds:

Lefkowitz, "Miriam: A Reconstruction" in *The Women's Passover Companion*, pp. 113-119.

Lefkowitz, "Attending to the Details: A Pesach Meditation on God, Grandmothers, And Gratitude," *Sh'ma* 27 (532), April 18, 1997.

"Miriam's Bowl," from A Woman's Seder, Columbus, Oh, 1995.

Week 11: The Body Fragmented: Genesis 18:16-20 (Sodom); Genesis 34 (Dinah); Judges 11 (Jephthah) and 19-21

Gilbert, Celia. "Lot's Wife," in *Bonfire*. Cambridge, MA: Alice James Books, 1983, 65-69.

Ostriker, "Performing Jephthah's Daughter." *Bridges* 8 (1/2), Spring 2000, 25-37.

Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*, 1968, 43-47.

Gail White, "Jephtha's Daughter."

Weeks 12 and 13: Oy! Was That A Close Call: The Book of Ruth and The Fundamental Jewish Plot

Kates and Reimer, *Reading Ruth*: Piercy, "The Book of Ruth and Naomi," 159-160; Ruth

Whitman, "Ruth's Journey," 161-165; Merle Feld, "At the Crossroads," 166-181; Kathryn Hellerstein, "Words Not Said: Four Poems After the Book of Ruth," 235-240; Barbara Hyett, "Awakening Ruth," 241; and Rapoport, "Isa," 242-249.

Background:

Zornberg, pp. 123-143

Lefkowitz, "Moving On: Yizkor and Life Lessons from the Book of Ruth," *Lilith Magazine* (summer, 2003)